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

**PSALMS-046**. **THIRST AND SATISFACTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. My soul thirsteth for Thee... . 5. My soul shall be satisfied... . 8. My soul followeth hard after Thee."*

*Psalm 63:1, 5, 8*

It is a wise advice which bids us regard rather what is said than who says it, and there are few regions in which the counsel is more salutary than at present in the study of the Old Testament, and especially the Psalms. This authorship has become a burning question which is only too apt to shut out far more important things. Whoever poured out this sweet meditation in the psalm before us, his tender longings for, and his jubilant possession of, God remain the same. It is either the work of a king in exile, or is written by some one who tries to cast himself into the mental attitude of such a person, and to reproduce his longing and his trust. It may be a question of literary interest, but it is of no sort of spiritual or religious importance whether the author is David or a singer of later date endeavouring to reproduce his emotions under certain circumstances.

The three clauses which I have read, and which are so strikingly identical in form, constitute the three pivots on which the psalm revolves, the three bends in the stream of its thought and emotion. My soul thirsts; my soul is satisfied; my soul follows hard after Thee. The three phases of emotion follow one another so swiftly that they are all wrapped up in the brief compass of this little song. Unless they in some degree express our experiences and emotions, there is little likelihood that our lives will be blessed or noble, and we have little right to call ourselves Christians. Let us follow the windings of the stream, and ask ourselves if we can see our own faces in its shining surface.

**I. The soul that knows its own needs will thirst after God.**

The Psalmist draws the picture of himself as a thirsty man in a waterless land. That may be a literally true reproduction of his condition, if indeed the old idea is correct, that this is a work of David's; for there is no more appalling desert than that in which he wandered as an exile. It is a land of arid mountains without a blade of verdure, blazing in their ghastly whiteness under the fierce sunshine, and with gaunt ravines in which there are no pools or streams, and therefore no sweet sound of running waters, no shadow, no songs of birds, but all is hot, dusty, glaring, pitiless; and men and beasts faint, and loll out their tongues, and die for want of water. And, says the Psalmist, such is life, if due regard be had to the deepest wants of a soul, notwithstanding all the abundant supplies which are spread in such rich and loving luxuriance around us--we are thirsty men in a waterless land. I need not remind you how true it is that a man is but a bundle of appetites, desires, often tyrannous, often painful, always active. But the misery of it is--the reason why man's misery is great upon him is--mainly, I suppose, that he does not know what it is that he wants; that he thirsts, but does not understand what the thirst means, nor what it is that will slake it. His animal appetites make no mistakes; he and the beasts know that when they are thirsty they have to drink, and when they are hungry they have to eat, and when they are drowsy they have to sleep. But the poor instinct of the animal that teaches it what to choose and what to avoid fails us in the higher reaches; and we are conscious of a craving, and do not find that the craving reveals to us the source from whence its satisfaction can be derived. Therefore broken cisterns that can hold no water are at a premium, and the fountain of living waters is turned away from, though it could slake so many thirsts. Like ignorant explorers in an enemy's country, we see a stream, and we do not stop to ask whether there is poison in it or not before we glue our thirsty lips to it. There is a great old promise in one of the prophets which puts this notion of the misinterpretation of our thirsts, and the mistakes as to the sources from which they can be slaked, into one beautiful metaphor which is obscured in our English version. The prophet Isaiah says, according to our reading, the parched land shall become a pool. The word which he uses is that almost technical one which describes the phenomenon known only in Eastern lands, or at least known in them only in its superlative degree; the mirage, where the dancing currents of ascending air simulate the likeness of a cool lake, with palm-trees around it. And, says he, the mirage shall become a pool, the romance shall turn into a reality, the mistakes shall be rectified, and men shall know what it is that they want, and shall get it when they know. Brethren! unless we have listened to the teaching from above, unless we have consulted far more wisely and far more profoundly than many of us have ever done the meaning of our own hearts when they cry out, we too shall only be able to take for ours the plaintive cry of the half of this first utterance of the Psalmist, and say despairingly, My soul thirsteth. Blessed are they who know where the fountain is, who know the meaning of the highest unrests in their own souls, and can go on to say with clear and true self-revelation, My soul thirsteth for God! That is religion. There is a great deal more in Christianity than longing, but there is no Christianity worth the name without it. There is moral stimulus to activity, a pattern for conduct, and so on, in our religion, and if our religion is only this longing--well then, it is worth very little; and I fancy it is worth a good deal less if there is none of this felt need for God, and for more of God, in us.

