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

**PSALMS-006**. **THE TWO AWAKENINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness."*

*Psalm 17:15*

*"As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image."*

*Psalm 73:20*

Both of these Psalms are occupied with that standing puzzle to Old Testament worthies--the good fortune of bad men, and the bad fortune of good ones. The former recounts the personal calamities of David, its author. The latter gives us the picture of the perplexity of Asaph its writer, when he saw the prosperity of the wicked.

And as the problem in both is substantially the same, the solution also is the same. David and Asaph both point onwards to a period when this confusing distribution of earthly good shall have ceased, though the one regards that period chiefly in its bearing upon himself as the time when he shall see God and be at rest, while the other thinks of it rather with reference to the godless rich as the time of their destruction.

In the details of this common expectation, also, there is a remarkable parallelism. Both describe the future to which they look as an awaking, and both connect with it, though in different ways and using different words, the metaphor of an image or likeness. In the one case, the future is conceived as the Psalmist's awaking, and losing all the vain show of this dreamland of life, while he is at rest in beholding the appearance, and perhaps in receiving the likeness, of the one enduring Substance, God. In the other, it is thought of as God's awaking, and putting to shame the fleeting shadow of well-being with which godless men befool themselves.

What this period of twofold awaking may be is a question on which good men and thoughtful students of Scripture differ. Without entering on the wide subject of the Jewish knowledge of a future state, it may be enough for the present purpose to say that the language of both these Psalms seems much too emphatic and high-pitched, to be fully satisfied by a reference to anything in this life. It certainly looks as if the great awaking which David puts in immediate contrast with the death of men of this world, and which solaced his heart with the confident expectation of beholding God, of full satisfaction of all his being, and possibly even of wearing the divine likeness, pointed onwards, however dimly, to that within the veil. And as for the other psalm, though the awaking of God is, no doubt, a Scriptural phrase for His ending of any period of probation and indulgence by an act of judgment, yet the strong words in which the context describes this awaking, as the destruction and the end of the godless, make it most natural to take it as here referring to the final close of the probation of life. That conclusion appears to be strengthened by the contrast which in subsequent verses is drawn between this end of the worldling, and the poet's hopes for himself of divine guidance in life, and afterwards of being taken (the same word as is used in the account of Enoch's translation) by God into His presence and glory--hopes whose exuberance it is hard to confine within the limits of any changes possible for earth.

The doctrine of a future state never assumed the same prominence, nor possessed the same clearness in Israel as with us. There are great tracts of the Old Testament where it does not appear at all. This very difficulty, about the strange disproportion between character and circumstances, shows that the belief had not the same place with them as with us. But it gradually emerged into comparative distinctness. Revelation is progressive, and the appropriation of revelation is progressive too. There is a history of God's self-manifestation, and there is a history of man's reception of the manifestation. It seems to me that in these two psalms, as in other places of Old Testament Scripture, we see inspired men in the very course of being taught by God, on occasion of their earthly sorrows, the clearer hopes which alone could sustain them. They stood not where we stand, to whom Christ has brought life and immortality to light; but to their devout and perplexed souls, the dim regions beyond were partially opened, and though they beheld there a great darkness, they also saw a great light. They saw all this solid world fade and melt, and behind its vanishing splendours they saw the glory of the God whom they loved, in the midst of which they felt that there must be a place for them, where eternal realities should fill their vision, and a stable inheritance satisfy their hearts.

The period, then, to which both David and Asaph look, in these two verses, is the end of life. The words of both, taken in combination, open out a series of aspects of that period which carry weighty lessons, and to which we turn now.

