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

**PSALMS-044**. **WAITING AND SINGING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9.* *Because of his strength will I wait upon Thee: for God is my defence... . 17. Unto Thee, O my strength, will I sing: for God is my defence, and the God of my mercy."*

*Psalm 59:9, 17*

There is an obvious correspondence between these two verses even as they stand in our translation, and still more obviously in the Hebrew. You observe that in the former verse the words because of are a supplement inserted by our translators, because they did not exactly know what to make of the bare words as they stood. His strength, I will wait upon Thee, is, of course, nonsense; but a very slight alteration of a single letter, which has the sanction of several good authorities, both in manuscripts and translations, gives an appropriate and beautiful meaning, and brings the two verses into complete verbal correspondence. Suppose we read, My strength, instead of His strength. The change is only making the limb of one letter a little shorter, and as you will perceive, we thereby get the same expressions in both verses.

We may then read our two texts thus: Upon Thee, O my Strength! I will wait... . Unto Thee, O my Strength, I will sing! They are, word for word, parallel, with the significant difference that the waiting in the one passes into song, in the other, the silent expectation breaks into music of praise. And these two words--wait and sing--are in the Hebrew the same in every letter but one, thus strengthening the impression of likeness as well as emphasising, with poetic art, that of difference. The parallel, too, obviously extends to the second half of each verse, where the reason for both the waiting and the praise is the same--For God is my defence--with the further eloquent variation that the song is built not only on the thought that God is my defence, but also on this, that He is the God of my mercy.

These two parallel verses, then, are a kind of refrain, coming in at the close of each division of the psalm; and if you examine its structure and general course of thought, you will see that the first stands at the end of a picture of the Psalmist's trouble and danger, and makes the transition to the second part, which is mainly a prayer for deliverance, and finishes with the refrain altered and enlarged, as I have pointed out.

The heading of the psalm tells us that its date is the very beginning of Saul's persecution, when they watched the house to kill David, and he fled by night from the city. There is a certain correspondence between the circumstances and some part of the picture of his foes here which makes the date probable. If so, this is one of David's oldest psalms, and is interesting as showing his faith and courage, even in the first burst of danger. But whether that be so or not, we have here, at any rate, the voice of a devout soul in sore sorrow, and we may well learn the lesson of its twofold utterance. The man, overwhelmed by calamity, betakes himself to God. Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I wait, for God is my defence. Then, by dint of waiting, although the outward circumstances keep just the same, his temper and feelings change. He began with, Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! for they lie in wait for my soul. He passes through My Strength! I will wait upon Thee, and so ends with My Strength! I will sing unto Thee. We may then throw our remarks into two groups, and deal for a few moments with these two points--the waiting on God, and the change of waiting into praise.

Now, with regard to the first of these--the waiting on God--I must notice that the expression here, I will wait, is a somewhat remarkable one. It means accurately, I will watch Thee, and it is the word that is generally employed, not about our looking up to Him, but about His looking down to us. It would describe the action of a shepherd guarding his flock; of a sentry keeping a city; of the watchers that watch for the morning, and the like. By using it, the Psalmist seems as if he would say--There are two kinds of watching. There is God's watching over me, and there is my watching for God. I look up to Him that He may bless; He looks down upon me that He may take care of me. As He guards me, so I stand expectant before Him, as one in a besieged town, upon the ramparts there, looks eagerly out across the plain to see the coming of the long-expected succours. God waits to be gracious--wonderful words, painting for us His watchfulness of fitting times and ways to bless us, and His patient attendance on our unwilling, careless spirits. We may well take a lesson from His attitude in bestowing, and on our parts, wait on Him to be helped. For these two things--vigilance and patience--are the main elements in the scriptural idea of waiting on God. Let me enforce each of them in a word or two.

