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

**PSALMS-015**. **GOD'S GUESTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."*

*Psalm 27:4*

We shall do great injustice to this mystical aspiration of the Psalmist, if we degrade it to be the mere expression of a desire for unbroken residence in a material Temple. He was no sickly, sentimental seeker after cloistered seclusion. He knew the necessities and duties of life far better than in a cowardly way to wish to shirk them, in order that he might loiter in the temple, idle under the pretence of worship. Nor would the saying fit into the facts of the case if we gave it that low meaning, for no person had his residence in the temple. And what follows in the next verse would, on that hypothesis, be entirely inappropriate. In the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me. No one went into the secret place of the Most High, in the visible, material structure, except the high priest once a year. But this singer expects that his abode will be there always; and that, in the time of trouble, he can find refuge there.

Apart altogether from any wider considerations as to the relation between form and spirit under the Old Covenant, I think that such observations compel us to see in these words a desire a great deal nobler and deeper than any such wish.

**I. Let us, then, note the true meaning of this aspiration of the Psalmist.**

Its fulfilment depends not on where we are, but on what we think and feel; for every place is God's house, and what the Psalmist desires is that he should be able to keep up unbroken consciousness of being in God's presence and should be always in touch with Him.

That seems hard, and people say, Impossible! how can I get above my daily work, and be perpetually thinking of God and His will, and consciously realising communion with Him? But there is such a thing as having an undercurrent of consciousness running all through a man's life and mind; such a thing as having a melody sounding in our ears perpetually, so sweet we know not we are listening to it until it stops, and then, by the poverty of the naked and silent atmosphere, we know how musical were the sounds that we scarcely knew that we heard, and yet did hear so well high above all the din of earth's noises.

Every man that has ever cherished such an aspiration as this knows the difficulties all too well. And yet, without entering upon thorny and unprofitable questions as to whether the absolute, unbroken continuity of consciousness of being in God's presence is possible for men here below, let us look at the question, which has a great deal more bearing upon our present condition--viz. whether a greater continuity of that consciousness is not possible than we attain to to-day. It does seem to me to be a foolish and miserable waste of time and temper and energy for good people to be quarrelling about whether they can come to the absolute realisation of this desire in this world, when there is not one of them who is not leagues below the possible realisation of it, and knows that he is. At all events, whether or not the line can be drawn without a break at all, the breaks might be a great deal shorter and a great deal less frequent than they are. An unbroken line of conscious communion with God is the ideal; and that is what this singer desired and worked for. How many of my feelings and thoughts to-day, or of the things that I have said or done since I woke this morning, would have been done and said and felt exactly the same, if there were not a God at all, or if it did not matter in the least whether I ever came into touch with Him or not? Oh, dear friends! it is no vain effort to bring our lives a little nearer that unbroken continuity of communion with Him of which this text speaks. And God knows, and we each for ourselves know, how much and how sore our need is of such a union. One thing have I desired, that will I seek after; that I, in my study; I, in my shop; I, in my parlour, kitchen, or nursery; I, in my studio; I, in my lecture-hall--may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. In our Father's house are many mansions. The room that we spend most of our lives in, each of us, at our tasks or our work-tables may be in our Father's house, too; and it is only we that can secure that it shall be.

The inmost meaning of this Psalmist's desire is that the consciousness of God shall be diffused throughout the whole of a man's days, instead of being coagulated here and there at points. The Australian rivers in a drought present a picture of the Christian life of far too many of us--a stagnant, stinking pool here, a stretch of blinding gravel there; another little drop of water a mile away, then a long line of foul-smelling mud, and then another shallow pond. Why! it ought to run in a clear stream that has a scour in it and that will take all filth off the surface.

The Psalmist longed to break down the distinction between sacred and secular; to consecrate work, of whatsoever sort it was. He had learned what so many of us need to learn far more thoroughly, that if our religion does not drive the wheels of our daily business, it is of little use; and that if the field in which our religion has power to control and impel is not that of the trivialities and secularities of our ordinary life, there is no field for it at all.

All the days of my life. Not only on Wednesday nights, while Tuesday and Thursday are given to the world and self; not only on Sundays; not for five minutes in the morning, when I am eager to get to my daily work, and less than five minutes at night, when I am half asleep, but through the long day, doing this, that, and the other thing for God and by God and with God, and making Him the motive and the power of my course, and my Companion to heaven. And if we have, in our lives, things over which we cannot make the sign of the cross, the sooner we get rid of them the better; and if there is anything in our daily work, or in our characters, about which we are doubtful, here is a good test: does it seem to check our continual communion with God, as a ligature round the wrist might do the continual flow of the blood, or does it help us to realise His presence? If the former, let us have no more to do with it; if the latter, let us seek to increase it.

