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

**JOB-006. WHAT LIFE MAY BE MADE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"26. For then shalt thou have thy delight in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God. 27. Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows. 28. Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways. 29. When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, ... lifting up; and He shall save the humble person."*

*Job 22:26-29*

These words are a fragment of one of the speeches of Job's friends, in which the speaker has been harping on the old theme that affliction is the consequence and evidence of sin. He has much ado to square his theory with facts, and especially with the fact which brought him to Job's dunghill. But he gets over the difficulty by the simple method of assuming that, since his theory must be true, there must be unknown facts which vindicate it in Job's case; and since affliction is a sign of sin, Job's afflictions are proof that he has been a sinner. So he charges him with grossest crimes, without a shadow of other reason; and after having poured this oil of vitriol into his wounds by way of consolation, he advises him to be good, on the decidedly low and selfish ground that it will pay.

His often-quoted exhortation, Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee, is, in his meaning of it, an undisguised appeal to purely selfish considerations, and its promise is not in accordance with facts. Whether that saying is noble and true or ignoble and false, depends on the meanings attached to peace and good. A similar flaw mars the words of our text, as understood by the speaker. But they can be raised to a higher level than that on which he placed them, and regarded as describing the sweet and wonderful prerogatives of the devout life. So understood, they may rebuke and stimulate and encourage us to make our lives conformed to the ideal here.

**I. I note, first, that life may be full of delight and confidence in God.**

Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God. Now when we delight in a thing or a person, we recognise that that thing, or person, fits into a cleft in our hearts, and corresponds to some need in our natures. We not only recognise its good, sweetness, and adaptation to ourselves, but we actually possess in real fruition the sweetness that we recognise, and the good which we apprehend in it. And so these things, the recognition of the supreme sweetness and all-perfect adaptation and sufficiency of God to all that I need; the suppression of tastes and desires which may conflict with that sweetness, and the actual enjoyment and fruition of the sweetness and preciousness which I apprehend--these things are the very heart of a man's religion. Without delight in God, there is no real religion.

The bulk of men are so sunken and embruted in animal tastes and sensuous desires and fleeting delights, that they have no care for the pure and calm joys which come to those who live near God. But above these stand the men, of whom there are a good many amongst us, whose religion is a matter of fear or of duty or of effort. And above them there stand the men who serve because they trust God, but whose religion is seeking rather than finding, and either from deficient consecration or from false conceptions of Him and of their relation to Him, is overshadowed by an unnatural and unwholesome gloom. And all these kinds of religion, the religion of fear, of duty, of effort, of seeking, and of doubt fighting with faith, are at the best wofully imperfect, and are, some of them, radically erroneous types of the religious life. He is the truly devout man who not only knows God to be great and holy, but feels Him to be sweet and sufficient; who not only fears, but loves; who not only seeks and longs, but possesses; or, in one word, true religion is delighting in God.

So herein is supplied a very sharp test for us. Do our tastes and inclinations set towards Him, and is He better to us than anything beside? Is God to me my dearest faith, the very home of my heart, to which I instinctively turn? Is the brightness of my day the light of His face? Is He the gladness of my joy? Is my Christianity a mill-horse round of service that I am not glad to render? Do I worship because I think it is duty, and are my prayers compulsory and mechanical; or do I worship because my heart goes out to Him? And is my life calm and sweet because I delight in the Lord?

The next words of my text will help us to answer. Thou shalt lift up thy face unto God. That is a clear enough metaphor to express frank confidence of approach to Him. The head hangs down in the consciousness of demerit and sin. Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, wailed the Psalmist, so that I am not able to look up. But it is possible for men to go into God's presence with a sense of peace, and to hold up their heads before their Judge and look Him in the eyes and not be afraid. And unless we have that confidence in Him, not because of our merits, but because of His certain love, there will be no delight in the Lord. And there will be no such confidence in Him unless we have access with confidence by faith in that Christ who has taken away our sins, and prepared the way for us into the Father's presence, and by whose death and sacrifice, and by it alone, we sinful men, with open face and uplifted foreheads, can stand to receive upon our visage the full beams of His light, and expatiate and be glad therein. There is no religion worth naming, of which the inmost characteristic is not delight in God. There is no delighting in God possible for sinful men unless they can come to Him with frank confidence, and there is no such confidence possible for us unless we apprehend by faith, and thereby make our own, the great work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**II. So, secondly, note, such a life of delighting in God will be blessed by the frankest intercourse with Him.**

Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows. These are three stages of this blessed communion that is possible for men. And note, prayer is not regarded in this aspect as duty, nor is it even dwelt upon as privilege, but as being the natural outcome and issue of that delighting in God and confident access to Him which have preceded. That is to say, if a man really has set his heart on God, and knows that in Him is all that he needs, then, of course, he will tell Him everything. As surely as the sunshine draws out the odours from the opening petals of the flowers, will the warmth of the felt divine light and love draw from our hearts the sweet confidence, which it is impossible not to give to Him in whom we delight.