**I. The first of these is that to all men the end of Life is an awaking.**

The representation of death most widely diffused among all nations is that it is a sleep. The reasons for that emblem are easily found. We always try to veil the terror and deformity of the ugly thing by the thin robe of language. As with reverential awe, so with fear and disgust, the tendency is to wrap their objects in the folds of metaphor. Men prefer not to name plainly their god or their dread, but find roundabout phrases for the one, and coaxing, flattering titles for the other. The furies and the fates of heathenism, the supernatural beings of modern superstition, must not be spoken of by their own appellations. The recoil of men's hearts from the thing is testified by the aversion of their languages to the bald name--death. And the employment of this special euphemism of sleep is a wonderful witness to our weariness of life, and to its endless toil and trouble. Everywhere that has seemed to be a comforting and almost an attractive name, which has promised full rest from all the agitations of this changeful scene. The prosperous and the wretched alike have owned the fatigue of living, and been conscious of a soothing expectance which became almost a hope, as they thought of lying still at last with folded hands and shut eyes. The wearied workers have bent over their dead, and felt that they are blest in this at all events, that they rest from their labours; and as they saw them absolved from all their tasks, have sought to propitiate the power that had made this ease for them, as well as to express their sense of its merciful aspect, by calling it not death, but sleep.

But that emblem, true and sweet as it is, is but half the truth. Taken as the whole, as indeed men are ever tempted to take it, it is a cheerless lie. It is truth for the senses--the foolish senses, who crown Death, as Omega, the last, the Lord, because they find no motion in the dead. Rest, cessation of consciousness of the outer world, and of action upon it, are set forth by the figure. But even the figure might teach us that the consciousness of life, and the vivid exercise of thought and feeling, are not denied by it. Death is sleep. Be it so. But does not that suggest the doubt--in that sleep, what dreams may come? Do we not all know that, when the chains of slumber bind sense, and the disturbance of the outer world is hushed, there are faculties of our souls which work more strongly than in our waking hours? We are all poets, makers in our sleep. Memory and imagination open their eyes when flesh closes it. We can live through years in the dreams of a night; so swiftly can spirit move when even partially freed from this muddy vesture of decay. That very phrase, then, which at first sight seems the opposite of the representation of our text, in reality is preparatory to and confirmatory of it. That very representation which has lent itself to cheerless and heathenish thoughts of death as the cessation not only of toil but of activity, is the basis of the deeper and truer representation, the truth for the spirit, that death is an awaking. If, on the one hand, we have to say, as we anticipate the approaching end of life, The night cometh, when no man can work; on the other the converse is true, The night is far spent; the day is at hand.

We shall sleep. Yes; but we shall wake too. We shall wake just because we sleep. For flesh and all its weakness, and all its disturbing strength, and craving importunities--for the outer world, and all its dissipating garish shows, and all its sullen resistance to our hand--for weariness, and fevered activity and toil against the grain of our tastes, too great for our strength, disappointing in its results, the end is blessed, calm sleep. And precisely because it is so, therefore for our true selves, for heart and mind, for powers that lie dormant in the lowest, and are not stirred into full action in the highest, souls; for all that universe of realities which encompass us undisclosed, and known only by faint murmurs which pierce through the opiate sleep of life, the end shall be an awaking.

The truth which corresponds to this metaphor, and which David felt when he said, I shall be satisfied when I awake, is that the spirit, because emancipated from the body, shall spring into greater intensity of action, shall put forth powers that have been held down here and shall come into contact with an order of things which here it has but indirectly known. To our true selves and to God we shall wake. Here we are like men asleep in some chamber that looks towards the eastern sky. Morning by morning comes the sunrise, with the tender glory of its rosy light and blushing heavens, and the heavy eyes are closed to it all. Here and there some lighter sleeper, with thinner eyelids or face turned to the sun, is half conscious of a vague brightness, and feels the light, though he sees not the colours of the sky nor the forms of the filmy clouds. Such souls are our saints and prophets, but most of us sleep on unconscious. To us all the moment comes when we shall wake and see for ourselves the bright and terrible world which we have so often forgotten, and so often been tempted to think was itself a dream. Brethren, see to it that that awaking be for you the beholding of what you have loved, the finding, in the sober certainty of waking bliss, of all the objects which have been your visions of delight in the sleep of earth.

This life of ours hides more than it reveals. The day shows the sky as solitary but for wandering clouds that cover its blue emptiness. But the night peoples its waste places with stars, and fills all its abysses with blazing glories. If light so much conceals, wherefore not life? Let us hold fast by a deeper wisdom than is born of sense; and though men, nowadays, seem to be willing to go back to the eternal sleep of the most unspiritual heathenism, and to cast away all that Christ has brought us concerning that world where He has been and whence He has returned, because positive science and the anatomist's scalpel preach no gospel of a future, let us try to feel as well as to believe that it is life, with all its stunted capacities and idle occupation with baseless fabrics, which is the sleep, and that for us all the end of it is--to awake.

