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

**PSALMS-040**. **DAVID'S CRY FOR PURITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. ... Renew a right spirit within me. 11... . And take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. 12... . And uphold me with Thy free Spirit.."*

*Psalm 51:10, 11, 12*

We ought to be very thankful that the Bible never conceals the faults of its noblest men. David stands high among the highest of these. His words have been for ages the chosen expression for the devotions of the holiest souls; and whoever has wished to speak longings after purity, lowly trust in God, the aspirations of love, or the raptures of devotion, has found no words of his own more natural than those of the poet-king of Israel. And this man sins, black, grievous sin. Self-indulgent, he stays at home while his army is in the field. His moral nature, relaxed by this shrinking from duty, is tempted, and easily conquered. The sensitive poet nature, to which all delights of eye and sense appeal so strongly, is for a time too strong for the devout soul. One sin drags on another. As self-indulgence opened the door for lust, so lust, which dwells hard by hate, draws after it murder. The king is a traitor to his subjects, the soldier untrue to the chivalry of arms, the friend the betrayer of the friend. Nothing can be blacker than the whole story, and the Bible tells the shameful history in all its naked ugliness.

Many a precious lesson is contained in it. For instance, It is not innocence which makes men good. This is your man after God's own heart, is it? runs the common, shallow sneer. Yes; not that God thought little of his foul sin, nor that saints make up for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms; not that righteousness as a standard of conduct is lower than morality; but that, having fallen, he learned to abhor his sin, and with deepened trust in God's mercy, and many tears, struggled out of the mire, and with unconquered resolve and strength drawn from a divine source, sought still to press towards the mark. It is not the attainment of purity, not the absence of sin, but the presence and operation, though it be partial, of an energy which is at war with all impurity, that makes a man righteous. That is a lesson worth learning.

Again, David was not a hypocrite because of this fall of his. All sin is inconsistent with a religious character. But it is not for us to say what sin is incompatible with a religious character.

Again, the worst sin is not some outburst of gross transgression, forming an exception to the ordinary tenor of a life, bad and dismal as such a sin is; but the worst and most fatal are the small continuous vices, which root underground and honeycomb the soul. Many a man who thinks himself a Christian, is in more danger from the daily commission, for example, of small pieces of sharp practice in his business, than ever was David at his worst. White ants pick a carcase clean sooner than a lion will.

Most precious of all is the lesson as to the possibility of all sin being effaced, and of the high hopes which even a man sunk in transgression has a right to cherish, as to the purity and beauty of character to which he may come. What a prayer these clauses contain to be offered by one who has so sinned! What a marvellous faith in God's pardoning love, and what a boldness of hope in his own future, they disclose! They set forth a profound ideal of a noble character; they make of that ideal a prayer; they are the prayer of a great transgressor, who is also a true penitent. In all these aspects they are very remarkable, and lead to valuable lessons. Let us look at them from these points of view successively.

**I. Observe that here is a remarkable outline of a holy character.**

It is to be observed that of these three gifts--a right spirit, Thy Holy Spirit, a free spirit--the central one alone is in the original spoken of as God's; the Thy of the last clause of the English Bible being an unnecessary supplement. And I suppose that this central petition stands in the middle, because the gift which it asks is the essential and fundamental one, from which there flow, and as it were, diverge on the right hand and on the left, the other two. God's Holy Spirit given to a man makes the human spirit holy, and then makes it right and free. Look then at the petitions, not in the order in which they stand in the text, but in the order which the text indicates as the natural one.

