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

**PSALMS-005**. **GOD WITH US, AND WE WITH GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8.* *I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved... . 11. In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."*

*Psalm 16:8, 11*

There are, unquestionably, large tracts of the Old Testament in which the anticipation of immortality does not appear, and there are others in which its presence may be doubtful. But here there can be no hesitation, I think, as to the meaning of these words. If we regard them carefully, we shall not only see clearly the Psalmist's hope of immortal life, but shall discern the process by which he came to it, and almost his very act of grasping at it; for the first verse of our text is manifestly the foundation of the second; and the facts of the one are the basis of the hopes of the other. That is made plain by the therefore which, in one of the intervening verses, links the concluding rapturous anticipations with the previous expressions.

If, then, we observe that here, in these two verses which I have read, there is a very remarkable parallelism, we shall get still more strikingly the connection between the devout life here and the perfecting of the same hereafter. Note how, even in our translation, the latter verse is largely an echo of the former, and how much more distinctly that is the case if we make a little variation in the rendering, which brings it closer to the original. I have set the Lord always before me, says the one,--that is the present. In Thy presence is fulness of joy, says the other,--that is the consequent future. And the two words, which are rendered in the one case before me and in the other case in Thy presence, are, though not identical, so precisely synonymous that we may take them as meaning the same thing. So we might render I have set the Lord always before my face: Before Thy face is fulness of joy. The other clause is, to an English reader, more obviously parallel: Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved--shall be steadied here. At Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore--the steadfastness here merges into eternal delights hereafter.

So then, we have two conditions set before us, and the link between them made very plain. And I gather all that I have to say about these words into two statements. First, life here may be God's presence with us, to make us steadfast. And secondly, if so, life hereafter will be our presence with God to make us glad. That is the Psalmist's teaching, and I will try to enforce it.

**I. First, then, life here may be God's presence with us, to make us steadfast.**

Mark the Psalmist's language. I have set the Lord always in front of me--before my face. Emphasis is placed on set and always. God is ever by our sides, but we may be very far away from Him, though He be not far off from every one of us, and if we are to have Him blazing, clear and unobscured above and beyond all the mists and hubbub of earth, we shall need continual effort in order to keep Him in our sight. I have set the Lord--He permits me to put out my hand, as it were, and station Him where I want Him, that I may always have Him in my sight, and be able to look at Him and be calm and blessed.

You cannot do that, if you let the world, and wealth, and business, and anxieties, and ambitions, and cares, and sorrows, and duties, and family responsibilities, jostle and hustle Him out of your minds and hearts. You cannot do it if, like John Bunyan's man with the muckrake, you keep your eyes always down on the straw at your feet, and never lift them to the crown above. How many men in Manchester walk its streets from year's end to year's end, and never look up to the sky except to see whether they must take their umbrellas with them or not? And so all the magnificence and beauty of the daily heavens, and the nightly gemming of the empty places with perpetually burning stars, are lost to them! So, God is blazing there in front of us, but unless we set ourselves to it, we shall never see Him. You have to look, by a conscious effort, over and away from the things that are seen and temporal if you want to see the things that are unseen and eternal.

But if you disturb the whole tenor of your being by agitations and distractions and petty cares, or if you defile it by sensual and fleshly lusts, and animal propensities gratified, and poor, miserable, worldly ambitions and longings filling up your souls, then God can no more be visible before your face than the blessed sun can mirror himself in a storm-tossed sea or in a muddy puddle. The heart must be pure, and the heart must be still, and the mind must be detached from earth, and glued to Heaven, and the glasses of the telescope must be sedulously cleansed from dust, if we are to be blessed with the vision of God continuously before our face.

Then note, still further, that if thus we have made God present with us, by realising the fact of His presence, when He comes, He comes with His hands full. I have set the Lord always before me, says the Psalmist. And then he goes on to say, Because He is at my right hand. Not only in front of you, then, David, to be looked at, but at your side! What for? What do we summon some one to come and stand beside us for? In order that from his presence there may come help and succour and courage and confidence. And so God comes to the right hand of the man who honestly endeavours through all the confusions and bustles of life to realise His sweet and calming presence. Where He comes He comes to help; not to be a spectator, but an ally in the warfare; and whoever sets the Lord before him will have the Lord at his right hand.

And then, note, still further, the steadfastness which God brings. I have spoken of the effort which brings God. I speak now of the steadfastness which He brings by His coming. The Psalmist's anticipation is a singularly modest one. Because He is at my right hand I shall--What? Be triumphant? No! Escape sorrows? No! Have my life filled with serenity? No! I shall not be moved. That is the best I can hope for. To be able to stand on the spot, with steadfast convictions, with steadfast purposes, with steadfast actions--continuously in one direction; having overcome all, to stand--that is as much as the best of us can desire or expect, in this poor struggling life of ours.

What a profound consciousness of inward weakness and of outward antagonism there breathes in that humble and modest hope, as being the loftiest result of the presence of Omnipotence for our aid: I shall not be moved! When we think of our inner weakness, when we remember the fluctuations of our feelings and emotions, when we compare the ups and downs of our daily life, or when we think of the larger changes covering years, which affect all our outlooks, our thoughts, our plans; and how

We all are changed by still degrees,

All but the basis of the soul,

it is much to say, I shall not be moved. And when we think of the obstacles that surround us, of the storms that dash against us, how we are swept by surges of emotion that wash away everything before their imperious onrush, or swayed by blasts of temptation that break down the strongest defences, or smitten by the shocks of change and sorrow that crush the firmest hearts, it is much to say, in the face of a world pressing upon us with the force of the wind in a cyclone, that our poor, feeble reed shall stand upright and not be moved in the fiercest blast. What went ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind--that is humanity. Behold! I have made thee an iron pillar and brazen walls, and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail--that is weak man, stiffened into uprightness, and rooted in steadfastness by the touch of the hand of a present God.