There is no waiting on God for help, and there is no help from God, without watchful expectation on our parts. If ever we fail to receive strength and defence from Him, it is because we are not on the outlook for it. Many a proffered succour from heaven goes past us, because we are not standing on our watch-tower to catch the far-off indications of its approach, and to fling open the gates of our heart for its entrance. He who expects no help will get none; he whose expectation does not lead him to be on the alert for its coming will get but little. How the beleaguered garrison, that knows a relieving force is on the march, strain their eyes to catch the first glint of the sunshine on their spears as they top the pass! But how unlike such tension of watchfulness is the languid anticipation and fitful look, with more of distrust than hope in it, which we turn to heaven in our need! No wonder we have so little living experience that God is our strength and our defence, when we so partially believe that He is, and so little expect that He will be either. The homely old proverb says, They that watch for providences will never want a providence to watch for, and you may turn it the other way and say, They that do not watch for providence will never have a providence to watch for. Unless you put out your water-jars when it rains you will catch no water; if you do not watch for God coming to help you, God's watching to be gracious will be of no good at all to you. His waiting is not a substitute for ours, but because He watches therefore we should watch. We say, we expect Him to comfort and help us--well, are we standing, as it were, on tiptoe, with empty hands upraised to bring them a little nearer the gifts we look for? Are our eyes ever towards the Lord? Do we pore over His gifts, scrutinising them as eagerly as a gold-seeker does the quartz in his pan, to detect every shining speck of the precious metal? Do we go to our work and our daily battle with the confident expectation that He will surely come when our need is the sorest and scatter our enemies? Is there any clear outlook kept by us for the help which we know must come, lest it should pass us unobserved, and like the dove from the ark, finding no footing in our hearts drowned in a flood of troubles, be fain to return to the calm refuge from which it came on its vain errand? Alas, how many gentle messengers of God flutter homeless about our hearts, unrecognised and unwelcomed, because we have not been watching for them! Of what avail is it that a strong hand from the beach should fling the safety-line with true aim to the wreck, if no eye on the deck is watching for it? It hangs there, useless and unseen, and then it drops into the sea, and every soul on board is drowned. It is our own fault--and very largely the fault of our want of watchfulness for the coming of God's help--if we are ever overwhelmed by the tasks, or difficulties, or sorrows of life. We wonder that we are left to fight out the battle ourselves. But are we? Is it not rather, that while God's succours are hastening to our side we will not open our eyes to see, nor our hearts to receive them? If we go through the world with our hands hanging listlessly down instead of lifted to heaven, or full of the trifles and toys of this present, as so many of us do, what wonder is it if heavenly gifts of strength do not come into our grasp?

That attitude of watchful expectation is vividly described for us in the graphic words of another psalm, My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. What a picture that is! Think of a wakeful, sick man, tossing restless all the night on his tumbled bed, racked with pain made harder to bear by the darkness. How often his heavy eye is lifted to the window-pane, to see if the dawn has not yet begun to tint it with a grey glimmer! How he groans, Would God it were morning! Or think of some unarmed and solitary man, benighted in the forest, and hearing the wild beasts growl and scream and bark all round, while his fire dies down, and he knows that his life depends on the morning breaking soon. With yet more eager expectation are we to look for God, whose coming is a better morning for our sick and defenceless spirits. If we are not so looking for His help, we need never be surprised that we do not get it. There is no promise and no probability that it will come to men in their sleep, who neither desire it nor wait for it. And such vigilant expectation will be accompanied with patience. There is no impatience in it, but the very opposite. If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. If we know that He will surely come, then if He tarry we can wait for Him. The measure of our confidence is ever the measure of our patience. Being sure that He is always in the midst of Zion, we may be sure that at the right time He will flame out into delivering might, helping her, and that right early. So waiting means watchfulness and patience, both of which have their roots in trust.

Further, we have here set forth not only the nature, but also the object of this waiting. Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I wait, for God is my Defence.

The object to which faith is directed, and the ground on which it is based, are both set forth in these two names here applied to God. The name of the Lord is Strength, therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of receiving of His power. The Lord is my Defence, therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of safety. The one name has respect to our condition of feebleness and inadequacy for our tasks, and points to God as infusing strength into us. The other points to our exposedness to danger and to enemies, and points to God as casting His shelter around us. The word translated defence is literally a high fortress, and is the same as closes the rapturous accumulation of the names of his delivering God, which the Psalmist gives us when he vows to love Jehovah, who has been his Rock, and Fortress, and Deliverer; his God in whom he will trust, his Buckler, and the Horn of his salvation, and his High Tower. The first name speaks of God dwelling in us, and His strength made perfect in our weakness; the second speaks of our dwelling in God, and our defencelessness sheltered in Him. The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. As some outnumbered army, unable to make head against its enemies in the open, flees to the shelter of some hill fortress, perched upon a crag, and taking up the drawbridge, cannot be reached by anything that has not wings, so this man, hard pressed by his foes, flees into God to hide him, and feels secure behind these strong walls.

That is the God on whom we wait. The recognition of His character as thus mighty and ready to help is the only thing that will evoke our expectant confidence, and His character thus discerned is the only object which our confidence can grasp aright. Trust Him as what He is, and trust Him because of what He is, and see to it that your faith lays hold on the living God Himself, and on nothing beside.

But waiting on God is not only the recognition of His character as revealed, but it involves, too, the act of laying hold on all the power and blessing of that character for myself. My strength, my defence, says the Psalmist. Think of what He is, and believe that He is that for you, else there is no true waiting on Him. Make God thy very own by claiming thine own portion in His might, by betaking thyself to that strong habitation. We cannot wait on God in crowds, but one by one, must say, My strength and my defence.

And now turn to the second verse of our two texts: Unto Thee, O my Strength! will I sing, for God is my defence and the God of my mercy.

