**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-023. A PETULANT WISH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before Thee!"*

*Genesis 17:18*

These words sound very devout, and they have often been used by Christian parents yearning for the best interests of their children, and sometimes of their wayward and prodigal children. But consecrated as they are by that usage, I am afraid that their meaning, as they were uttered, was nothing so devout and good as that which is often attached to them.

**I. Note the temper in which Abraham speaks here.**

The very existence of Ishmael was a memorial of Abraham's failure in faith and patience. For he thought that the promised heir was long in coming, and so he thought that he would help God. For thirteen years the child had been living beside him, winding a son's way into a father's heart, with much in his character, as was afterwards seen, that would make a frank, daring boy his old father's darling. Then all at once comes the divine message, This is not the son of the Covenant; this is not the heir of the Promise. Sarah shall have a child, and from him shall come the blessings that have been foretold. And what does Abraham do? Fall down in thankfulness before God? leap up in heart at the conviction that now at last the long-looked-for fulfilment of the oath of God was impending? Not he. O that Ishmael might live before Thee. Why cannot he do? Why may he not be the chosen child, the heir of the Promise? Take him, O God!'

That is to say, he thinks he knows better than God. He is petulant, he resists his blessing, he fancies that his own plan is quite as good as the divine plan. He does not want to draw away his heart from the child that it has twined round. So he loses the blessing of the revelation that is being made to him; because he does not bow his will, and accept God's way instead of his own. Now, do you not think that that is what we do? When God sends us Isaac, do we not often say, Take Ishmael; he is my own making. I have set all my hopes on him. Why should I have to wrench them all away? In our individual lives we want to prescribe to God, far too often, not only the ends, but the way in which we shall get to the ends; and we think to ourselves, That road of my own engineering that I have got all staked out, that is the true way for God's providence to take. And when His path does not coincide with ours, then we are discontented, and instead of submitting we go with our pet schemes to Him; and if not in so many words, at least in spirit and temper, we try to force our way upon God, and when He is speaking about Isaac insist on pressing Ishmael on His notice.

It is often so in regard to our individual lives; and it is so in regard to the united action of Christian people very often. A great deal of what calls itself earnest contending for the faith once delivered to the saints is nothing more nor less than insisting that methods of men's devising shall be continued, when God seems to be substituting for them methods of His own sending; and so fighting about externals and church polity, and determining that the world has got to be saved in my own special fashion, and in no other, though God Himself seems to be suggesting the new thing to me. That is a very frequent phenomenon in the experience of Christian communities and churches. Ishmael is so very dear. He is not the child of promise, but he is the child that we have thought it advisable to help God with. It is hard for us to part with him.

Dear brethren, sometimes, too, God comes to us in various providences, and not only reduces into chaos and a heap of confusion our nicely built-up little houses, but He sometimes comes to us, and lifts us out of some lower kind of good, which is perfectly satisfactory to us, or all but perfectly satisfactory, in order to give to us something nobler and higher. And we resist that too; and do not see why Ishmael should not serve God's turn as he has served ours; or think that there is no need at all for Isaac to come into our lives. God never takes away from us a lower, unless for the purpose of bestowing upon us a higher blessing. Therefore not to submit is the foolishest thing that men can do.

But if that be anything like an account of the temper expressed by this saying, is it not strange that murmuring against God takes the shape of praying? Ah! there is a great deal of prayer as it calls itself, which is just moulded upon this petulant word of Abraham's momentarily failing faith and submission. How many people think that to pray means to bring their wishes to God, and try to coax Him to make them His wishes! Why, half the shallow sceptical talk of this generation about the worthlessness of prayer goes upon that fundamental fallacy that the notion of prayer is to dictate terms to God; and that unless a man gets his wishes answered he has no right to suppose that his prayers are answered. But it is not so. Prayer is not after the type of O that Ishmael might live before Thee! That is a poor kind of prayer of which the inmost spirit is resistance to a clear dictate of the divine will; but the true prayer is, O that I may be willing to take what Thou art willing, in Thy mercy and love, to send!'

I believe in importunate prayer, but I believe also that a great deal of what calls itself importunate prayer is nothing more than an obstinate determination not to be satisfied with what satisfies God. If a man has been bringing his wishes--and he cannot but have such--continuously to God, with regard to any outward things, and these have not been answered, he needs to look very carefully into his own temper and heart in order to make sure that what seems to be waiting upon God in importunate petition is not pestering Him with refused desires. To make a prayer out of my rebellion against His will is surely the greatest abuse of prayer that can be conceived. And when Abraham said, O that Ishmael might live before Thee! if he said it in the spirit in which I think he did, he was not praying, but he was grumbling.

**II. And then notice, still further, how such a temper and such a prayer have the effect of hiding joy and blessing from us.**

This was the crisis of Abraham's whole life. It was the moment at which his hundred years nearly of patient waiting were about to be rewarded. The message which he had just received was the most lovely and gracious word that ever had come to him from the heavens, although many such words had come. And what does he do with it? Instead of falling down before God, and letting his whole heart go out in jubilant gratitude, he has nothing to say but I would rather that Thou didst it in another way. It is all very well to speak about sending this heir of promise. I have no pleasure in that, because it means that my Ishmael is to be passed by and shelved. So the proffered joy is turned to ashes, and Abraham gets no good, for the moment, out of God's greatest blessing to him; but all the sky is darkened by mists that come up from his own heart.

Brethren, if you want to be miserable, perk up your own will against God's. If you want to be blessed, acquiesce in all that He does send, in all that He has sent, and, by anticipation, in all that He will send. For, depend upon it, the secret of finding sunbeams in everything is simply letting God have His own way, and making your will the sounding-board and echo of His. If Abraham had done as he ought to have done, that would have been the gladdest moment of his life. You and I can make out of our deepest sorrows the occasions of pure, though it is quiet, gladness, if only we have learned to say, Not my will, but Thy will be done. That is the talisman that turns everything into gold, and makes sorrow forget its nature, and almost approximate to solemn joy.

**III. My last word is this: God loves us all too well to listen to such a prayer.**

Abraham's passionate cry was so much empty wind, and was like a straw laid across the course of an express train, in so far as its power to modify the gracious purpose of God already declared was concerned. And would it not be a miserable thing if we could deflect the solemn, loving march of the divine Providence by these hot, foolish, purblind wishes of ours, that see only the nearer end of things, and have no notion of where their further end may go, or what it may be?

Is it not better that we should fall back upon this thought, though, at first sight, it seems so to limit the power of petition, We know that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us'? There is nothing that would more wreck our lives than if what some people want were to be the case--that God should let us have our own way, and give us serpents because we asked for them and fancied they were eggs; or let us break our teeth upon bestowed stones because, like whimpering children crying for the moon, we had asked for them under the delusion that they were bread.

Leave all that in His hands; and be sure of this, that the true way to peace, to rest, to gladness, and to wringing the last drop of possible sweetness out of gifts and losses, disappointments and fruitions, is to have no will but God's will enthroned above and in our own wills. If Abraham had acquiesced and submitted, Ishmael and Isaac would have been a pair to bless his life, as they stood together over his grave. And if you and I will leave God to order all our ways, and not try to interfere with His purposes by our short-sighted dictation, all things will work together for good to us, because we love God, and lovingly accept His will and His law.