If you have to be driven to prayer by a sense of duty, and if there be no impulse in your heart whispering ever to you, Tell your Love about it! you have much need to examine into the reality, and certainly into the depth of your religion. For as surely as instinctive impulse, which needs no spurring from conscience or will, leads us to breathe our confidences to those that we love best, and makes us restless whilst we have a secret hid from them, so surely will a true love to God make it the most natural thing in the world to put all our circumstances, wants, and feeling into the shape of prayers. They may be in briefest words. They may scarcely be vocalised at all, but there will be, if there be a true love to Him, an instinctive turning to Him in every circumstance; and the single-worded cry, if it be no more, for help is sufficient. The arrow may be shot towards Heaven, though it be but slender and short, and it will reach its goal.

For my text goes on to the second stage, He shall hear thee. That was not true as Eliphaz meant it. But it is true if we remember the preceding conditions. The fundamental passage, which I suppose underlies part, at least, of our text, is that great word in the psalm, Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Does that mean that if a man loves God he may get everything he wants? Yes! and No! If it is supposed to mean that our religion is a kind of key to God's storehouse, enabling us to go in there and rifle it at our pleasure, then it is not true; if it means that a man who delights himself in God will have his supreme desire set upon God, and so will be sure to get it, then it is true. Fulfil the conditions and you are sure of the promise. If our prayer in its deepest essence be Not my will, but Thine, it will be answered. When the desires of our heart are for God, and for conformity to His will, as they will be when we delight ourselves in Him, then we get our heart's desires. There is no promise of our being able to impose our wills upon God, which would be a calamity, and not a blessing, but a promise that they who make Him their joy and their desire will never be defrauded of their desire nor robbed of their joy.

And so the third stage of this frank intercourse comes. Thou shalt pay thy vows. All life may become a thank-offering to God for the benefits that have flowed unceasing from His hands. First a prayer, then the answer, then the rendered thank-offering. Thus, in swift alternation and reciprocity, is carried on the commerce between Heaven and earth, between man and God. The desires rise to Heaven, but Heaven comes down to earth first; and prayer is not the initial stage, but the second, in the process. God first gives His promise, and the best prayer is the catching up of God's promise and tossing it back again whence it came. Then comes the second downward motion, which is the answer to prayer, in blessing, and on it follows, finally, the reflection upwards, in thankful surrender and service, of the love that has descended on us, in answer to our desires. So like sunbeams from a mirror, or heat from polished metal, backwards and forwards, in continual alternation and reciprocation of influence and of love, flash and travel bright gleams between the soul and God. Truth springs out of the earth, and righteousness looks down from Heaven. Our God shall give that which is good, and the earth shall yield her increase. Is there any other life of which such alternation is the privilege and the joy?

**III. Then thirdly, such a life will neither know failure nor darkness.**

Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee, and the light shall shine upon thy ways. Then is my will to be omnipotent, and am I to be delivered from the experiences of disappointments and failures and frustrated plans that are common to all humanity, and an essential part of its discipline, because I am a Christian man? Eliphaz may have meant that, but we know something far nobler. Again, I say, remember the conditions precedent. First of all, there must be the delight in God, and the desire towards Him, the submission of the will to Him, and the waiting before Him for guidance. I decree a thing--if I am a true Christian, and in the measure in which I am--only when I am quite sure that God has decreed it. And it is only His decrees, registered in the chancery of my will, of which I may be certain that they shall be established. There will be no failures to the man whose life's purpose is to serve God, and to grow like Him; but if our purpose is anything less than that, or if we go arbitrarily and self-willedly resolving and saying, Thus I will; thus I command; let my will stand instead of all reason, we shall have our contemptuous decrees disestablished many a time. If we run our heads against stone walls in that fashion, the walls will stand, and our heads will be broken. To serve Him and to fall into the line of His purpose, and to determine nothing, nor obstinately want anything until we are sure that it is His will--that is the secret of never failing in what we undertake.