**II. The second principle contained in our text is that death is to some men the awaking of God.**

When Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image. Closely rendered, the former clause would read simply in awaking, without any specifying of the person, which is left to be gathered from the succeeding words. But there is no doubt that the English version fills the blank correctly by referring the awaking to God.

The metaphor is not infrequent in the Old Testament, and, like many others applying to the divine nature, is saved from any possibility of misapprehension by the very boldness of its materialism. It has a well-marked and uniform meaning. God awakes when He ends an epoch of probation and long-suffering mercy by an act or period of judgment. So far, then, as the mere expression is concerned, there may be nothing more meant here than the termination by a judicial act in this life, of the transient prosperity of the wicked. Any divinely-sent catastrophe which casts the worldly rich man down from his slippery eminence would satisfy the words. But the emphatic context seems, as already pointed out, to require that they should be referred to that final crash which irrevocably separates him who has his portion in this life, from all which he calls his goods.

If so, then the whole period of earthly existence is regarded as the time of God's gracious forbearance and mercy; and the time of death is set forth as the instant when sterner elements of the divine dealings start into greater prominence. Life here is predominantly, though not exclusively, the field for the manifestation of patient love, not willing that any should perish. To the godless soul, immersed in material things, and blind to the light of God's wooing love, the transition to that other form of existence is likewise the transition to the field for the manifestation of the retributive energy of God's righteousness. Here and now His judgment on the whole slumbers. The consequences of our deeds are inherited, indeed, in many a merciful sorrow, in many a paternal chastisement, in many a partial exemplification of the wages of sin as death. But the harvest is not fully grown nor ripened yet; it is not reaped in all its extent; the bitter bread is not baked and eaten as it will have to be. Nor are men's consciences so awakened that they connect the retribution, which does befall them, with its causes in their own actions, as closely as they will do when they are removed from the excitement of life and the deceit of its dreams. Sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily. For the long years of our stay here, God's seeking love lingers round every one of us, yearning over us, besetting us behind and before, courting us with kindnesses, lavishing on us its treasures, seeking to win our poor love. It is sometimes said that this is a state of probation. But that phrase suggests far too cold an idea. God does not set us here as on a knife edge, with abysses on either side ready to swallow us if we stumble, while He stands apart watching for our halting, and unhelpful to our tottering feebleness. He compasses us with His love and its gifts, He draws us to Himself, and desires that we should stand. He offers all the help of His angels to hold us up. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber. The judgment sleeps; the loving forbearance, the gracious aid wake. Shall we not yield to His perpetual pleadings, and, moved by the mercies of God, let His conquering love thaw our cold hearts into streams of thankfulness and self-devotion?

But remember, that that predominantly merciful and long-suffering character of God's present dealing affords no guarantee that there will not come a time when His slumbering judgment will stir to waking. The same chapter which tells us that He is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, goes on immediately to repel the inference that therefore a period of which retribution shall be the characteristic is impossible, by the solemn declaration, But the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night. His character remains ever the same, the principles of His government are unalterable, but there may be variations in the prominence given in His acts, to the several principles of the one, and the various though harmonious phases of the other. The method may be changed, the purpose may remain unchanged. And the Bible, which is our only source of knowledge on the subject, tells us that the method is changed, in so far as to intensify the vigour of the operation of retributive justice after death, so that men who have been compassed with the loving-kindness of the Lord, and who die leaving worldly things, and keeping worldly hearts, will have to confront the terror of the Lord.

