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

**PSALMS-001**. **BLESSEDNESS AND PRAISE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord."*

*Psalm 1:1-2*

*"Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord."*

*Psalm 150:6*

The Psalter is the echo in devout hearts of the other portions of divine revelation. There are in it, indeed, further disclosures of God's mind and purposes, but its especial characteristic is--the reflection of the light of God from brightened faces and believing hearts. As we hold it to be inspired, we cannot simply say that it is man's response to God's voice. But if the rest of Scripture may be called the speech of the Spirit of God to men, this book is the answer of the Spirit of God in men.

These two verses which I venture to lay side by side present in a very remarkable way this characteristic. It is not by accident that they stand where they do, the first and last verses of the whole collection, enclosing all, as it were, within a golden ring, and bending round to meet each other. They are the summing up of the whole purpose and issue of God's revelation to men.

The first and second psalms echo the two main portions of the old revelation--the Law and the Prophets. The first of them is taken up with the celebration of the blessedness and fruitful, stable being of the man who loves the Law of the Lord, as contrasted with the rootless and barren life of the ungodly, who is like the chaff. The second is occupied with the contemplation of the divine decree by which the coming King is set in God's holy hill of Zion, and of the blessedness of all they who put their trust in Him, as contrasted with the swift destruction that shall fall on the vain imaginations of the rebellious heathen and banded kings of earth.

The words of our first text, then, may well stand at the beginning of the Psalter. They express the great purpose for which God has given His Law. They are the witness of human experience to the substantial, though partial, accomplishment of that purpose. They rise in buoyant triumph over that which is painful and apparently opposed to it; and in spite of sorrow and sin, proclaim the blessedness of the life which is rooted in the Law of the Lord.

The last words of the book are as significant as its first. The closing psalms are one long call to praise--they probably date from the time of the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, when, as we know, the service of song was carefully re-established, and the harps which had hung silent upon the willows by the rivers of Babylon woke again their ancient melodies. These psalms climb higher and higher in their rapturous call to all creatures, animate and inanimate, on earth and in heaven, to praise Him. The golden waves of music and song pour out ever faster and fuller. At last we hear this invocation to every instrument of music to praise Him, responded to, as we may suppose, by each, in turn as summoned, adding its tributary notes to the broadening river of harmony--until all, with gathered might of glad sound blended with the crash of many voices, unite in the final words, Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.

**I. We have here a twofold declaration of God's great purpose in all His self-revelation, and especially in the Gospel of His Son.**

Our first text may be translated as a joyful exclamation, Oh! the blessedness of the man--whose delight is in the law of the Lord. Our second is an invocation or a command. The one then expresses the purpose which God secures by His gift of the Law; the other the purpose which He summons us to fulfil by the tribute of our hearts and songs--man's happiness and God's glory.

His purpose is Man's blessedness.

That is but another way of saying, God is love. For love, as we know it, is eminently the desire for the happiness of the person on whom it is fixed. And unless the love of God be like ours, however it may transcend it, there is no revelation of Him to our hearts at all. If He be love, then He delights in the prosperity of His children.

And that purpose runs through all His acts. For perfect love is all-pervasive, and even with us men, it rules the whole being; nor does he love at all who seeks the welfare of the heart he clings to by fits and starts, by some of his acts and not by others. When God comes forth from the unvisioned light, which is thick darkness, of His own eternal, self-adequate Being, and flashes into energy in Creation, Providence, or Grace, the Law of His Working and His Purpose are one, in all regions. The unity of the divine acts depends on this--that all flow from one deep source, and all move to one mighty end. Standing on the height to which His own declarations of His own nature lift our feebleness, we can see how the river of God that waters the garden and parts into many heads, gushes from one fountain. One of the psalms puts what people call the philosophy of creation and of providence very clearly, in accordance with this thought--that the love of God is the source, and the blessedness of man the end, of all His work: To Him that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that slew mighty kings; for His mercy endureth for ever.

Creation, then, is the effluence of the loving heart of God. Though the sacred characters be but partially legible to us now, what He wrote, on stars and flowers, on the infinitely great and the infinitely small, on the infinitely near and the infinitely far off, with His creating hand, was the one inscription--God is love. And as in nature, so in providence. The origination, and the support, and the direction of all things, are the works and the heralds of the same love. It is printed in starry letters on the sky. It is graven on the rocks, and breathed by the flowers. It is spoken as a dark saying even by sorrow and pain. The mysteries of destructive and crushing providences have come from the same source. And he who can see with the Psalmist the ever-during mercy of the Lord, as the reason of creation and of judgments, has in his hands the golden key which opens all the locks in the palace chambers of the great King. He only hath penetrated to the secret of things material, and stands in the light at the centre, who understands that all comes from the one source--God's endless desire for the blessedness of His creatures.