We must understand a little more deeply than we are apt to do what is meant by success, before we predict unfailing success for any man. But if we have obeyed the commandment from the psalm already quoted, which may be again alluded to in the words of my text--Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him--we shall inherit the ancient promise, and He shall bring it to pass. All things work together for good to them that love God, and in the measure of our love to Him are our discernment and realisation of what is truly good. Religion gives no screen to keep the weather off us, but it gives us an insight into the truth that storms and rain are good for the only crop that is worth growing here. If we understand what we are here for, we shall be very slow to call sorrow evil, and to crown joy with the exclusive title of blessing and good; and we shall have a deeper canon of interpretation for the words of my text than he who is represented as speaking them ever dreamed of.

So with the promise of light to shine upon our paths. It is the light which never was on sea or land, and not the material light which sense-bound eyes can see. That may all go. But if we have God in our hearts, there will be a light upon our way which knows no variableness, neither shadow of turning. The Arctic winter, sunless though it be, has a bright heaven radiant with myriad stars, and flashing with strange lights born of no material or visible orb. And so you and I, if we delight ourselves in the Lord, will have an unsetting sun to light our paths; and at eventide, and in the mirkest midnight, there will be light in the darkness.

**IV. Lastly, such a life will be always hopeful, and finally crowned with deliverance.**

When they--that is, the ways that he has been speaking about--when they are cast down, thou shalt say, Lifting up. That is an exclamation or a prayer, and we might simply render, thou shalt say, Up! Even in so blessed a life as has been described, times will come when the path plunges downwards into some valley of the shadow of death. But even then the traveller will bate no jot of hope. He will in his heart say Up! even while sense says Down! either as expressing indomitable confidence and good cheer in the face of depressing circumstances, or as pouring out a prayer to Him who has showed him great and sore troubles that He would bring him up again from the depths of the earth. The devout life is largely independent of circumstances, and is upheld and calmed by a quiet certainty that the general trend of its path is upward, which enables it to trudge hopefully down an occasional dip in the road.

Such an obstinate hopefulness and cheery confidence are the natural result of the experiences already described in the text. If we delight in God, hold communion with Him and have known Him as answering prayer, prospering our purposes and illuminating our paths, how shall we not hope? Nothing need depress nor perturb those whose joys and treasures are safe above the region of change and loss. If our riches are there where neither moth, rust, nor thieves can reach, our hearts will be there also, and an inward voice will keep singing, Lift up your heart. It is the prerogative of experience to light up the future. It is the privilege of Christian experience to make hope certainty. If we live the life outlined in these verses we shall be able to bring June into December, and feel the future warmth whilst our bones are chilled with the present cold. When the paths are made low, thou shalt say, Up!

And the end will vindicate such confidence. For the issue of all will be, He will save the humble person; namely, the man who is of the character described, and who is lowly of eyes in conscious unworthiness, even while he lifts up his face to God in confidence in his Father's love. The saving meant here is, of course, temporary and temporal deliverance from passing outward peril. But we may permissibly give it wider and deeper meaning. Continuous partial deliverances lead on to and bring about final full salvation.

We read that into the words, of course. But nothing less than a complete and conclusive deliverance can be the legitimate end of the experience of the Christian life here. Absurdity can no further go than to suppose that a soul which has delighted itself in God, and looked in His face with frank confidence, and poured out his desires to Him, and been the recipient of numberless answers, and the seat of numberless thank-offerings, has travelled along life's common way in cheerful godliness, has had the light of heaven shining on the path, and has found an immortal hope springing as the natural result of present experience, shall at the last be frustrated of all, and lie down in unconscious sleep, which is nothingness. If that were the end of a Christian life, then the pillared firmament were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble. No, no! A heaven of endless blessedness and close communion with God is the only possible ending to the facts of the devout life on earth.

We have such a life offered to us all and made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we may delight ourselves in the Lord, by whom we have access with confidence, who is Himself the light of our hope, the answer of our prayers, the joy of our hearts, and who will deliver us from every evil work as we travel along the road; and save us at last into His heavenly kingdom, where we shall be joined to the Delight of our souls, and drink for evermore of the fountain of life.