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

**PSALMS-049**. **REASONABLE RAPTURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25.* *Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee. 26. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."*

*Psalm 73:25-26*

We have in this psalm the record of the Psalmist's struggle with the great standing difficulty of how to reconcile the unequal distribution of worldly prosperity with the wisdom and providence of God. That difficulty pressed more acutely upon men of the Old Dispensation than even upon us, because the very promise of that stage of revelation was that Godliness brought with it outward well-being. Our Psalmist reaches a solution, not exactly by the same path by which the writers of the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes find an answer to the problem. This man gives up the endeavour to solve the question by reflection and thought, and as he says, goes into the sanctuary of God, gets into communion with his Father in heaven, and by reason of that communion reaches a conclusion which is, at all events, an approximate solution of his difficulty, viz. the belief of a future life, Then understood I their end. The solemn vision of a life beyond the present, which should be the outcome and retribution of this, rises before him from out of his agitated thoughts, like the moon, pale and phantom-like, from a stormy sea. That truth, if revealed at all to the Psalmist's contemporaries, certainly did not occupy the same position of clearness or of prominence as it does in our religious beliefs. But here we see a soul led up by its wrestlings to apprehend it, and as was said of a statesman, calling a new world into existence to redress the balance of the old. So we get here a soul taught by God, and filled with Him by communion, therefore lifted to the height of a faith in a future life, and so made able to look out upon all the perplexities and staggering mysteries of earth's mingled ill and good, if not with distinct understanding, at least with patient faith.

The words of my text indicate for us the very high-water mark of religious experience, the very apex and climax of what some people would call mystical religion to which this man has climbed, because he fought with his doubts, and by God's grace was able to lay them. To him the world's uncertain ill or good becomes infinitely insignificant, because for the future he has a clear vision of a continued life with God, and because for the present he knows that to have God in his heart is all that he really needs.

**I. We have here, first, a necessity which, misdirected, is the source of man's misery.**

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee. If men would interpret the deepest voices of their own souls that is what they would all say, because, from the very make of our human nature there is not one of us, howsoever weak and sinful and small, but is great enough to be too great to be filled with anything smaller than God. Our thoughts, even the thoughts of the least enlightened amongst us, go wandering through eternity; and as the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes says:--He hath set eternity in men's hearts. We all of us need, though, alas! so few of us know that we need, a living possession of a living perfect Person, for mind, for heart, for will. Nothing short of the fulness of God is enough for the smallest amongst us. So, because we do not believe this, because hundreds of you do not know what it is for which your souls are crying out, the misery of man is great upon him. You try to fill that deep and aching void in your hearts, which is a sign of your possible nobleness, and a pledge of your possible blessedness, with all manner of minute rubbish, which can never fill up the gap that is there. Cartload after cartload may be tilted into the bottomless bog, and there is no more solid ground on the surface than there was at the beginning. Oh, my brother! consult thine own deepest need; listen to that voice, often stifled, often neglected, and by some of you always misunderstood, which speaks in your wills, minds, consciences, hopes, desires, hearts; and is it not this: My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God?

There is none in the heaven, with all its stars and angels, enough for thee but Him. There is none upon earth, with all its flowers, and treasures, and loves, that will calm and still thy soul but only God. The words of my text spring from a necessity felt by every man, misdirected by a tragical majority of men, and therefore the source of restlessness and misery.

**II. Secondly, we see here the longing which, rightly directed and cherished, is the very spirit of religion.**

He, and only he, is the religious man, who can take these words of my text for the inmost words of his conscious effort and life. Only in the measure in which you and I recognise that God is our sole and all-sufficient good, in that measure have we any business to call ourselves devout or Christian people. That is a sharp test, is it not? Is it not a valid and an accurate one? Is that not what really makes a religious man, namely, the supreme admiration of, and aspiration after, and possession of God, and God alone? What a contrast that forms to our ordinary notions of what religion is! High above all creeds which are valuable as leading up to this enthusiasm of longing and rapture of possession, high above all preliminaries and preparations in the way of outward services and ceremonial or united acts of worship, which are only helps to this inward possession, rises such a thought of religion as this. You are not a Christian because you believe a creed. The very death of Jesus Christ is a means to this end. In order that we might come into personal, rapturous, and hallowing possession of God, His very Self in our hearts and spirits, Jesus Christ died and rose again. Do not mistake the staircase for the presence-chamber. Do not fancy that you are Christian people because you hold certain opinions or beliefs in regard of certain doctrines. Do not fancy that religion consists in either the mere outward practice of, or abstinence from, certain forms of conduct. Such things are the means to, or the outcome of, this inward devotion, but the true essence of our religion is that we recognise God as our only good, and that in Him we find absolute rest and perfect sufficiency.

Is that your religion, my brother? What a contrast these words of my text present not only to our notions of what constitutes religion, but to our practice! What is the thing that you and I crave most to have? What is the thing that we lament most of all when we lose? Where do our desires go when we take the guiding hand off them, and let them run as they will? For some of us there are dearer hearts on earth than His, Perhaps for some of us there are more dearly loved faces in heaven than His. Taking the two extreme possible cases, and supposing at the one end of the scale a man that had everything but God, and at the other end a man that had nothing but God, do we live as if we believed that the man that had everything minus God is a pauper; and the other who has God minus everything is rich to all the intents of bliss? Let us shape our desires, aspirations, efforts, according to that certain truth.