But while all God's works do thus praise Him by testifying that He seeks to bless His creatures, the loftiest example of that desire is, of course, found in His revelation of Himself to men's hearts and consciences, to men's spirits and wills. That mightiest act of love, beginning in the long-past generations, has culminated in Him in whom dwelleth the whole fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in whose work is all the love--the perfect, inconceivable, patient, omnipotent love of our redeeming God.

And then, remember that this is not inconsistent with or contradicted by the sterner aspects of that revelation, which cannot be denied, and ought not to be minimised or softened. Here, on the right hand, are the flowery slopes of the Mount of Blessing; there, on the left, the barren, stern, thunder-riven, lightning-splintered pinnacles of the Mount of Cursing. Every clear note of benediction hath its low minor of imprecation from the other side. Between the two, overhung by the hopes of the one, and frowned upon and dominated by the threatenings of the other, is pitched the little camp of our human life, and the path of our pilgrimage runs in the trough of the valley between. And yet--might we not go a step farther, and say that above the parted summits stretches the one overarching blue, uniting them both, and their roots deep down below the surface interlace and twine together? That is to say, the threatenings and rebukes, the acts of retributive judgment, which are contained in the revelation of God, are no limitation nor disturbance of the clear and happy faith that all which we behold is full of blessing, and that all comes from the Father's hand. They are the garb in which His Love needs to array itself when it comes in contact with man's sin and man's evil. The love of God appears no less when it teaches us in grave sad tones that the wages of sin is death, than when it proclaims that the gift of God is eternal life.

Love threatens that it may never have to execute its threats. Love warns that we may be wise in time. Love prophesies that its sad forebodings may not be fulfilled. And love smites with lighter strokes of premonitory chastisements, that we may never need to feel the whips of scorpions.

Remember, too, that these sterner aspects both of Law and of Gospel point this lesson--that we shall very much misunderstand God's purpose if we suppose it to be blessedness for us men anyhow, irrespective altogether of character. Some people seem to think that God loves us so much, as they would say--so little, so ignobly, as I would say--as that He only desires us to be happy. They seem to think that the divine love is tarnished unless it provides for men's felicity, whether they are God-loving and God-like or no. Thus the solemn and majestic love of the Father in heaven is to be brought down to a weak good nature, which only desires that the child shall cease crying and be happy, and does not mind by what means that end is reached. God's purpose is blessedness; but, as this very text tells us, not blessedness anyhow, but one which will not and cannot be given by God to those who walk in the way of sinners. His love desires that we should be holy, and followers of God as dear children--and the blessedness which it bestows comes from pardon and growing fellowship with Him. It can no more fall on rebellious hearts than the pure crystals of the snow can lie and sparkle on the hot, black cone of a volcano.

The other text that I have read sets forth another view of God's purpose. God seeks our praise. The glory of God is the end of all the divine actions. Now, that is a statement which no doubt is irrefragable, and a plain deduction from the very conception of an infinite Being. But it may be held in such connections, and spoken with such erroneous application, and so divorced from other truths, that instead of being what it is in the Bible, good news, it shall become a curse and a lie. It may be so understood as to describe not our Father in heaven, but an almighty devil! But, when the thought that God's purpose in all His acts is His own glory, is firmly united with that other, that His purpose in all His acts is our blessing, then we begin to understand how full of joy it may be for us. His glory is sought by Him in the manifestation of His loving heart, mirrored in our illuminated and gladdened hearts. Such a glory is not unworthy of infinite love. It has nothing in common with the ambitious and hungry greed of men for reputation or self-display. That desire is altogether ignoble and selfish when it is found in human hearts; and it would be none the less ignoble and selfish if it were magnified into infinitude, and transferred to the divine. But to say that God's glory is His great end, is surely but another way of saying that He is love. The love that seeks to bless us desires, as all love does, that it should be known for what it is, that it should be recognised in our glad hearts, and smiled back again from our brightened faces. God desires that we should know Him, and so have Eternal Life; He desires that knowing Him, we should love Him, and loving should praise, and so should glorify Him. He desires that there should be an interchange of love bestowing and love receiving, of gifts showered down and of praise ascending, of fire falling from the heavens and sweet incense, from grateful hearts, going up in fragrant clouds acceptable unto God. It is a sign of a Fatherly heart that He seeketh such to worship Him. He desires to be glorified by our praise, because He loves us so much. He commences with an offer, He advances to a command. He gives first, and then (not till then) He comes seeking fruit from the trees which are the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified. His plea is not the vineyard belongs to Me, and I have a right to its fruits, but what could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?--judge between Me and My vineyard. First, He showers down blessings; then, He looks for the revenue of praise!