Now as to that fundamental petition, Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me, one thing to notice is that David regards himself as possessing that Spirit. We are not to read into this psalm the fully developed New Testament teaching of a personal Paraclete, the Spirit whom Christ reveals and sends. To do that would be a gross anachronism. But we are to remember that it is an anointed king who speaks, on whose head there has been poured the oil that designated him to his office, and in its gentle flow and sweet fragrance, symbolised from of old the inspiration of a divine influence that accompanied every divine call. We are to remember, too, how it had fared with David's predecessor. Saul had been chosen by God; had been for a while guided and upheld by God. But he fell into sin, and--not because he fell into it, but because he continued in it; not because he did wrong, but because he did not repent--the solemn words are recorded concerning him, that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him. The divine influence which came on the towering head of the son of Kish, through the anointing oil that Samuel poured upon his raven hair, left him, and he stood God-forsaken because he stood God-forsaking. And so David looks back from the horrible pit and miry clay into which he had fallen, where, stained with blood and lust, he lies, to that sad gigantic figure, remembered so well and loved by him so truly--the great king who sinned away his soul, and bled out his life on the heights of Gilboa. He sees in that blasted pine-tree, towering above the forest but dead at the top, and barked and scathed all down the sides by the lightning scars of passion, the picture of what he himself will come to, if the blessing that was laid upon his ruddy locks and his young head by the aged Samuel's anointing should pass from him too as it had done from his predecessor. God had departed from Saul, because Saul had refused His counsel and departed from Him; and Saul's successor, trembling as he remembers the fate of the founder of the monarchy, and of his vanished dynasty, prays with peculiar emphasis of meaning, Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me!

That Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, had descended upon him when he was anointed king, but it was no mere official consecration which he had thereby received. He had been fitted for regal functions by personal cleansing and spiritual gifts. And it is the man as well as the king, the sinful man much rather than the faulty king, that here wrestles with God, and stays the heavenly Visitant whom his sin has made to seem as if He would depart. What he desires most earnestly, next to that pardon which he has already sought and found, is that his spirit should be made holy by God's Spirit. That is, as I have said, the central petition of his threefold prayer, from which the others come as natural consequences.

And what is this holiness which David so earnestly desires? Without attempting any lengthened analysis of the various shades of meaning in the word, our purpose will be served if I point out that in all probability the primary idea in it is that of separation. God is holy--that is, separated by all the glory of His perfect nature from His creatures. Things are holy--that is, separated from common uses, and appropriated to God's service. Whatever He laid His hand on and claimed in any especial manner for His, became thereby holy, whether it were a ceremony, or a place, or a tool. Men are holy when they are set apart for God's service, whether they be officially consecrated for certain offices, or have yielded themselves by an inward devotion based on love to be His.

The ethical signification which is predominant in our use of the word and has made it little more than a synonym for moral purity is certainly not the original meaning, as is sufficiently clear from the fact that the word is applied to material things which could have no moral qualities, and sometimes to persons who were not pure, but who were in some sense or other set apart for God's service. But gradually that meaning becomes more and more completely attached to the word, and holiness is not only separation for God, but separation from sin. That is what David longs for in this prayer; and the connection of these two meanings of the word is worth pointing out in a sermon, for the sake of the great truth which it suggests, that the basis of all rightness and righteousness in a human spirit is its conscious and glad devotion to God's service and uses. A reference to God must underlie all that is good in men, and on the other hand, that consecration to God is a delusion or a deception which does not issue in separation from evil.

Holiness is a loftier and a truer word than morality, virtue, or the like; it differs from these in that it proclaims that surrender to God is the very essence of all good, while they seek to construct a standard for human conduct, and to lay a foundation for human goodness, without regard to Him. Hence, irreligious moralists dislike the very word, and fall back upon pale, colourless phrases rather than employ it. But these are inadequate for the purpose. Man's duties can never be summed up in any expression which omits man's relation to God. How do I stand to Him? Do I belong to Him by joyous yielding of myself to be His instrument? That, my friends! is the question, the answer to which determines everything about me. Rightly answered, there will come all fruits of grace and beauty in the character as a natural consequence; whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, every virtue and every praise grow from the root of consecration to God. Wrongly answered, there will come only fruits of selfishness and evil, which may simulate virtue, but the blossom shall go up in dust, and the root in stubble. Do you seek purity, nobleness, strength, and beauty of soul? Learn that all these inhere in and flow from the one act of giving up yourself to God, and in their truest perfection are found only in the spirit that is His. Holiness considered as moral excellence is the result of holiness considered as devotion to God. And learn too that holiness in both aspects comes from the operation and indwelling in our spirits of a divine Spirit, who draws away our love from self to fix it on Him, which changes our blindness into sight, and makes us by degrees like Himself, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners. The Spirit of the Lord is the energy which produces all righteousness and purity in human spirits.

