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

**PSALMS-002**. **A STAIRCASE OF THREE STEPS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"All those that put their trust in Thee ... them also that love Thy name ... the righteous."*

*Psalm 5:11, 12*

I have ventured to isolate these three clauses from their context, because, if taken in their sequence, they are very significant of the true path by which men draw nigh to God and become righteous. They are all three designations of the same people, but regarded under different aspects and at different stages. There is a distinct order in them, and whether the Psalmist was fully conscious of it or not, he was anticipating and stating, with wonderful distinctness, the Christian sequence--faith, love, righteousness.

These three are the three flights of stairs, as it were, which lead men up to God and to perfection, or if you like to take another metaphor, meaning the same thing, they are respectively the root, the stalk, and the fruit of religion. They that put their trust in Thee ... them also that love Thy Name ... the righteous.

**I. So, then, the first thought here is that the foundation of all is trust.**

Now, the word that is employed here is very significant. In its literal force it really means to flee to a refuge. And that the literal signification has not altogether been lost in the spiritual and metaphorical use of it, as a term expressive of religious experience, is quite plain from many of the cases in which it occurs. Let me just repeat one of them to you. Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful to me, for my soul trusteth in Thee; yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge. There the picture that is in the words is distinctly before the Psalmist's mind, and he is thinking not only of the act of mind and heart by which he casts himself in confidence upon God, but upon that which represents it in symbol, the act by which a man flees into some hiding-place. The psalm is said in the superscription to have been written when David hid in a cave from his persecutor. Though no weight be given to that statement, it suggests the impression made by the psalm. In imagination we can see the rough sides of the cavern that sheltered him arching over the fugitive, like the wings of some great bird, and just as he has fled thither with eager feet and is safely hidden from his pursuers there, so he has betaken himself to the everlasting Rock, in the cleft of which he is at rest and secure. To trust in God is neither more nor less than to flee to Him for refuge, and there to be at peace. The same presence of the original metaphor, colouring the same religious thought, is found in the beautiful words with which Boaz welcomes Ruth, when he prays for her that the God of Israel may reward her, under the shadow of whose wings thou hast come to trust.

So, as a man in peril runs into a hiding-place or fortress, as the chickens beneath the outspread wing of the mother bird nestle close in the warm feathers and are safe and well, the soul that trusts takes its flight straight to God, and in Him reposes and is secure.

Now, it seems to me that such a figure as that is worth tons of theological lectures about the true nature of faith, and that it tells us, by means of a picture that says a great deal more than many a treatise, that faith is something very different from a cold-blooded act of believing in the truth of certain propositions; that it is the flight of the soul--knowing itself to be in peril, and naked, and unarmed--into the strong Fortress.

What is it that keeps a man safe when he thus has around him the walls of some citadel? Is it himself, is it the act by which he took refuge, or is it the battlements behind which he crouches? So in faith--which is more than a process of a man's understanding, and is not merely the saying, Yes, I believe all that is in the Bible is true; at any rate, it is not for me to contradict it, but is the running of the man, when he knows himself to be in danger, into the very arms of God--it is not the running that makes him safe, but it is the arms to which he runs.

If we would only lay to heart that the very essence of religion lies in this flight of the lonely soul to the only God, we should understand better than we do what He asks from us in order that He may defend us, and how blessed and certain His defence is. So let us clear our minds from the thought that anything is worth calling trust which is not thus taking refuge in God Himself.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that all this is just as true about us as it was about David, and that the emotion or the act of his will and heart which he expresses in these words of my text is neither more nor less than the Christian act of faith. There is no difference except a difference of development; there is no difference between the road to God marked out in the Psalms, and the road to God laid down in the Gospels. The Psalmist who said, Trust ye in the Lord for ever, and the Apostle who said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, were preaching identically the same doctrine. One of them could speak more fully than the other could of the Person on whom trust was to be rested, but the trust itself was the same, and the Person on whom it rested was the same, though His Name of old was Jehovah, and His Name to-day is Immanuel, God with us.

Nor need I do more than point out how the context of the words that I have ventured to detach from their surroundings is instructive: Let all those that put their trust in Thee rejoice because Thou defendest them. The word for defending there continues the metaphor that lies in the word for trust, for it means literally to cover over and so to protect. Thus, when a man runs to God for His refuge, God

Covers his defenceless head With the shadow of His wings.

And the joy of trust is, first, that it brings round me the whole omnipotence of God for my defence, and the whole tenderness of God for my consolation, and next, that in the very exercise of trust in such defence, so fortified and vindicated by experience, there is great reward. All who thus flee into the refuge shall find refuge whither they flee, and shall be glad.