**II. We may also take these passages as giving us a twofold expression of the actual effects of God's revelation, especially in the Gospel, even here upon earth.**

The one text is the joyful exclamation built upon experience and observation. The other is a call which is answered in some measure even by voices that are often dumb in unthankfulness, often broken by sobs, often murmuring in penitence.

God does actually, though not completely, make men blessed here. Our text sums up the experience of all the devout hearts and lives whose emotions are expressed in the Psalms. He who wrote this psalm would preface the whole book by words into which the spirit of the book is distilled. It will have much to say of sorrow and pain. It will touch many a low note of wailing and of grief. There will be complaints and penitence, and sighs almost of despair before it closes. But this which he puts first is the note of the whole. So it is in our histories. They will run through many a dark and desert place. We shall have bitterness and trials in abundance, there will be many an hour of sadness caused by my own evil, and many a hard struggle with it. But high above all these mists and clouds will rise the hope that seeks the skies, and deep beneath all the surface agitations of storms and currents there will be the unmoved stillness of the central ocean of peace in our hearts. In the valley of weeping we may still be blessed if the ways are in our hearts, and if we make of the very tears a well, drawing refreshment from the very trials. With all its sorrows and pains, its fightings and fears, its tribulations in the world, and its chastenings from a Father's hand, the life of a Christian is a happy life, and the joy of the Lord remains with His servants.

More than twenty centuries have passed since that psalm was written. As many stretched dim behind the Psalmist as he sang. He was gathering up in one sentence the spirit of the past, and confirming it by his own life's history. And has any one that has lived since then stood up and said--Behold! I have found it otherwise. I have waited on God, and He has not heard my cry. I have served Him, and that for nought. I have trusted in Him, and been disappointed. I have sought His face--in vain. And I say, from my own experience, that the man who trusts in Him is not blessed? Not one, thank God! The history of the past, so far as this matter is concerned, may be put in one sentence They looked unto Him and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed, and as for the present, are there not some of us who can say, This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles?

Brethren! make the experiment for yourselves. Test this experience by your own simple affiance and living trust in Jesus Christ. We have the experience of all generations to encourage us. What has blessed them is enough for you and me. Like the meal and the oil, which were the Prophet's resource in famine, yesterday's supply does not diminish to-morrow's store. We, too, may have all that gladdened the hearts and stayed the spirits of the saints of old. Oh! taste and see that God is good. Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.

So, too, God's gift produces man's praise.

What is it that He desires from us? Nothing but our thankful recognition and reception of His benefits. We honour God by taking the full cup of salvation which He commends to our lips, and by calling, while we drink, upon the name of the Lord. Our true response to His Word, which is essentially a proffer of blessing to us, is to open our hearts to receive, and, receiving, to render grateful acknowledgment. The echo of love which gives and forgives, is love which accepts and thanks. We have but to lift up our empty and impure hands, opened wide to receive the gift which He lays in them--and though they be empty and impure, yet the lifting up of our hands is as the evening sacrifice; our sense of need stands in the place of all offerings. The stained thankfulness of our poor hearts is accepted by Him who inhabits the praises of eternity, and yet delights in the praises of Israel. He bends from heaven to give, and all He asks is that we should take. He only seeks our thankfulness--but He does seek it. And wherever His grace is discerned, and His love is welcomed, there praise breaks forth, as surely as streams pour from the cave of the glacier when the sun of summer melts it, or earth answers the touch of spring with flowers.

And that effect is produced, notwithstanding all the complaints and sighs and tears which sometimes choke our praise. It is produced even while these last; the psalms of thanksgiving are not all reserved for the end of the book. But even in those which read like the very sobs of a broken heart, there is ever present some tone of grateful acknowledgment of God's mercy. He sends us sorrow, and He wills that we should weep--but they should be tears like David's, who, at the lowest point of his fortunes, when he plaintively besought God, Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle--could say in the same breath, Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto Thee. God works on our souls that we may have the consciousness of sin, and He wills that we should come with broken and contrite hearts, and like the king of Israel wail out our confessions and supplications--Have mercy upon me, O God! according to Thy loving-kindness. But, like him, we should even in our lowliest abasement, when our hearts are bruised, be able to say along with our contrition, Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise. Our sorrows are never so great that they hide our mercies. The sky is never so covered with clouds that neither sun nor stars appear for many days. And in every Christian heart the low tones of lamentation and confession are blended with grateful praise. So it is even in the darkest moments, whilst the blast of misfortune and misery is as a storm against the wall.

But a brighter hope even for our life here rises from these words, if we think of the place which they hold in the whole book. They are the last words. Whatever other notes have been sounded in its course, all ends in this. The winter's day has had its melancholy grey sky, with many a bitter dash of snow and rain--but it has stormed itself out, and at eventide, a rent in the clouds reveals the sun, and it closes in peaceful clearness of light.