And so I come to two classes of my hearers; and to the first of them I say, Dear friends! do not mistake what it is that you need, and see to it that you turn the current of your longings from earth to God; and to the second of them I say, Dear friends! if you have found out that God is your supreme good, see to it that you live in the good, see to it that you live in the constant attitude of longing for more of that good which alone will slake your appetite.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise Doth ask a drink divine, and unless we know what it is to be drawn outwards and upwards, in strong aspirations after something--afar from the sphere of our sorrow, I know not why we should call ourselves Christians at all.

But, dear friends! let us not forget that these higher aspirations after the uncreated and personal good which is God have to be cultivated very sedulously and with great persistence, throughout all our changing lives, or they will soon die out, and leave us. There has to be the clear recognition, habitual to us, of what is our good. There has to be a continual meditation, if I may so say, upon the all-sufficiency of that divine Lord and Lover of our souls, and there has to be a vigilant and a continual suppression, and often excision and ejection, of other desires after transient and partial satisfactions. A man who lets all his longings go unchecked and untamed after earthly good has none left towards heaven. If you break up a river into a multitude of channels, and lead off much of it to irrigate many little gardens, there will be no force in its current, its bed will become dry, and it will never reach the great ocean where it loses its individuality and becomes part of a mightier whole. So, if we fritter away and divide up our desires among all the clamant and partial blessings of earth, then we shall but feebly long, and feebly longing, shall but faintly enjoy, the cool, clear, exhaustless gush from the fountain of life--My soul thirsteth for God!--in the measure in which that is true of us, and not one hairsbreadth beyond it, in spite of orthodoxy, and professions, and activities, are we Christian people.

**II. The soul that thirsts after God is satisfied.**

The Psalmist, by the magic might of his desire, changes, as in a sudden transformation scene in a theatre, all the dreariness about him. One moment it is a dry and barren land where no water is; the next moment a flash of verdure has come over the yellow sand, and the ghastly silence is broken by the song of merry birds. The one moment he is hungering there in the desert; the next, he sees spread before him a table in the wilderness, and his soul is satisfied as with marrow and with fatness, and his mouth praises God, whom he possesses, who has come unto him swift, immediate, in full response to his cry. Now, all that is but a picturesque way of putting a very plain truth, which we should all be the happier and better if we believed and lived by, that we can have as much of God as we desire, and that what we have of Him will be enough.

We can have as much of God as we desire. There is a quest which finds its object with absolute certainty, and which finds its object simultaneously with the quest. And these two things, the certainty and the immediateness with which the thirst of the soul after God passes into a satisfied fruition of the soul in God, are what are taught us here in our text; and what you and I, if we comply with the conditions, may have as our own blessed experience. There is one search about which it is true that it never fails to find. The certainty that the soul thirsting after God shall be satisfied with God results at once from His nearness to us, and His infinite willingness to give Himself, which He is only prevented from carrying into act by our obstinate refusal to open our hearts by desire. It takes all a man's indifference to keep God out of his heart, for in Him we live, and move, and have our being, and that divine love, which Christianity teaches us to see on the throne of the universe, is but infinite longing for self-communication. That is the definition of true love always, and they fearfully mistake its essence, and take the lower and spurious forms of it for the higher and nobler, who think of love as being what, alas! it often is, in our imperfect lives, a fierce desire to have for our very own the thing or person beloved. But that is a second-rate kind of love. God's love is an infinite desire to give Himself. If only we open our hearts--and nothing opens them so wide as longing--He will pour in, as surely as the atmosphere streams in through every chink and cranny, as surely as if some great black rock that stands on the margin of the sea is blasted away, the waters will flood over the sands behind it. So unless we keep God out, by not wishing Him in, in He will come.