The alternation of epochs of tolerance and destruction is in accordance with the workings of God's providence here and now. For though the characteristic of that providence as we see it is merciful forbearance, yet we are not left without many a premonition of the mighty final day of the Lord. For long years or centuries a nation or an institution goes on slowly departing from truth, forgetting the principles on which it rests, or the purposes for which it exists. Patiently God pleads with the evil-doers, lavishes gifts and warnings upon them. He holds back the inevitable avenging as long as restoration is yet possible--and His eye and heart see it to be possible long after men conclude that the corruption is hopeless. But at last comes a period when He says, I have long still holden My peace, and refrained Myself, now will I destroy; and with a crash one more hoary iniquity disappears from the earth which it has burdened so long. For sixty times sixty slow, throbbing seconds, the silent hand creeps unnoticed round the dial and then, with whirr and clang, the bell rings out, and another hour of the world's secular day is gone. The billows of the thunder-cloud slowly gather into vague form, and slowly deepen in lurid tints, and slowly roll across the fainting blue; they touch--and then the fierce flash, like the swift hand on the palace-wall of Babylon, writes its message of destruction over all the heaven at once. We know enough from the history of men and nations since Sodom till to-day, to recognise it as God's plan to alternate long patience and sudden destruction:--

The mills of God grind slowly,

But they grind exceeding small;

and every such instance confirms the expectation of the coming of that great and terrible day of the Lord, whereof all epochs of convulsion and ruin, all falls of Jerusalem, and Roman empires, Reformations, and French Revolutions, and American wars, all private and personal calamities which come from private wrong-doing, are but feeble precursors. When Thou awakest, Thou wilt despise their image.

Brethren, do we use aright this goodness of God which is the characteristic of the present? Are we ready for that judgment which is the mark of the future?

**III. Death is the annihilation of the vain show of worldly life.**

The word rendered image is properly shadow, and hence copy or likeness, and hence image. Here, however, the simpler meaning is the better. Thou shalt despise their shadow. The men are shadows, and all their goods are not what they are called, their substance, but their shadow, a mere appearance, not a reality. That show of good which seems but is not, is withered up by the light of the awaking God. What He despises cannot live.

So there are the two old commonplaces of moralists set forth in these grand words--the unsatisfying character of all merely external delights and possessions, and also their transitory character. They are non-substantial and non-permanent.

Nothing that is without a man can make him rich or restful. The treasures which are kept in coffers are not real, but only those which are kept in the soul. Nothing which cannot enter into the substance of the life and character can satisfy us. That which we are makes us rich or poor, that which we own is a trifle.

There is no congruity between any outward thing and man's soul, of such a kind as that satisfaction can come from its possession. Cisterns that can hold no water, that which is not bread, husks that the swine did eat--these are not exaggerated phrases for the good gifts which God gives for our delight, and which become profitless and delusive by our exclusive attachment to them. There is no need for exaggeration. These worldly possessions have a good in them, they contribute to ease and grace in life, they save from carking cares and mean anxieties, they add many a comfort and many a source of culture. But, after all, a true, lofty life may be lived with a very small modicum. There is no proportion between wealth and happiness, nor between wealth and nobleness. The fairest life that ever lived on earth was that of a poor Man, and with all its beauty it moved within the limits of narrow resources. The loveliest blossoms do not grow on plants that plunge their greedy roots into the fattest soil. A little light earth in the crack of a hard rock will do. We need enough for the physical being to root itself in; we need no more.

Young men! especially you who are plunged into the busy life of our great commercial centres, and are tempted by everything you see, and by most that you hear, to believe that a prosperous trade and hard cash are the realities, and all else mist and dreams, fix this in your mind to begin life with--God is the reality, all else is shadow. Do not make it your ambition to get on, but to get up. Having food and raiment, let us be content. Seek for your life's delight and treasure in thought, in truth, in pure affections, in moderate desires, in a spirit set on God. These are the realities of our possessions. As for all the rest, it is sham and show.

And while thus all without is unreal, it is also fleeting as the shadows of the flying clouds; and when God awakes, it disappears as they before the noonlight that clears the heavens. All things that are, are on condition of perpetual flux and change. The cloud-rack has the likeness of bastions and towers, but they are mist, not granite, and the wind is every moment sweeping away their outlines, till the phantom fortress topples into red ruin while we gaze. The tiniest stream eats out its little valley and rounds the pebble in its widening bed, rain washes down the soil, and frost cracks the cliffs above. So silently and yet mightily does the law of change work that to a meditative eye the solid earth seems almost molten and fluid, and the everlasting mountains tremble to decay.

Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? Are we going to be such fools as to fix our hopes and efforts upon this fleeting order of things, which can give no delight more lasting than itself? Even whilst we are in it, it continueth not in one stay, and we are in it for such a little while! Then comes what our text calls God's awaking, and where is it all then? Gone like a ghost at cockcrow. Why! a drop of blood on your brain or a crumb of bread in your windpipe, and as far as you are concerned the outward heavens and earth pass away with a great silence, as the impalpable shadows that sweep over some lone hillside.

The glories of our birth and state

Are shadows, not substantial things;

There is no armour against fate,

Death lays his icy hand on kings.

What an awaking to a worldly man that awaking of God will be! As when a hungry man dreameth, and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty. He has thought he fed full, and was rich and safe, but in one moment he is dragged from it all, and finds himself a starving pauper, in an order of things for which he has made no provision. When he dieth, he shall carry nothing away. Let us see to it that not in utter nakedness do we go hence, but clothed with that immortal robe, and rich in those possessions that cannot be taken away from us, which they have who have lived on earth as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Let us pierce, for the foundation of our life's house, beneath the shifting sands of time down to the Rock of Ages, and build there.

**IV. Finally, death is for some men the annihilation of the vain shows in order to reveal the great reality.**

I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.

Likeness is properly form, and is the same word which is employed in reference to Moses, who saw the similitude of the Lord. If there be, as is most probable, an allusion to that ancient vision in these words, then the likeness is not that conformity to the divine character which it is the goal of our hopes to possess, but the beholding of His self-manifestation. The parallelism of the verse also points to such an interpretation.

If so, then, we have here the blessed confidence that when all the baseless fabric of the dream of life has faded from our opening eyes, we shall see the face of our ever-loving God. Here the distracting whirl of earthly things obscures Him from even the devoutest souls, and His own mighty works which reveal do also conceal. In them is the hiding as well as the showing of His power. But there the veil which draped the perfect likeness, and gave but dim hints through its heavy swathings of the outline of immortal beauty that lay beneath, shall fall away. No longer befooled by shadows, we shall possess the true substance; no longer bedazzled by shows, we shall behold the reality.

And seeing God we shall be satisfied. With all lesser joys the eye is not satisfied with seeing, but to look on Him will be enough. Enough for mind and heart, wearied and perplexed with partial knowledge and imperfect love; enough for eager desires, which thirst, after all draughts from other streams; enough for will, chafing against lower lords and yet longing for authoritative control; enough for all my being--to see God. Here we can rest after all wanderings, and say, I travel no further; here will I dwell for ever--I shall be satisfied.

And may these dim hopes not suggest to us too some presentiment of the full Christian truth of assimilation dependent on vision, and of vision reciprocally dependent on likeness? We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is,--words which reach a height that David but partially discerned through the mist. This much he knew, that he should in some transcendent sense behold the manifested God; and this much more, that it must be in righteousness that he should gaze upon that face. The condition of beholding the Holy One was holiness. We know that the condition of holiness is trust in Christ. And as we reckon up the rich treasure of our immortal hopes, our faith grows bold, and pauses not even at the lofty certainty of God without us, known directly and adequately, but climbs to the higher assurance of God within us, flooding our darkness with His great light, and changing us into the perfect copies of His express Image, His only-begotten Son. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness, cries the prophet Psalmist. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, responds the Christian hope.

Brethren! take heed that the process of dissipating the vain shows of earth be begun betimes in your souls. It must either be done by Faith, whose rod disenchants them into their native nothingness, and then it is blessed; or it must be done by death, whose mace smites them to dust, and then it is pure, irrevocable loss and woe. Look away from, or rather look through, things that are seen to the King eternal, invisible. Let your hearts seek Christ, and your souls cleave to Him. Then death will take away nothing from you that you would care to keep, but will bring you your true joy. It will but trample to fragments the dome of many-coloured glass that stains the white radiance of eternity. Looking forward calmly to that supreme hour, you will be able to say, I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety. Looking back upon it from beyond, and wondering to find how brief it was, and how close to Him whom you love it has brought you, your now immortal lips touched by the rising Sun of the heavenly morning will thankfully exclaim, When I awake, I am still with Thee.