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

**PROVERBS-008. KEEPING AND KEPT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."*

*Proverbs 4:23*

*"Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation."*

*1 Peter 1:5*

The former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. Here is your duty, do it is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

**I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.**

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, the issues of life flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this--that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character--and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase with all diligence is literally above all guarding, and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin. The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls a fool.

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote--princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it--

Give not thy humours way;

God gave them to thee under lock and key.

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying No to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.

**II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.**

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to let thine heart keep my commandments and to trust in the Lord with all thine heart. The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison are traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we take heed thereto, according to Thy word. For even God's viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God's power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be kept by the power of God, and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

**III. There is no keeping by God without faith.**

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I, was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul, we only add one more impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.