**II. And now let me say a word about the Psalmist's reason for this aspiration.**

The word which he employs carries with it a picture which is even more vividly given us by a synonymous word employed in the same connection in some of the other psalms. That I may dwell in the house of the Lord--now, that is an allusion, not only, as I think, to the Temple, but also to the Oriental habit of giving a man who took refuge in the tent of the sheikh, guest-rites of protection and provision and friendship. The habit exists to this day, and travellers among the Bedouins tell us lovely stories of how even an enemy with the blood of the closest relative of the owner of the tent on his hands, if he can once get in there and partake of the salt of the host, is safe, and the first obligation of the owner of the tent is to watch over the life of the fugitive as over his own. So the Psalmist says, I desire to have guest-rites in Thy tent; to lift up its fold, and shelter there from the heat of the desert. And although I be dark and stained with many evils and transgressions against Thee, yet I come to claim the hospitality and provision and protection and friendship which the laws of the house do bestow upon a guest. Carrying out substantially the same idea, Paul tells the Ephesians, as if it were the very highest privilege that the Gospel brought to the Gentiles: Ye are no more strangers, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; incorporated into His family, and dwelling safely in His pavilion as their home.

That is to say, the blessedness of keeping up such a continual consciousness of touch with God is, first and foremost, the certainty of infallible protection. Oh! how it minimises all trouble and brightens all joys, and calms amidst all distractions, and steadies and sobers in all circumstances, to feel ever the hand of God upon us! He who goes through life, finding that, when he has trouble to meet, it throws him back on God, and that when bright mornings of joy drive away nights of weeping, these wake morning songs of praise, and are brightest because they shine with the light of a Father's love, will never be unduly moved by any vicissitudes of fortune. Like some inland and sheltered valley, with great mountains shutting it in, that heareth not the loud winds when they call beyond the barriers that enclose it, our lives may be tranquilly free from distraction, and may be full of peace, of nobleness, and of strength, on condition of our keeping in God's house all the days of our lives.

There is another blessing that will come to the dweller in God's house, and that not a small one. It is that, by the power of this one satisfied longing, driven like an iron rod through all the tortuosities of my life, there will come into it a unity which otherwise few lives are ever able to attain, and the want of which is no small cause of the misery that is great upon men. Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days, and our lives to be a heap of links parted from each other rather than a chain. But if we have that one constant thought with us, and if we are, through all the variety of occupations, true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions, and the misery of multiplicity; and we enter into the blessedness of unity and singleness of purpose; and our lives become, like the starry heavens in all the variety of their motions, obedient to one impulse. For unity in a life does not depend upon the monotony of its tasks, but upon the simplicity of the motive which impels to all varieties of work. So it is possible for a man harassed by multitudinous avocations, and drawn hither and thither by sometimes apparently conflicting and always bewildering, rapidly-following duties, to say, This one thing I do, if all his doings are equally acts of obedience to God.

**III. So, lastly, note the method by which this desire is realised.**

One thing have I desired, ... that will I seek after There are two points to be kept in view to that end. A great many people say, One thing have I desired, and fail in persistent continuousness of the desire. No man gets rights of residence in God's house for a longer time than he continues to seek for them. The most advanced of us, and those that have longest been like Anna, who departed not from the Temple, day nor night, will certainly eject ourselves unless, like the Psalmist, we use the verbs in both tenses, and say, One thing have I desired ... that will I seek after. John Bunyan saw that there was a back door to the lower regions close by the gates of the Celestial City. There may be men who have long lived beneath the shadow of the sanctuary, and at the last will be found outside the gates.

But the words of the text not only suggest, by the two tenses of the verbs, the continuity of the desire which is destined to be granted, but also by the two verbs themselves--desire and seek after--the necessity of uniting prayer and work. Many desires are unsatisfied because conduct does not correspond to desires. Many a prayer remains unanswered because its pray-ers never do anything to fulfil their prayers. I do not say they are hypocrites; certainly they are not consciously so, but I do say that there is a large measure of conventionality that means nothing, in the prayers of average Christian people for more holiness and likeness to Jesus Christ.

Dear friends! if we truly wish this desire of dwelling in the house of the Lord to be fulfilled, the day's work must run in the same direction as the morning's petition, and we must, like the Psalmist, say, I have desired it of the Lord, so I, for my part, will seek after it. Then, whether or not we reach absolutely to the standard, which is none the less to be aimed at, though it seems beyond reach, we shall arrive nearer and nearer to it; and, God helping our weakness and increasing our strength, quickening us to desire, and upholding us to seek after, we may hope that, when the days of our life are past, we shall but remove into an upper chamber, more open to the sunrise and flooded with light; and shall go no more out, but dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.