The note of gladness heard at the beginning, Oh! the blessedness of the man that delights in the law of the Lord, holds on persistently, like a subdued and almost bewildered undercurrent of sweet sound amid all the movements of some colossal symphony, through tears and sobs, confession and complaint, and it springs up at the close triumphant, like the ruddy spires of a flame long smothered, and swells and broadens, and draws all the intricate harmonies into its own rushing tide. Some of you remember the great musical work which has these very words for its theme. It begins with the call, All that hath life and breath, praise ye the Lord, and although the gladness saddens into the plaintive cry of a soul sick with hope deferred, Will the night soon pass? yet, ere the close, all discords are reconciled, and at last, with assurance firmer for the experience of passing sorrows, loud as the voice of many waters and sweet as harpers harping with their harps, the joyful invocation peals forth again, and all ends, as it does in a Christian man's life, and as it does in this book, with Praise ye the Lord.

**III. We have here also a twofold prophecy of the perfection of Heaven.**

Whilst it is true that both of these purposes are accomplished here and now, it is also true that their accomplishment is but partial, and that therefore for their fulfilment we have to lift our eyes beyond this world of imperfect faith, of incomplete blessedness, of interrupted praise. Whether the Psalmist looked forward thus we do not know. But for us, the very shortcomings of our joys and of our songs are prophetic of the perfect and perpetual rapture of the one, and the perfect and perpetual music of the other. We know that He who has given us so much will not stay His hand until He has perfected that which concerns us. We know that He who has taught our dumb hearts to magnify His name will not cease till out of the lips of babes and sucklings, He has perfected praise. We know that the pilgrims in whose hearts are the ways are blessed, and we are sure that a fuller blessedness must belong to those who have reached the journey's end.

And so these words give us a twofold aspect of that future on which our longing hopes may well fix.

It is the perfection of man's blessedness. Then the joyous exclamation of our first text, which we have often had to strive hard not to disbelieve, will be no more a truth of faith but a truth of experience. Here we have had to trust that it was so, even when we could scarce cleave to the confidence. There, memory will look back on our wanderings through this great wilderness, and, enlightened by the issue of them all, will speak only of Mercy and Goodness as our angel guides all our lives. The end will crown the work. Pure unmingled consciousness of bliss will fill all hearts, and break into the old exclamation, which we had sometimes to stifle sobs ere we could speak on earth. When He says, Come in! ye blessed of My Father, all our tears and fears, and pains and sins, will be forgotten, and we shall but have to say, in wonder and joy, Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house; they will be still praising Thee.

It is the perfection of God's praise. We may possibly venture to see in these wonderful words of our text a dim and far-off hint of a possibility that seems to be pointed at in many parts of Scripture--that the blessings of Christ's mighty work shall, in some measure and manner, pass through man to his dwelling-place and its creatures. Dark shadows of evil--the mystery of pain and sorrow--lie over earth and all its tribes. We look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. And the statements of Scripture which represent creation as suffering by man's sin, and participant in its degree in man's redemption, seem too emphatic and precise, as well as too frequent, and in too didactic connections, to be lightly brushed aside as poetic imagery. May it not be that man's transgression

Broke the fair music that all creatures made

To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed,

and that man's restoration may, indeed, bring back all that hath life and breath to a harmonious blessedness--according to the deep and enigmatical words, which declare that the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God? Be that as it may, at all events our second text opens to us the gates of the heavenly temple, and shows us there the saintly ranks and angel companies gathered in the city whose walls are salvation and its gates praise. They harmonise with that other later vision of heaven which the Seer in Patmos beheld, not only in setting before us worship as the glad work of all who are there, but in teaching the connection between the praises of men, and the answering hymns of angels. The harps of heaven are hushed to hear their praise who can sing, Thou hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood, and, in answer to that hymn of thanksgiving for unexampled deliverance and resorting grace, the angels around the throne break forth into new songs to the Lamb that was slain--while still wider spread the broadening circles of harmonious praise, till at last every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, join in the mighty hymn of Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever. Then the rapturous exclamation from human souls redeemed,--Oh! the blessedness of the men whom Thou hast loved and saved, shall be answered by choral praise from everything that hath breath.

And are you dumb, my friend, in these universal bursts of praise? Is that because you have not chosen to take the universal blessing which God gives? You have nothing to do but to receive the things that are freely given to you of God--the forgiveness, the cleansing, the life, that come from Christ by faith. Take them, and call upon the name of the Lord, And can you refuse His gifts and withhold your praise? You can be eloquent in thanks to those who do you kindnesses, and in praise of those whom you admire and love, but your best Friend receives none of your gratitude and none of your praise. Ignoble silence and dull unthankfulness--with these you requite your Saviour! I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out!