The certitude that we possess Him when we desire Him is as absolute. As swift as Marconi's wireless message across the Atlantic and its answer; so immediate is the response from Heaven to the desire from earth. What a contrast that is to all our experiences! Is there anything else about which we can say I am quite sure that if I want it I shall have it. I am quite sure that when I want it I have it? Nothing! There may be wells to which a man has to go, as the Bedouin in the desert has to go, with empty water-skins, many a day's journey, and it comes to be a fight between the physical endurance of the man and the weary distance between him and the spring. Many a man's bones, and many a camel's, lie on the track to the wells, who lay down gasping and black-lipped, and died before they reached them. We all know what it is to have longing desires which have cost us many an effort, and efforts and desires have both been in vain. Is it not blessed to be sure that there is One whom to long for is immediately to possess?

Then there is the other thought here, too, that when we have God we have enough. That is not true about anything else. God forbid that one should depreciate the wise adaptation of earthly goods to human needs which runs all through every life! but all that recognised, still we come back to this, that there is nothing here, nothing except God Himself, that will fill all the corners of a human heart. There is always something lacking in all other satisfactions. They address themselves to sides, and angles, and facets of our complex nature; they leave all the others unsatisfied. The table that is spread in the world, at which, if I might use so violent a figure, our various longings and capacities seat themselves as guests, always fails to provide for some of them, and whilst some, and those especially of the lower type, are feasting full, there sits by their side another guest, who finds nothing on the table to satisfy his hunger. But if my soul thirsts for God, my soul will be satisfied when I get Him. The prophet Isaiah modifies this figure in the great word of invitation which pealed out from him, where he says, Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters. But that figure is not enough for him, that metaphor, blessed as it is, does not exhaust the facts; and so he goes on, yea, come, buy wine--and that is not enough for him, that does not exhaust the facts, therefore he adds, and milk. Water, wine, and milk; all forms of the draughts that slake the thirsts of humanity, are found in God Himself, and he who has Him needs seek nowhere besides.

Lastly--

**III. The soul that is satisfied with God immediately renews its quest.**

My soul followeth hard after Thee. The two things come together, longing and fruition, as I have said. Fruition begets longing, and there is swift and blessed alternation, or rather co-existence of the two. Joyful consciousness of possession and eager anticipation of larger bestowments are blended still more closely, if we adhere to the original meaning of the words of this last clause, than they are in our translation, for the psalm really reads, My soul cleaveth after Thee. In the one word cleaveth, is expressed adhesion, like that of the limpet to the rock, conscious union, blessed possession; and in the other word after Thee is expressed the pressing onwards for more and yet more. But now contrast that with the issue of all other methods of satisfying human appetites, be they lower or be they higher. They result either in satiety or in a tyrannical, diseased appetite which increases faster than the power of satisfying it increases. The man who follows after other good than God, has at the end to say, I am sick, tired of it, and it has lost all power to draw me, or he has to say, I ravenously long for more of it, and I cannot get any more. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase. You have to increase the dose of the narcotic, and as you increase the dose, it loses its power, and the less you can do without it the less it does for you. But to drink into the one God slakes all thirsts, and because He is infinite, and our capacity for receiving Him may be indefinitely expanded; therefore, Age cannot wither, nor custom stale His infinite variety; but the more we have of God, the more we long for Him, and the more we long for Him the more we possess Him.

Brethren! these are the possibilities of the Christian life; being its possibilities they are our obligations. The Psalmist's words may well be turned by us into self-examining interrogations and we may--God grant that we do!--all ask ourselves; Do I thus thirst after God? Have I learned that, notwithstanding all supplies, this world without Him is a waterless desert? Have I experienced that whilst I call He answers, and that the water flows in as soon as I open my heart? And do I know the happy birth of fresh longings out of every fruition, and how to go further and further into the blessed land, and into my elastic heart receive more and more of the ever blessed God? These texts of mine not only set forth the ideal for the Christian life here, but they carry in themselves the foreshadowing of the life hereafter. For surely such a merely physical accident as death cannot be supposed to break this golden sequence which runs through life. Surely this partial and progressive possession of an infinite good, by a nature capable of indefinitely increasing appropriation of, and approximation to it is the prophecy of its own eternal continuance. So long as the fountain springs, the thirsty lips will drink. God's servants will live till God dies. The Christian life will go on, here and hereafter, till it has reached the limits of its own capacity of expansion, and has exhausted God. The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.