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

**PSALMS-051**. **MEMORY, HOPE, AND EFFORT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments."*

*Psalm 78:7*

In its original application this verse is simply a statement of God's purpose in giving to Israel the Law, and such a history of deliverance. The intention was that all future generations might remember what He had done, and be encouraged by the remembrance to hope in Him for the future; and by both memory and hope, be impelled to the discharge of present duty.

So, then, the words may permissibly bear the application which I purpose to make of them in this sermon, re-echoing only (and aspiring to nothing more) the thoughts which the season has already, I suppose, more or less, suggested to most of us. Smooth motion is imperceptible; it is the jolts that tell us that we are advancing. Though every day be a New Year's Day, still the alteration in our dates and our calendars should set us all thinking of that continual lapse of the mysterious thing--the creature of our own minds--which we call time, and which is bearing us all so steadily and silently onwards.

My text tells us how past, present, and future--memory, hope, and effort may be ennobled and blessed. In brief, it is by associating them all with God. It is as the field of His working that our past is best remembered. It is on Him that our hopes may most wisely be set. It is keeping His commandments which is the consecration of the present. Let us, then, take the three thoughts of our text and cast them into New Year's recommendations.

**I. First, then, let us associate God with memory by thankful remembrance.**

Now I suppose that there are very few of the faculties of our nature which we more seldom try to regulate by Christian principles than that great power which we have of looking backwards. Did you ever reflect that you are responsible for what you remember, and for how you remember it, and that you are bound to train and educate your memory, not merely in the sense of cultivating it as a means of carrying intellectual treasures, but for a religious purpose? The one thing that all parts of our nature need is God, and that is as true about our power of remembrance as it is about any other part of our being. The past is then hallowed, noble, and yields its highest results and most blessed fruits for us when we link it closely with Him, and see in it not only, nor so much, the play of our own faculties, whether we blame or approve ourselves, as rather see in it the great field in which God has brought Himself near to our experience, and has been regulating and shaping all that has befallen us. The one thing which will consecrate memory, deliver it from its errors and abuses, raise it to its highest and noblest power, is that it should be in touch with God, and that the past should be regarded by each of us as it is, in deed and in truth, one long record of what God has done for us.

We can see His presence more clearly when we look back over a long-connected stretch of days, and when the excitement of feeling the agony or rapture have passed, than we could whilst they were hot, and life was all hurry and bustle. The men on the deck of a ship see the beauty of the city that they have left behind, better than when they were pressing through its narrow streets. And though the view of the receding houses from the far-off waters may be an illusion, our view of the past, if we see God brooding over it all, and working in it all, is no illusion. The meannesses are hidden, the narrow places are invisible, all the pain and suffering is quieted, and we are able to behold more truly than when we were in the midst of them, the bearing, the purpose, and the blessedness alike of our sorrows and of our joys.

Not a few of us are old enough to have had a great many mysteries of our early days cleared up. We have seen at least the beginnings of the harvest which the ploughshare of sorrow and the winter winds were preparing for us, and for the rest we can trust. Brethren! remember your mercies; remember your losses; and for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us these many years in the wilderness, let us try to be thankful, including in our praises the darkness and the storm as well as the light and the calm. Some of us are like people who, when they get better of their sicknesses, grudge the doctor's bill. We forget the mercies as soon as they are past, because we only enjoyed the sensuous sweetness of them whilst it tickled our palate, and did not think, in the enjoyment of them, whose love it was that they spoke of to us. Sorrows and joys, bring them all in your thanksgivings, and forget not the works of God.

Such a habit of cultivating the remembrance of God's hand as moving in all our past, will not, in the slightest degree, interfere with lower and yet precious exercises of that same faculty. We shall still be able to look back, and learn our limitations, mark our weaknesses, gather counsels of prudence from our failures, tame our ambitions by remembering where we broke down. And such an exercise of grateful God-recognising remembrance will deliver us from the abuses of that great power, by which so many of us turn our memories into a cause of weakness, if not of sin. There are people, and we are all tempted to be of the number, who look back upon the past and see nothing there but themselves, their own cleverness, their own success; burning incense to their own net, and sacrificing to their own drag. Another mood leads us to look back into the past dolefully and disappointedly, to say, I have broken down so often; my resolutions have all gone to water so quickly; I have tried and failed over and over again. I may as well give it all up, and accept the inevitable, and grope on as well as I can without hope of self-advancement or of victory. Never! If only we will look back to God we shall be able to look forward to a perfect self. To-morrow need never be determined by the failures that have been. We may still conquer where we have often been defeated. There is no worse use of the power of remembrance than when we use it to bind upon ourselves, as the permanent limitations of our progress, the failures and faults of the past. Forget the things that are behind. Your old fragmentary goodness, your old foiled aspirations, your old frequent failures--cast them all behind you!

And there are others to whom remembrance is mainly a gloating over old sins, and a doing again of these--ruminating upon them; bringing up the chewed food once more to be masticated. Some of us gather only poisonous weeds, and carry them about in the hortus siccus of our memories. Alas! for the man whose memory is but the paler portraiture of past sins. Some of us, I am sure, have our former evils holding us so tight in their cords that when we look back memory is defiled by the things which defiled the unforgettable past. Brethren! you may find a refuge from that curse of remembrance in remembering God.

