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

**PSALMS-041**. **FEAR AND FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"3.* *What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. 4... . In God I have put my trust: I will not fear."*

*Psalm 56:3, 4*

It is not given to many men to add new words to the vocabulary of religious emotion. But so far as an examination of the Old Testament avails, I find that David was the first that ever employed the word that is here translated, I will trust, with a religious meaning. It is found occasionally in earlier books of the Bible in different connections, never in regard to man's relations to God, until the Poet-Psalmist laid his hand upon it, and consecrated it for all generations to express one of the deepest relations of man to his Father in heaven. And it is a favourite word of his. I find it occurs constantly in his psalms; twice as often, or nearly so, in the psalms attributed to David as in all the rest of the Psalter put together; and as I shall have occasion to show you in a moment, it is in itself a most significant and poetic word.

But, first of all, I ask you to notice how beautifully there comes out here the occasion of trust. What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee.

This psalm is one of those belonging to the Sauline persecution. If we adopt the allocation in the superscription, it was written at one of the very lowest points of David's fortunes. And there seem to be one or two of its phrases which acquire new force, if we regard the psalm as drawn forth by the perils of his wandering, hunted life. For instance--Thou tellest my wanderings, is no mere expression of the feelings with which he regarded the changes of this early pilgrimage, but is the confidence of the fugitive that in the doublings and windings of his flight God's eye marked him. Put thou my tears into Thy bottle--one of the few indispensable articles which he had to carry with him, the water-skin which hung beside him, perhaps, as he meditated. So read in the light of his probable circumstances, how pathetic and eloquent does that saying become--What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. That goes deep down into the realities of life. It is when we are afraid that we trust in God; not in easy times, when things are going smoothly with us. Not when the sun shines, but when the tempest blows and the wind howls about his ears, a man gathers his cloak round him, and cleaves fast to his supporter. The midnight sea lies all black; but when it is cut into by the oar, or divided and churned by the paddle, it flashes up into phosphorescence, and so it is from the tumults and agitation of man's spirit that there is struck out the light of man's faith. There is the bit of flint and the steel that comes hammering against it; and it is the contact of these two that brings out the spark. The man never knew confidence who does not know how the occasion that evoked and preceded it was terror and need. What time I am afraid, I will trust. That is no trust which is only fair weather trust. This principle--first fear, and only then, faith--applies all round the circle of our necessities, weaknesses, sorrows, and sins.

There must, first of all, be the deep sense of need, of exposedness to danger, of weakness, of sorrow, and only then will there come the calmness of confidence. A victorious faith will

rise large and slow

From out the fluctuations of our souls,

As from the dim and tumbling sea

Starts the completed moon.

And then, if so, notice how there is involved in that the other consideration, that a man's confidence is not the product of outward circumstances, but of his own fixed resolves. I will put my trust in Thee. Nature says, Be afraid! and the recoil from that natural fear, which comes from a discernment of threatening evil, is only possible by a strong effort of the will. Foolish confidence opposes to natural fear a groundless resolve not to be afraid, as if heedlessness were security, or facts could be altered by resolving not to think about them. True faith, by a mighty effort of the will, fixes its gaze on the divine Helper, and there finds it possible and wise to lose its fears. It is madness to say, I will not to be afraid! it is wisdom and peace to say, I will trust, and not be afraid. But it is no easy matter to fix the eye on God when threatening enemies within arm's-length compel our gaze; and there must be a fixed resolve, not indeed to coerce our emotions or to ignore our perils, but to set the Lord before us, that we may not be moved. When war desolates a land, the peasants fly from their undefended huts to the shelter of the castle on the hilltop, but they cannot reach the safety of the strong walls without climbing the steep road. So when calamity darkens round us, or our sense of sin and sorrow shakes our hearts, we need effort to resolve and to carry into practice the resolution, I flee unto Thee to hide me. Fear, then, is the occasion of faith, and faith is fear transformed by the act of our own will, calling to mind the strength of God, and betaking ourselves thereto. Therefore, do not wonder if the two things lie in your hearts together, and do not say, I have no faith because I have some fear, but rather feel that if there be the least spark of the former it will turn all the rest into its own bright substance. Here is the stifling smoke, coming up from some newly-lighted fire of green wood, black and choking, and solid in its coils; but as the fire burns up, all the smoke-wreaths will be turned into one flaming spire, full of light and warmth. Do you turn your smoke into fire, your fear into faith. Do not be down-hearted if it takes a while to convert the whole of the lower and baser into the nobler and higher. Faith and fear do blend, thank God! They are as oil and water in a man's soul, and the oil will float above, and quiet the waves. What time I am afraid--there speak nature and the heart; I will trust in Thee--there speaks the better man within, lifting himself above nature and circumstances, and casting himself into the extended arms of God, who catches him and keeps him safe.