Therefore, all our desires after what is good and true should shape themselves into the desire for that Spirit. Our prayer should be, Make me separate from evil, and that I may be so, claim and keep me for Thine own. As Thou hast done with the Sabbath amongst the days, with the bare summit of the hill of the Lord's house among the mountains, with Israel amidst the nations, so do with me; lay Thine hand upon me for Thine own. Let my spirit, O God! know its destination for Thee, its union with Thee. Then being Thine, it will be clean. Dwell in me, that I may know myself Thine. Seal me with that gracious influence which is the proof that Thou possessest me, and the pledge that I possess Thee. "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me." So much for the chief of these petitions, which gives the ideal character in its deepest relations. There follow two other elements in the character, which on either side flow from the central source. The holy spirit in a man will be a right spirit and a free spirit. Consider these further thoughts in turn.

A right spirit. You will observe that our translators have given an alternative rendering in the margin, and as is not seldom the case, it is a better one than that adopted in the text. A constant or firm spirit is the Psalmist's meaning. He sees that a spirit which is conscious of its relation to God, and set free from the perturbations of sin, will be a spirit firm and settled, established and immovable in its obedience and its faith. For Him, the root of all steadfastness is in consecration to God.

And so this collocation of ideas opens the way for us to important considerations bearing upon the practical ordering of our natures and of our lives. For instance, there is no stability and settled persistency of righteous purpose possible for us, unless we are made strong because we lay hold on God's strength, and stand firm because we are rooted in Him. Without that hold-fast, we shall be swept away by storms of calamity or by gusts of passion. Without that to steady us, our own boiling lusts and desires will make every fibre of our being quiver and tremble. Without that armour, there will not be solidity enough in our character to bear without breaking the steady pressure of the world's weight, still less the fierce hammering of special temptation. To stand erect, and in that sense to have a right spirit--one that is upright and unbent--we must have sure footing in God, and have His energy infused into our shrinking limbs. If we are to be stable amidst earthquakes and storms, we must be built on the rock, and build rock-like upon it. Build thy strength upon God. Let His Holy Spirit be the foundation of thy life, and then thy tremulous and vagrant soul will be braced and fixed. The building will become like the foundation, and will grow into a tower of strength that stands four-square to every wind. Rooted in God, thou shalt be unmoved by the loud winds when they call; or if still the tremulous leaves are huddled together before the blast, and the swaying branches creak and groan, the bole will stand firm and the gnarled roots will not part from their anchorage, though the storm-giant drag at them with a hundred hands. The spirit of holiness will be a firm spirit.

But there is another phase of connection between these two points of the ideal character--if my spirit is to be holy and to preserve its holiness, it must be firm. That is to say, you can only get and keep purity by resistance. A man who has not learned to say No!--who is not resolved that he will take God's way in spite of every dog that can bay or bark at him, in spite of every silvery voice that woos him aside--will be a weak and a wretched man till he dies. In such a world as this, with such hearts as ours, weakness is wickedness in the long run. Whoever lets himself be shaped and guided by anything lower than an inflexible will, fixed in obedience to God, will in the end be shaped into a deformity and guided to wreck and ruin. Dreams however rapturous, contemplations however devout, emotions however deep and sacred, make no man pure and good without hard effort, and that to a large extent in the direction of resistance. Righteousness is not a mere negative idea, and Scripture morality is something much deeper than prohibitions. But there is no law for us without prohibitions, and no righteousness without casting out evil that is strong in us, and fighting against evil that is attractive around us. Therefore we need firmness to guard holiness, to be the hard shell in which the rich fruit matures. We need a wholesome obstinacy in the right that will neither be bribed nor coaxed nor bullied, nor anyhow persuaded out of the road in which we know that we should walk. Add to your faith manly vigour. Learn that an indispensable requisite of holiness is prescribed in that command, Whom resist, steadfast in the faith. And remember that the ground of all successful resistance and the need for it are alike taught in that series of petitions, which makes a holy spirit the foundation of a constant spirit, and a constant spirit the guard of a holy spirit.