And some of us, unwisely and ungratefully, live in the light of departed blessings, so as to have no hearts either for present mercies or for present duties. There is no more weakening and foolish misdirection of that great gift of remembrance than when we employ it to tear down the tender greenery with which healing time has draped the ruins; or to turn again in the wound which is beginning to heal the sharp and poisoned point of the sorrow which once pierced it. For all these abuses--the memory that gloats upon sin; the memory that is proud of success; the memory that is despondent because of failures; the memory that is tearful and broken-hearted over losses--for all these the remedy is that we should not forget the works of God, but see Him everywhere filling the past.

**II. Again, let us live in the future by hope in Him.**

Our remembrances and our hopes are closely connected; one might almost even say that the power by which we look backwards and that by which we look forwards are one and the same. At all events, Hope owes to Memory the pigments with which it paints, the canvas on which it paints, and the objects which it portrays there. But in all our earthly hopes there is a feeling of uncertainty which brings alarm as well as expectation, and he whose forward vision runs only along the low levels of earth, and is fed only by experience and remembrance, will never be able to say, I hope with certitude, and I know that my hope shall be fulfilled. For him hopes, and fears that kindle hopes, will be an indistinguishable throng; and there will be as much of pain as of pleasure in his forward glance.

But if, according to my text, we set our hopes on God, then we shall have a certainty absolute. What a blessing it is to be able to look forward to a future as fixed and sure, as solid and as real, as much our possession, as the irrevocable past! The Christian man's hope, if it be set on God, is not a may be, but a will be; and he can be as sure of to-morrow as he is of yesterday.

They whose hopes are set on God have a certain hope, a sufficient one, and one that fills all the future. All other expectations are fulfilled, or disappointed, as the case may be, but are left behind and outgrown. This one only never palls, and is never accomplished, and yet is never disappointed. So if we set our hopes on Him, we can face very quietly the darkness that lies ahead of us. Earthly hopes are only the mirrors in which the past reflects itself, as in some king's palace you will find a lighted chamber, with a great sheet of glass at each end, which perpetuates in shining rows the lights behind the spectator. A curtain veils the future, and earthly hope can only put a mirror in front of it that reflects what has been. But the hope that is set on God draws back the curtain, and lets us see enough of a fixed, eternal future to make our lives bright and our hearts calm. The darkness remains; what of that, if

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care?

Set your hopes on God,

and they will not be ashamed.

**III. Lastly, let us live in the present by strenuous obedience.**

After all, memory and hope are meant to fit us for work in the flying moment. Both should impel us to this keeping of the commandments of God; for both yield motives which should incline us thereto. A past full of blessing demands the sacrifice of loving hearts and of earnest hands. A future so fair, so far, so certain, so sovereign, and a hope that grasps it, and brings some of its sweet fragrance into the else scentless air of the poor present, ought to impel to service, vigorous and continual. Both should yield motives which make such service a delight.

If my memory weakens me for present work, either because it depresses my hope of success, or because it saddens me with the remembrance of departed blessings, then it is a curse and not a good. And if I dream myself away in any future, and forget the exigencies of the imperative and swiftly-passing moment, then the faculty of hope, too, is a curse and a weakening. But both are delivered from their possible abuses, if both are made into means of helping us to fill the present with loving obedience. These two faculties are like the two wings that may lift us to God, like the two paddles, one on either side of the ship, that may drive us steadily forward, through all the surges and the tempest. They find their highest field in fitting us for the grinding tasks and the heavy burdens that the moment lays upon us.

So, dear friends! we are very different in our circumstances and positions. For some of us Hope's basket is nearly empty, and Memory's sack is very full. For us older men the past is long, the earthly future is short. For you younger people the converse is the case. It is Hope whose hands are laden with treasures for you, Memory carries but a little store. Your past is brief; your future is probably long. The grains of sand in some of our hour-glasses are very heaped and high in the lower half, and running very low in the upper. But whichever category we stand in, one thing remains the same for us all, and that is duty, keeping God's commandments. That is permanent, and that is the one thing worth living for. Whether we live we live unto the Lord; or whether we die we die unto the Lord.

So let us front this New Year, with all its hidden possibilities, with quiet, brave hearts, resolved on present duty, as those ought who have such a past to remember and such a future to hope for. It will probably be the last on earth for some of us. It will probably contain great sorrows for some of us, and great joys for others. It will probably be comparatively uneventful for others. It may make great outward changes for us, or it may leave us much as it found us. But, at all events, God will be in it, and work for Him should be in it. Well for us if, when its hours have slidden away into the grey past, they continue to witness to us of His love, even as, while they were wrapped in the mists of the future, they called on us to hope in Him! Well for us if we fill the passing moment with deeds of loving obedience! Then a present of keeping His commandments will glide into a past to be thankfully remembered, and will bring us nearer to a future in which hope shall not be put to shame. To him who sees God in all the divisions and particles of his days, and makes Him the object of memory, hope, and effort, past, present, and future are but successive calm ripples of that mighty river of Time which bears him on the great ocean of Eternity, from which the drops that make its waters rose, and to which its ceaseless flow returns.