Here we catch, as it were, waiting expectation and watchfulness in the very act of passing over into possession and praise. For remember the aspect of things has not changed a bit between the first verse of our text and the last. The enemies are all round about David just as they were, making a noise like a dog, as he says, and going round about the city. The evil that was threatening him and making him sad remains entirely unlightened. What has altered? He has altered. And how has he altered? Because his waiting on God has begun to work an inward change, and he has climbed, as it were, out of the depths of his sorrow up into the sunlight. And so it ever is, my friends! There is deliverance in spirit before there is deliverance in outward fact. If our patient waiting bring, as it certainly will bring, at the right time, an answer in the removal of danger, and the lightening of sorrow, it will bring first the better answer, the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, to keep your hearts and minds. That is the highest blessing we have to seek for in our waiting on God, and that is the blessing which we get as soon as we wait on Him. The outward deliverance may tarry, but ever there come before it, as heralds of its approach, the sense of a lightened burden and the calmness of a strengthened heart. It may be long before the morning breaks, but even while the darkness lasts, a faint air begins to stir among the sleeping leaves, the promise of the dawn, and the first notes of half-awakened birds prelude the full chorus that will hail the sunrise.

It is beautiful, I think, to see how in the compass of this one little psalm the singer has, as it were, wrought himself clear, and sung himself out of his fears. The stream of his thought, like some mountain torrent, turbid at first, has run itself bright and sparkling. How all the tremor and agitation have gone away, just because he has kept his mind for a few minutes in the presence of the calm thought of God and His love. The first courses of his psalm, like those of some great building, are laid deep down in the darkness, but the shining summit is away up there in the sunlight, and God's glittering glory is sparklingly reflected from the highest point. Whoever begins with, Deliver me--I will wait upon Thee, will pass very quickly, even before the outward deliverance comes, into--O my Strength! unto Thee will I sing! Every song of true trust, though it may begin with a minor, will end in a burst of jubilant gladness. No prayer ought ever to deal with complaints, as we know, without starting with thanksgiving, and, blessed be God, no prayer need to deal with complaints without ending with thanksgiving. So, all our cries of sorrow, and all our acknowledgments of weakness and need, and all our plaintive beseechings, should be inlaid, as it were, between two layers of brighter and gladder thought, like dull rock between two veins of gold. The prayer that begins with thankfulness, and passes on into waiting, even while in sorrow and sore need, will always end in thankfulness, and triumph, and praise.

If we regard this second verse of our text as the expression of the Psalmist's emotion at the moment of its utterance, then we see in it a beautiful illustration of the effect of faithful waiting to turn complaining into praise. If we regard it rather as an expression of his confidence, that I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, we see in it an illustration of the power of patient waiting to brighten the sure hope of deliverance, and to bring summer into the heart of winter. As resolve, or as prophecy, it is equally a witness of the large reward of quiet waiting for the salvation of the Lord.

In either application of the words their almost precise correspondence with those of the previous verse is far more than a mere poetic ornament, or part of the artistic form of the psalm. It teaches us this happy lesson--that the song of accomplished deliverance, whether on earth, or in the final joy of heaven, will be but a sweeter, fuller repetition of the cry that went up in trouble from our waiting hearts. The object to which we shall turn with our thankfulness is He to whom we betook ourselves with our prayers. There will be the same turning of the soul to Him; only instead of wistful waiting in the longing look, joy will light her lamps in our eyes, and thankfulness beam in our faces as we turn to His light. We shall look to Him as of old, and name Him what we used to name Him when we were in weakness and warfare,--our Strength and our Defence. But how different the feelings with which the delivered soul calls Him so, from those with which the sorrowful heart tried to grasp the comfort of the names. Then their reality was a matter of faith, often hard to hold fast. Now it is a matter of memory and experience. I called Thee my strength when I was full of weakness; I tried to believe Thou wast my defence when I was full of fear; I thought of Thee as my fortress when I was ringed about with foes; I know Thee now for that which I then trusted that Thou wast. As I waited upon Thee that Thou mightest be gracious, I praise Thee now that Thou hast been more gracious than my hopes. Blessed are they whose loftiest expectations were less than their grateful memories and their rich experience, and who can take up in their song of praise the names by which they called on God, and feel that they knew not half their depth, their sweetness, or their power!

But the praise is not merely the waiting transformed. Experience has not only deepened the conception of the meaning of God's name; it has added a new name. The cry of the suppliant was to God, his strength and defence; the song of the saved is to the God who is also the God of his mercy. The experiences of life have brought out more fully the love and tender pity of God. While the troubles lasted it was hard to believe that God was strong enough to brace us against them, and to keep us safe in them; it was harder still to think of them as coming from Him at all; it was hardest to feel that they came from His love. But when they are past, and their meaning is plainer, and we possess their results in the weight of glory which they have wrought out for us, we shall be able to look back on them all as the mercies of the God of our mercy, even as when a man looks down from the mountain-top upon the mists and the clouds through which he passed, and sees them all smitten by the sunshine that gleams upon them from above. That which was thick and damp as he was struggling through it, is irradiated into rosy beauty; the retrospective and downward glance confirms and surpasses all that faith dimly discerned, and found it hard to believe. Whilst we are fighting here, brethren! let us say, I will wait for Thee, and then yonder we shall, with deeper knowledge of the love that was in all our sorrows, sing unto Him who was our strength in earth's weakness, our defence in earth's dangers, and is for ever more the God of our mercy, amidst the large and undeserved favours of heaven.