And, brother! there is nothing else that will stay a man's soul. The holdfast cannot be a part of the chain. It must be fastened to a fixed point. The anchor that is to keep the ship of your life from dragging and finding itself, when the morning breaks, a ghastly wreck upon the reef, must be outside of yourself, and the cable of it must be wrapped round the throne of God. The anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which will neither break nor drag, can only be firm when it enters into that within the veil. God, and God only, can thus make us strong! So, dear friends, let us see to it that we fasten our aims and purposes, our faith and love, our submission and obedience, upon that mighty Helper who will be with us and make us strong, that we may stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might.

**II. Now, secondly, notice how, if so, life hereafter will be our presence with God, to make us glad.**

I have already pointed out briefly the connection between these two portions of my text, and I need only remark here that the link which holds them together is very obvious. If a man loves God, and trusts Him, and walks with Him, after the fashion described in our former verse, then there will spring up, irrepressible and unconquerable, a conviction in that man's soul that this sweet and strong communion, which makes so much of the blessedness of life, must last after death. Anything is conceivable rather than that a man who walks with God shall cease to be! Rather, when he is not any more found among men, it is only because God took him. Thus the emotions and experiences of a truly devout soul are (apart from the great revelation in Jesus Christ which hath brought life and immortality to light') the best evidence and confirmation of the anticipation of immortal life. It cannot be, unless our whole intellectual faculties are to be put into utter confusion, that such an experience as that of the man who loves God, and tries to trust Him, and walk before Him, is destined to be brought to nothingness with the mere dissolution of this earthly frame. The greatness and the smallness, the achievements and the failures, of the religious life as we see it here, all bear upon their front the mark of imperfection, and in their imperfection prophesy and proclaim a future completion. Because it is so great in itself, and because, being so great, its developments and influence are so strangely and sadly checked, the faith that knits a man to Christ demands eternity for its duration, and infinitude for its perfection. Thus, he that says I have set the Lord always before me, goes on to say, with an undeniable accuracy of inference, Therefore Thou wilt not leave my soul in the under world. God is not going to forget the soul that clave to Him, and anything is believable sooner than that.

Our texts not only assert this connection and base the confidence of immortality on the present experiences of the spirit that trusts in God, but also give the outline, at least, of the correspondences between the imperfections of the present and the perfectnesses of the future. And I cast this into two or three words before I close.

This is the first of them. If you will turn your faces to God, amidst all the flaunting splendours and vain shows and fleeting possessions of this present, His face will dawn on you yonder. We can say but little of what is meant by such a hope as that. But only this we can say, that there will be, as yet unimaginable, new wealths of revelation of the Father, and to match them, as yet unimaginable new inlets of apprehension and perception upon our parts, so that the sweetest, clearest, closest, most satisfying vision of God that has ever dawned on sad souls here, shall be but as in a glass darkly compared with that face to face sight. We live away out on the far-off outskirts of the system where those great planets plough along their slow orbits, and turn their languid rotations at distances that imagination faints in contemplating, and the light and the heat and the life that reach them are infinitesimally small. We shall be shifted into the orb that is nearest the sun; and oh! what a rapture of light and life and heat will come to our amazed spirits: I have set the Lord always before me. Twilight though the light has been, I have tried to keep it. I shall be of the sons of light close to the Throne and shall see Thy face. I shall be satisfied when I wake out of this sleep of life into Thy likeness.

Then, again, if you will keep God at your right hand here, He will set you on His hereafter. Keep Him here for your Companion, for your Ally, for your Advocate, to breathe strength into you by the touch of His hand, as some feeble man, leaning upon a stronger arm, may be upheld. If you will do that, then the place where the favoured servants stand will be yours; the place where trusted counsellors stand will be yours; the place where the sheep stand will be yours; the place where the Shepherd sits will be yours; for He to whom it is said, Sit Thou at My right hand till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool, says to us, Where I am there shall also My servant be. Keep God by your sides, and you will be lifted to Christ's place at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Lastly, if we let ourselves be stayed by God amidst the struggle and difficulty, we shall be gladdened by Him with perpetual joys. The emphasis of the last words of my text is rather on the adjectives than on the nouns--full joy, eternal pleasure. And how both characteristics contradict the experiences of earth, even the gladdest, which we fain would make permanent! For I suppose that no earthly joy is either central, reaching the deepest self, or circumferential, embracing the whole being of a man, but that only God can so go into the depths of my soul as that from His throne there He can flood the whole of my nature with felicity and peace. In all other gladnesses there is always in the landscape one bit of sullen shadow somewhere or other, unparticipant of the light, while all around is blazing. And we need that He should come to make us blessed.

Joys here are no more lasting than they are complete. As one who only too sadly proved the truth of his own words, burning out his life before he was six-and-thirty, has said--

Pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flower, its bloom is shed!

Or like the snowflake in the river.

A moment white--then gone for ever.

Oh! my friend, why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? The life of faith on earth is the beginning, and only the beginning, of that life of calm and complete felicity in the heavenly places.

I have shown you the ladder's foot, I have set the Lord always before me. The top round reaches the throne of God, and whoever begins at the bottom, and holds fast the beginning of his confidence firm unto the end, for him the great promise of the Master will come true, and Christ's joy will remain in him and his joy shall be full.