I do not need to remind you that this lofty height of conscious longing, not unblest with contemporaneous fruition, is above the height to which we habitually rise. But what I would now insist upon is only this, that whilst there will be variations, whilst there will be ups and downs, the periods in our lives when we do not consciously recognise Him as our supreme and single good are the periods that drop below duty and blessedness. Acknowledge the imperfections, but Oh, my friends! you Christian men and women, who know that these hours of high communion with a loving God are not diffused through your whole life, do not sit down contented, and say that it must be so; but confess them as being imperfections which are your own fault, and remember that just as much, and not one hairsbreadth more than, we can take these words of my text for ours, so much and no more, have we a right to call ourselves religious men and women.

**III. Again, we have here the blessed possession, which deadens earthly desires.**

That clause, There is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee, might, I think, be rendered more accurately With Thee--that is to say, possessing Thee,--I desire none upon earth. If we thus have been longing after God, and fuller possession of Him, and if in some measure, in answer to the desire, as is always the case, we have received into mind and heart and will more of His preciousness and sweetness, then that will kill the desires that otherwise would conflict with it. Our great poet, speaking about a supreme earthly love, says--

That rich golden shaft

Hath killed the flock of all affections else,

That lived in her.

And the same thing is true about this higher life. This new affection will deaden, and in some sense destroy, the desires that turn to lower and to earthly things. The sun when it rises quenches the brightest stars that can but fade in his light and die. And so when, in answer to our longing, God lifts the light of His countenance--a better sunrise--upon us, that new affection dims and quenches the brightness of these little, though they be lustrous points, that shed a fragmentary and manifold twinkling over the darkness of our former night. Walk in the light, and your heaven will be naked of all competing brightness.

Only remember that this supreme, and in some sense exclusive, love and longing does not destroy the sweetness of lower possessions and blessings. A new deep love in a man or a woman's heart does not make their former affections less, but more, sweet and noble and strong. And so when we get to love God best, and to love all other persons and things in Him, and Him in them, then they become sources of dignity and nobleness, of sweetness and strength, in our lives, which they otherwise never would be. If you want to make all your family affections, for instance, more permanent, more lofty, and more blessed, let them be all in God:

I trust he lives in God, and there

I find him worthier to be loved,

says the poet about one that had been carried into the other life. It is true about us in our relations to one another, even whilst we remain here. Let God be first, and the second rises higher in the scale than when we thought it first. The more our hearts are knit to Him and all other desires are subordinated to Him, the more do they become precious, and powers for good in our lives.

**IV. And so, lastly, we have here the possession which is the pledge of perpetuity.**

The Psalmist, in the last verse of my text, supposes an extreme, and in some sense, an impossible case. My flesh--my bodily frame--and my heart--some portion of my immaterial being--faileth. The clause should probably be taken as hypothetical. Even supposing that it has come to this, says he, that I had been separated from my body, and that along with the body there had also been "consumed" (as is the meaning of the original word) some portion of my spiritual being, even then, though there were only a thin thread of personality left, enough to call "me" and no more, so to speak, I should cling with that to God, and I know that then I should have enough, for "God is the Rock of my heart, and my Portion for ever." These two last words are obviously here to be taken in their widest extension. The whole context requires us to suppose that the Psalmist's eye is looking across the black gorge of death to the shining table-land beyond. So here we are admitted to see faith in the future life in the very act of growth. The singer soars to that sunlit height of confidence in the endless blessedness of union with God, just because he feels so deeply the sacredness and the blessedness of his present communion with God.

Next to the resurrection of Jesus Christ the best proof of immortality lies in the present experience of communion with God. Anything is more reasonable than to believe that a soul which can grasp God for its good, which can turn itself to, and be united with, an infinite Being; and itself is capable of indefinite approximation towards that Being, should have its course and career cut short by such a surface thing as death. If there be a God at all, anything is more reasonable than to believe that the union, formed between Him and me by faith here, can ever come to an end until I have exhausted Him, and drawn all His fulness into myself. This communion, by its very sweetness yieldeth proof that it was born for immortality. And the Psalmist here, just because to-day God is the Rock of his heart, is sure that that relation must last on, through life, through death, ay! and for ever, when all that seems shall suffer shock.

So, my brethren! here is the choice and alternative presented before us. And I ask you which is the wise man, he who clutches at external possessions which cannot abide, or he who hungers for that indwelling God, who sinks into the very substance of his soul, and is more inseparable from him than his very body? Which is the wise man, he of whom it shall one day be said, This night thy soul shall be required of thee, and His glory shall not descend after him, or the man who knows for what his heart hungers, and knowing it turns to God in Christ, by simple faith and lowly aspiration, as his enduring Treasure; and then, and therefore, can look out with a calm smile of security over all the tumbling sea of change, and beyond the dark horizon there where sight fails; and can say, I am persuaded that neither things present, nor things to come, nor life, nor death, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the God who is my Treasure, and the Life of my very self?