Then consider, for a moment, the third element in the character which David longs to possess--a free spirit. He who is holy because full of God's Spirit, and constant in his holiness, will likewise be free. That is the same word which is in other places translated willing--and the scope of the Psalmist's desire is, Let my spirit be emancipated from sin by willing obedience. This goes very deep into the heart of all true godliness. The only obedience which God accepts is that which gladly, and almost as by an instinctive inward impulse, harmonises the human will with the divine. Lo! I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, and Thy law is within my heart. That is a blessed thought, that we may come to do Him service not because we must, but because we like; not as serfs, but as sons; not thinking of His law as a slave-driver that cracks his whip over our heads, but as a friend that lets us know how we may please Him whom it is our delight to obey. And so the Psalmist prays, Let my obedience be so willing that I had rather do what Thou wilt than anything besides.

Then, he thinks, I shall be free. Of course--for the correlative of freedom is lawful authority, and the definition of freedom is willing submission. If for us duty is joy, and all our soul's desires flow with an equable motion parallel to the will of God, then there is no sense of restraint in keeping within the limits beyond which we do not seek to go. The willing spirit sets us free, free from the ancient solitary reign of the despot Self, free from the mob rule of passions and appetites, free from the incubus of evil habits, free from the authority of men's voices and examples. Obedience is freedom to them that have learned to love the lips that command. We are set free that we may serve: O Lord! truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds. We are set free in serving: I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts. Let a willing, free spirit uphold me.

**II. Observe, too, that desires for holiness should become prayers.**

David does not merely long for certain spiritual excellences; he goes to God for them. And his reasons for doing so are plain. If you will look at the former verses of this psalm, you will see that he had found out two things about his sin, both of which make him sure that he can only be what he should be by God's help. He had learned what his crimes were in relation to God, and he had further learned what they indicated about himself. The teaching of his bitter experience as to the former of these two matters lies in that saying which some people have thought strange. Against Thee only have I sinned. What! Had he not committed a crime against human law? had he not harmed Uriah and Bathsheba? were not his deeds an offence to his whole kingdom? Yes, he knew all that; but he felt that over and above all that was black in his deed, considered in its bearing upon men, it was still blacker when it was referred to God; and a sadder word than crime or fault had to be used about it. I have done wrong as against my fellows, but worse than that, I have sinned against God. The notion of sin implies the notion of God. Sin is wilful transgression of the law of God. An atheist can have no conception of sin. But bring God into human affairs, and men's faults immediately assume the darker tint, and become men's sins. Therefore the need of prayer if these evils are to be blotted out. If I had done crime against man only, I should not need to ask God for pardon or cleansing; but I have sinned against Him, and done this evil in His sight, therefore my desires for deliverance address themselves to Him, and my longings for purity must needs break into the cry of entreaty to that God with whom are forgiveness and redemption from all iniquity.

And still further, looking at the one deed, he sees in it something more than an isolated act. It leads him down to its motive; that motive carries him to the state of mind in which it could have power; that state of mind, in which the motive could have power, carries him still deeper to the bias of his nature as he had received it from his parents. And thinking of how he had fallen, how upon his terraced palace roof there the eye had inflamed the heart, and the heart had yielded so quickly to the temptations of the eye, he finds no profounder explanation of the disastrous eclipse of goodness than this: Behold! I was shapen in iniquity.

Is that a confession or a palliation, do you think? Is he trying to shuffle off guilt from his own shoulders? By no means, for these words are the motive for the prayer, Purge me, and I shall be clean. That is to say, he has learned that isolated acts of sin inhere in a common root, and that root a disposition inherited from generation to generation to which evil is familiar and easy, to which good, alas! is but too alien and unwelcome. None the less is the evil done his deed. None the less has he to wail in full consciousness of his individual responsibility: Against Thee have I sinned. But the effect of this second discovery, that sin has become so intertwisted with his being that he cannot shake off the venomous beast into the fire and feel no harm, is the same as that of the former--to drive him to God, who alone can heal the nature and separate the poison from his blood.