**II. Then the next thought of my texts, which I do not force into them, but which results, as it seems to me, distinctly from the order in which they occur in the context, is that love follows trust.**

All those that put their trust in Thee--they also that love Thee. If I am to love God, I must be quite sure that God loves me. My love can never be anything else than an answer to His. It can only be secondary and derived, or I would rather say reflected and flashed back from His. And so, very significantly, the Psalmist says, Those that love Thy Name, meaning by Name, as is always meant by it, the revealed character of God. If I am to love God, He must not hide in the darkness behind His infinity, but must come out and give me something about Him that I know. The three letters G O D mean nothing, and there is no power in them to stir a man's heart. It must be the knowledge of the acts of God that brings men to love Him. And there is no way of getting that knowledge but through the faith which, as I said, must precede love. For faith realises the fact that God loves. We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. The first step is to grasp the great truth of the loving God, and through that truth to grasp the God that loves. And then, and not till then, does there spring up in a man's heart love towards Him. But it is only the faith that is set on Him who hath declared the Father unto us that gives us for our very own the grasp of the facts, which facts are the only possible fuel that can kindle love in a human heart. We love Him because He first loved us, and we shall never know that He loves us unless we come to the knowledge through the road of faith. So John himself tells us when he says, in the words that I have already quoted, We have known and believed. He puts the foundation last, We have known, because we have believed the love that God hath to us.

And so faith is the only possible means by which any of us can ever experience, as well as realise, the love that kindles ours. It is the possession of the fact of redemption for my very own and of the blessings which accompany it, and that alone, that binds a man to God in the bonds of love that cannot be broken, and that subdues and unites all vagrant emotions, affections, and desires in the mighty tide of a love that ever sets towards Him. As surely as the silvery moon in the sky draws after it the heaped waters of the ocean all round the world, so God's love draws ours. They that believe contemplate, and they that believe experience the effects of that divine love, which must be experienced ere our answering love can be flashed back to heaven.

Students of acoustics tell us that if you have two stringed instruments in adjacent apartments, tuned to the same pitch, a note sounded on one of them will be feebly vibrated upon the other as soon as the waves of sound have reached the sensitive string. In like manner a man's heart gives off a faint, but musical, little tinkle of answering love to God when the deep note of God's love to him, struck on the chords of heaven up yonder, reaches his poor heart.

Love follows trust. So, brethren, if we desire to be warmed, let us get into the sunshine and abide there. If we desire to have our hearts filled with love to God, do not let us waste our time in trying to pump up artificial emotions or to persuade ourselves that we love Him better than we do, but let us fix our thoughts and fasten our refuge-seeking trust on Him, and then that shall kindle ours.

**III. Lastly, righteousness follows trust and love.**

The last description here of the man who begins as a believer and then advances to being a lover is righteous. That is the evangelical order. That is the great blessing and beauty of Christianity, that it goes an altogether different way to work to make men good from that which any other system has ever dreamed of. It says, first of all, trust, and that will create love and that will ensure obedience. Faith leads to righteousness because, in the very act of trusting God, I come out of myself, and going out of myself and ceasing from all self-admiration and self-dependence and self-centred life is the beginning of all good and has in it the germ of all righteousness, even as to live for self is the mother tincture out of which we can make all sins.

And faith leads to righteousness in another way. Open the heart and Christ comes in. Trust Him and He fills our poor nature with the law of the Spirit of life that was in Christ Jesus, and that makes me free from the law of sin and death. Righteousness, meaning thereby just what irreligious men mean by it--viz. good living, plain obedience to the ordinary recognised dictates of morality, going straight--that is most surely attained when we cease from our own works and say to Jesus Christ, Lord, I cannot walk in the narrow path. Do Thou Thyself come to me and fill my heart and keep my feet. They that trust and love are found in Him, not having their own righteousness, but that which is of God by faith.

And love leads to righteousness because it brings the one motive into play in our hearts which turns duty into delight, toil into joy, and makes us love better to do what will please our beloved Lover than anything besides. Why did Jesus Christ say, My yoke is easy and My burden is light? Was it because He diminished the weight of duties or laid down an easier slipshod morality than had been enjoined before? No! He intensified it all, and His Commandment is far harder to flesh and blood than any commandments that were ever given. But for all that, the yoke that He lays upon our necks is, if I may so say, padded with velvet; and the burden that we have to draw behind us is laid upon wheels that will turn so easily that the load is diminished, inasmuch as for Duty He substitutes Himself and says to us, If ye love Me, keep My Commandments.

So, dear brethren! here is a very easily applied, and a very far-reaching test for us who call ourselves Christians: Does our love and does our trust culminate in practical righteousness? We are all tempted to make too much of the emotions of the religious life, and too little of its persistent, dogged obedience. We are all too apt to think that a Christian is a man that believes in Jesus Christ. Justification by faith alone without the works of the law used to be the watchword of the Evangelical Church. It might be so held as to be either a blessed truth or a great error, and many of us make it an error instead of a blessing.

On the other hand, there is only one way by which righteousness can be attained, and that is: first by faith and then by love. Here are three steps: we have known and believed the love that God hath to us; that is the broad, bottom step. And above it we love Him because He first loved us, that is the central one. And on the top of all, herein is our love made perfect that we keep His Commandments. They that trust are they also who love Thy Name, and they who trust through love are, and only they are, the righteous.