Then, still further, these words, or rather one portion of them, give us a bright light and a beautiful thought as to the essence and inmost centre of this faith or trust. Scholars tell us that the word here translated trust has a graphic, pictorial meaning for its root idea. It signifies literally to cling to or hold fast anything, expressing thus both the notion of a good tight grip and of intimate union. Now, is not that metaphor vivid and full of teaching as well as of impulse? I will trust in Thee. And he exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord. We may follow out the metaphor of the word in many illustrations. For instance, here is a strong prop, and here is the trailing, lithe feebleness of the vine. Gather up the leaves that are creeping all along the ground, and coil them around that support, and up they go straight towards the heavens. Here is a limpet in some pond or other, left by the tide, and it has relaxed its grasp a little. Touch it with your finger and it grips fast to the rock, and you will want a hammer before you can dislodge it. There is a traveller groping along some narrow broken path, where the chamois would tread cautiously, his guide in front of him. His head reels, and his limbs tremble, and he is all but over, but he grasps the strong hand of the man in front of him, or lashes himself to him by the rope, and he can walk steadily. Or, take that story in the Acts of the Apostles, about the lame man healed by Peter and John. All his life long he had been lame, and when at last healing comes, one can fancy with what a tight grasp the lame man held Peter and John. The timidity and helplessness of a lifetime made him hold fast, even while, walking and leaping, he tried how the unaccustomed feet and ankle bones could do their work. How he would clutch the arms of his two supporters, and feel himself firm and safe only as long as he grasped them! That is faith, cleaving to Christ, twining round Him with all the tendrils of our heart, as the vine does round its pole; holding to Him by His hand, as a tottering man does by the strong hand that upholds.

And there is one more application of the metaphor, which perhaps may be best brought out by referring to a passage of Scripture. We find this same expression used in that wonderfully dramatic scene in the Book of Kings, where the supercilious messengers from the king of Assyria came up and taunted the king and his people on the wall. What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? Now, on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me? Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which, if a man lean, it will go into his hand and pierce it: so is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, unto all that trust on him, The word of our text is employed there, and as the phrase shows, with a distinct trace of its primary sense. Hezekiah was leaning upon that poor paper reed on the Nile banks, that has no substance, or strength, or pith in it. A man leans upon it, and it runs into the palm of his hand, and makes an ugly festering wound. Such rotten stays are all our earthly confidences. The act of trust, and the miserable issues of placing it on man, are excellently described there. The act is the same when directed to God, but how different the issues. Lean all your weight on God as on some strong staff, and depend upon it that your support will never yield nor crack and no splinters will run into your palms from it.

If I am to cling with my hand I must first empty my hand. Fancy a man saying, I cannot stand unless you hold me up; but I have to hold my bank book, and this thing, and that thing, and the other thing; I cannot put them down, so I have not a hand free to lay hold with, you must do the holding. That is what some of us are saying in effect. Now the prayer, Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe, is a right one; but not from a man who will not put his possessions out of his hands that he may lay hold of the God who lays hold of him.

Nothing in my hand I bring.

Then, of course, and only then, when we are empty-handed, shall we be free to grip and lay hold; and only then shall we be able to go on with the grand words--

Simply to Thy Cross I cling,

as some half-drowned, shipwrecked sailor, flung up on the beach, clasps a point of rock, and is safe from the power of the waves that beat around him.

And then one word more. These two clauses that I have put together give us not only the occasion of faith in fear, and the essence of faith in this clinging, but they also give us very beautifully the victory of faith. You see with what poetic art--if we may use such words about the breathings of such a soul--he repeats the two main words of the former verse in the latter, only in inverted order--What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. He is possessed by the lower emotion, and resolves to escape from its sway into the light and liberty of faith. And then the next words still keep up the contrast of faith and fear, only that now he is possessed by the more blessed mood, and determines that he will not fall back into the bondage and darkness of the baser. In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. He has confidence, and in the strength of that he resolves that he will not yield to fear. If we put that thought into a more abstract form it comes to this: that the one true antagonist and triumphant rival of all fear is faith, and faith alone. There is no reason why any man should be emancipated from his fears either about this world or about the next, except in proportion as he has faith. Nay, rather it is far away more rational to be afraid than not to be afraid, unless I have this faith in Christ. There are plenty of reasons for dread in the dark possibilities and not less dark certainties of life. Disasters, losses, partings, disappointments, sicknesses, death, may any of them come at any moment, and some of them will certainly come sooner or later. Temptations lurk around us like serpents in the grass, they beset us in open ferocity like lions in our path. Is it not wise to fear unless our faith has hold of that great promise, Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; there shall no evil befall thee? But if we have a firm hold of God, then it is wise not to be afraid, and terror is folly and sin. For trust brings not only tranquillity, but security, and so takes away fear by taking away danger.

That double operation of faith in quieting and in defending is very strikingly set forth by an Old Testament word, formed from the verb here employed, which means properly confidence, and then in one form comes to signify both in security and in safety, secure as being free from anxiety, safe as being sheltered from peril. So, for instance, the people of that secluded little town of Laish, whose peaceful existence amidst warlike neighbours is described with such singular beauty in the Book of Judges, are said to dwell careless, quiet, and secure. The former phrase is literally in trust, and the latter is trusting. The idea sought to be conveyed by both seems to be that double one of quiet freedom from fear and from danger. So again, in Moses blessing, The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him, we have the same phrase to express the same twofold benediction of shelter, by dwelling in God, from all alarm and from all attack:

As far from danger as from fear,

While love, Almighty love is near.

This thought of the victory of faith over fear is very forcibly set forth in a verse from the Book of Proverbs, which in our version runs The righteous is bold as a lion. The word rendered is bold is that of our text, and would literally be trusts, but obviously the metaphor requires such a translation as that of the English Bible. The word that properly describes the act of faith has come to mean the courage which is the consequence of the act, just as our own word confidence properly signifies trust, but has come to mean the boldness which is born of trust. So, then, the true way to become brave is to lean on God. That, and that alone, delivers from otherwise reasonable fear, and Faith bears in her one hand the gift of outward safety, and in her other that of inward peace.

Peter is sinking in the water; the tempest runs high. He looks upon the waves, and is ready to fancy that he is going to be swallowed up immediately. His fear is reasonable if he has only the tempest and himself to draw his conclusions from. His helplessness and the scowling storm together strike out a little spark of faith, which the wind cannot blow out, nor the floods quench. Like our Psalmist here, when Peter is afraid, he trusts. Save, Lord! or I perish. Immediately the outstretched hand of his Lord grasps his, and brings him safety, while the gentle rebuke, O thou of little faith! wherefore didst thou doubt? infuses courage into his beating heart. The storm runs as high as ever, and the waves beat about his limbs, and the spray blinds his eyes. If he leaves his hold for one moment down he will go. But, as long as he clasps Christ's hand, he is as safe on that heaving floor as if his feet were on a rock; and as long as he looks in Christ's face and leans upon His upholding arm, he does not see the waves boisterous, nor tremble at all as they break around him. His fear and his danger are both gone, because he holds Christ and is upheld by Him. In this sense, too, as in many others, this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.