Dear friends! there are some of you who are wasting your lives in paroxysms of fierce struggle with the evil that you have partially discovered in yourselves, alternating with long languor, fits of collapse and apathy, and who make no solid advance, just because you will not lay to heart these two convictions--your sin has to do with God, and your sins come from a sinful nature. Because of the one fact, you must go to God for pardon; because of the other, you must go to God for cleansing. There, in your heart, like some black well-head in a dismal bog, is the source of all the swampy corruption that fills your life. You cannot stanch it, you cannot drain it, you cannot sweeten it. Ask Him, who is above your nature and without it, to change it by His own new life infused into your spirit. He will heal the bitter waters. He alone can. Sin is against God; sin comes from an evil heart; therefore, if your longings for that ideal perfectness are ever to be fulfilled, you must make prayers of them, and cry to Him who hears, Create in me a clean heart, O God! take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.

**III. Finally, observe that prayers for perfect cleansing are permitted to the lips of the greatest sinners.**

Such longings as these might seem audacious, when the atrocity of the crime is remembered, and by man's standard they are so. Let the criminal be thankful for escape, and go hide himself, say men's pardons. But here is a man, with the evil savour of his debauchery still tainting him, daring to ask for no mere impunity, but for God's choicest gifts. Think of his crime, think of its aggravations from God's mercies to him, from his official position, from his past devotion. Remember that this cruel voluptuary is the sweet singer of Israel, who had taught men songs of purer piety and subtler emotion than the ruder harps of older singers had ever flung from their wires. And this man, so placed, so gifted, set up on high to be the guiding light of the nation, has plunged into the filth of these sins, and quenched all his light there. When he comes back penitent, what will he dare to ask? Everything that God can give to bless and gladden a soul. He asks for God's Spirit, for His presence, for the joy of His salvation; to be made once again, as he had been, the instrument that shall show forth His praise, and teach transgressors God's ways. Ought he to have had more humble desires? Does this great boldness show that he is leaping very lightly over his sin? Is he presumptuous in such prayers? God be thanked--no! But, knowing all his guilt, and broken and contrite in heart (crushed and ground to powder, as the words mean), utterly loathing himself, aware of all the darkness of his deserts, he yet cherishes unconquerable confidence in the pitying love of God, and believes that in spite of all his sin, he may yet be pure as the angels of heaven--ay, even holy as God is holy.

Thank God we have such an example for our heartening! Lay it to heart, brethren! You cannot believe too much in God's mercy. You cannot expect too much at His hands. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. No sin is so great but that, coming straight from it, a repentant sinner may hope and believe that all God's love will be lavished upon him, and the richest of God's gifts be granted to his desires. Even if our transgression is aggravated by a previous life of godliness, and have given the enemies great occasion to blaspheme, as David's did, yet David's penitence may in our souls lead on to David's hope, and the answer will not fail us. Let no sin, however dark, however repeated, drive us to despair of ourselves, because it hides from us our loving Saviour. Though beaten back again and again by the surge of our passions and sins, like some poor shipwrecked sailor sucked back with every retreating wave and tossed about in the angry surf, yet keep your face towards the beach, where there is safety, and you will struggle through it all, and though it were but on some floating boards and broken pieces of the ship, will come safe to land. He will uphold you with His Spirit, and take away the weight of sin that would sink you, by His forgiving mercy, and bring you out of all the weltering waste of waters to the solid shore.

So whatever thy evil behaviour, come with it all, and cast thyself before Him, with whom is plenteous redemption. Embrace in one act the two truths, of thine own sin and of God's infinite mercy in Jesus Christ. Let not the one blind you to the other; let not the one lead you to a morbid despondency, which is blind to Christ, nor the other to a superficial estimate of the deadliness of sin, which is blind to thine own self. Let the Cross teach thee what sin is, and let the dark background of thy sin bring into clear prominence the Cross that bringeth salvation. Know that thou art utterly black and sinful. Believe that God is eternally, utterly, inconceivably, merciful. Learn both, in Him who is the Standard by which we can estimate our sin, and the Proof and Medium of God's mercy. Trust thyself and all thy foulness to Jesus Christ; and, so doing, look up from whatsoever horrible pit and miry clay thou mayest have fallen into, with this prayer, Create in me a clean heart, O God! and renew a right spirit within me, take not Thy Holy Spirit from me, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit. Then the answer shall come to you from Him who ever puts the best robe upon His returning prodigals, and gives His highest gifts to sinners who repent. From all your filthiness will I cleanse you, a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes.