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

**PSALMS-056**. **A SHEAF OF PRAYER ARROWS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *Bow down Thine ear, O Lord, hear me; for I am poor and needy. 2. Preserve my soul, for I am holy: O Thou my God, save Thy servant that trusteth in Thee. 3. Be merciful unto me, O Lord: for I cry unto Thee daily. 4. Rejoice the soul of Thy servant: for unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. 5. For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee."*

*Psalm 86:1-5*

We have here a sheaf of arrows out of a good man's quiver, shot into heaven. This series of supplications is remarkable in more than one respect. They all mean substantially the same thing, but the Psalmist turns the one blessing round in all sorts of ways, so great does it seem to him, and so earnest is his desire to possess it. They are almost all quotations from earlier psalms, just as our prayers are often words of Scripture, hallowed by many associations, and uniting us with the men of old who cried unto God and were answered.

The structure of the petitions is remarkably uniform. In each there are a prayer and a plea, and in most of them a direct invocation of God. So I have thought that, if we put them all together now, we may get some lessons as to the invocations, the petitions, and the pleas of true prayer; or, in other words, we may be taught how to lay hold of God, what to ask from Him, and how to be sure of an answer.

**I. First, the lesson as to how to lay hold upon God.**

The divine names in this psalm are very frequent and significant, and the order in which they are used is evidently intentional. We have the great covenant name of Jehovah set in the very first verse, and in the last verse; as if to bind the whole together with a golden circlet. And then, in addition, it appears once in each of the other two sections of the psalm, with which we have nothing to do at present. Then we have, further, the name of God employed in each of the sections; and further, the name of Lord, which is not the same as Jehovah, but implies the simple idea of superiority and authority. In each portion of the psalm, then, we see the writer laying his hand, as it were, upon these three names--Jehovah, my God, Lord--and in all of them finding grounds for his confidence and reasons for his cry.

Nothing in our prayers is often more hollow and unreal than the formal repetitions of the syllables of that divine name, often but to fill a pause in our thoughts. But to call upon the Name of the Lord means, first and foremost, to bring before our minds the aspects of His great and infinite character, which are gathered together into the Name by which we address Him. So when we say Jehovah! Lord! what we ought to mean is this, that we are gazing upon that majestic, glorious thought of Being, self-derived, self-motived, self-ruled, the being of Him whose Name can only be, I am that I am. Of all other creatures the name is, I am that I have been made, or I am that I became, but of Him the Name is, I am that I am. Nowhere outside of Himself is the reason for His being, nor the law that shapes it, nor the aim to which it tends. And this infinite, changeless Rock is laid for our confidence, Jehovah the Eternal, the Self-subsisting, Self-sufficing One.

There is more than that thought in this wondrous Name, for it not only expresses the timeless, unlimited, and changeless being of God, but also the truth that He has entered into what He deigns to call a Covenant with us men. The name Jehovah is the seal of that ancient Covenant, of which, though the form has vanished, the essence abides for ever, and God has thereby bound Himself to us by promises that cannot be abrogated. So that when we say, O Lord! we summon up before ourselves, and grasp as the grounds of our confidence, and we humbly present before Him as the motives, if we may so call them, for His action, His own infinite being and His covenanted grace.

Then, further, our psalm invokes my God. That names implies in itself, simply, the notion of power to be reverenced. But when we add to it that little word my, we rise to the wonderful thought that the creature can claim an individual relation to Him, and in some profound sense a possession there. The tiny mica flake claims kindred with the Alpine peak from which it fell. The poor, puny hand, that can grasp so little of the material and temporal, can grasp all of God that it needs.

Then, there is the other name, Lord, which simply expresses illimitable sovereignty, power over all circumstances, creatures, orders of being, worlds, and cycles of ages. Wherever He is He rules, and therefore my prayer can be answered by Him. When a child cries Mother! it is more than all other petitions. A dear name may be a caress when it comes from loving lips. If we are the kind of Christians that we ought to be, there will be nothing sweeter to us than to whisper to ourselves, and to say to Him, Abba! Father! See to it that your calling on the Name of the Lord is not formal, but the true apprehension, by a believing mind and a loving heart, of the ineffable and manifold sweetnesses which are hived in His manifold names.

**II. Now, secondly, we have here a lesson as to what we should ask.**

The petitions of our text, of course, only cover a part of the whole field of prayer. The Psalmist is praying in the midst of some unknown trouble, and his petitions are manifold in form, though in substance, as I have said, they may all be reduced to one. Let me run over them very briefly. Bow down Thine ear and hear me. That is not simply the invocation of the omniscience of a God, but an appeal for loving, attentive regard to the desires of His poor servant. The hearing is not merely the perception in the divine mind of what the creature desires, but it is the answer in fact, or the granting of the petition. The best illustration of what the Psalmist desires here may be found in another psalm, where another Psalmist tells us his experience and says, My cry came unto His ears, and the earth shook and trembled. You put a spoonful of water into a hydraulic press at the one end, and you get a force that squeezes tons together at the other. Here there is a poor, thin stream of the voice of a sorrowful man at the one end, and there is an earthquake at the other. That is what hearing and bowing down the ear means.

Then the prayers go on to three petitions, which may be all regarded as diverse acts of deliverance or of help. Preserve my soul. The word expresses the guardianship with which a garrison keeps a fortress. It is the Hebrew equivalent of the word employed by Paul--The peace of God shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The thought is that of a defenceless man or thing round which some strong protection is cast. And the desire expressed by it is that in the midst of sorrow, whatever it is, the soul may be guarded from evil. Then, the next petition--Save Thy servant--goes a step further, and not only asks to be kept safe in the midst of sorrows, but to be delivered out of them. And then the next petition--Be merciful unto me, O Lord!--craves that the favour which comes down to inferiors, and is bestowed upon those who might deserve something far otherwise, may manifest itself, in such acts of strengthening, or help, or deliverance, as divine wisdom may see fit. And then the last petition is--Rejoice the soul of Thy servant. The series begins with hearing, passes through preserving, saving, showing mercy, and comes at last to rejoice the soul that has been so harassed and troubled. Gladness is God's purpose for us all; joy we all have a right to claim from Him. It is the intended issue of every sorrow, and it can only be had when we cleave to Him, and pass through the troubles of life with continual dependence on and aspiration towards Himself.

So these are the petitions massed together, and out of them let me take two or three lessons. First, then, let us learn to make all wishes and annoyances material of prayer. This man was harassed by some trouble, the nature of which we do not know; and although the latter portion of his psalm rises into loftier regions of spiritual desire, here, in the first part of it, he is wrestling with his afflicting circumstances, whatever they were, and he has no hesitation in spreading them all out before God and asking for His delivering help. Wishes that are not turned into prayers irritate, disturb, unsettle. Wishes that are turned into prayers are calmed and made blessed. Stanley and his men lived for weeks upon a poisonous root, which, if eaten crude, brought all manner of diseases, but, steeped in running water, had all the acrid juices washed out of it, and became wholesome food. If you steep your wishes in the stream of prayer the poison will pass out of them. Some of them will be suppressed, all of them will be hallowed, and all of them will be calmed. Troubles, great or small, should be turned into prayers. Breath spent in sighs is wasted; turned into prayers it will swell our sails. If a man does not pray without ceasing, there is room for doubt whether he ever prays at all. What would you think of a traveller who had a valuable cordial of which he only tasted a drop in the morning and another in the evening; or who had a sure staff on which to lean which he only employed at distant intervals on the weary march, and that only for a short time? Let us turn all that we want into petitions, and all that annoys us let us spread before God.

Learn, further, that earnest reiteration is not vain repetition. Use not vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking, said the Master. But the same Master went away from them and prayed the third time, using the same words. As long as we have not consciously received the blessing, it is no vain reiteration if we renew our prayers that it may come upon our heads. The man who asks for a thing once, and then gets up from his knees and goes away, and does not notice whether he gets the answer or not, does not pray. The man who truly desires anything from God cannot be satisfied with one languid request for it. But as the heart contracts with a sense of need, and expands with a faith in God's sufficiency, it will drive the same blood of prayer over and over again through the same veins; and life will be wholesome and strong.

Then learn, further, to limit wishes and petitions within the bounds of God's promises. The most of these supplications of our text may be found in other parts of Scripture, as promises from God. Only so far as an articulate divine word carries my faith has my faith the right to go. In the crooked alleys of Venice there is a thin thread of red stone, inlaid in the pavement or wall, which guides through all the devious turnings to the Piazza, in the centre, where the great church stands. As long as we have the red line of promise on our path, faith may follow it and will come to the Temple. Where the line stops it is presumption, and not faith, that takes up the running. God's promises are sunbeams flung down upon us. True prayer catches them on its mirror, and signals them back to God. We are emboldened to say, Bow down Thine ear! because He has said, I will hear. We are encouraged to cry, Be merciful! because we have our foot upon the promise that He will be; and all that we can ask of Him is, Do for us what Thou hast said; be to us what Thou art.

The final lesson is, Leave God to settle how He answers your prayer. The Psalmist prayed for preservation, for safety, for joy; but he did not venture to prescribe to God how these blessings were to be ministered to him. He does not ask that the trouble may be taken away. That is as it may be; it may be better that it shall be left. But he asks that in it he shall not be allowed to sink, and that, however the waves may run high, they shall not be allowed to swamp his poor little cockle-shell of a boat. This is the true inmost essence of prayer--not that we should prescribe to Him how to answer our desires, but that we should leave all that in His hands. The Apostle Paul said, in his last letter, with triumphant confidence, that he knew that God would deliver him and save him into His everlasting kingdom. And he knew, at the same time, that his course was ended, and that there was nothing for him now but the crown. How was he saved into the kingdom and delivered from the mouth of the lion? The sword that struck off the wearied head that had thought so long for God's Church was the instrument of the deliverance and the means of the salvation. For us it may be that a sharper sorrow may be the answer to the prayer, Preserve Thy servant. It may be that God's bowing down His ear and answering us when we cry shall be to pass us through a mill that has finer rollers, to crush still more the bruised corn. But the end and the meaning of it all will be to rejoice the soul of the servant with a deeper joy at last.

**III. Finally, mark the lesson which we have here as to the pleas that are to be urged, or the conditions on which prayer is answered.**

I am poor and needy, or, as perhaps the words more accurately mean, afflicted and poor. The first condition is the sense of need. God's highest blessings cannot be given except to the men who know they want them. The self-righteous man cannot receive the righteousness of Christ. The man who has little or no consciousness of sin is not capable of receiving pardon. God cannot put His fulness into our emptiness if we conceit ourselves to be filled and in need of nothing. We must know ourselves to be poor and naked and blind and miserable ere He can make us rich, and clothe us, and enlighten our eyes, and flood our souls with His own gladness. Our needs are dumb appeals to Him; and in regard to all outward and lower things, they bind Him to supply us, because they themselves have been created by Him. He that hears the raven's croak satisfies the necessities that He has ordained in man and beast. But, for all the best blessings of His providence and of His love, the first steps towards receiving them are the knowledge that we need them and the desire that we should possess them.

Then the Psalmist goes on to put another class of pleas derived from his relation to God. These are mainly two--I am holy, and Thy servant that trusteth in Thee. Now, with regard to that first word holy, according to our modern understanding of the expression it by no means sets forth the Psalmist's idea. It has an unpleasant smack of self-righteousness, too, which is by no means to be found in the original. But the word employed is a very remarkable and pregnant one. It really carries with it, in germ, the great teaching of the Apostle John. We love Him because He first loved us. It means one who, being loved and favoured by God, answers the divine love with his own love. And the Psalmist is not pleading any righteousness of his own, but declaring that he, touched by the divine love, answers that love, and looks up; not as if thereby he deserved the response that he seeks, but as knowing that it is impossible but that the waiting heart should thus be blessed. They who love God are sure that the answer to their desires will come fluttering down upon their heads, and fold its white wings and nestle in their hearts. Christian people are a great deal too much afraid of saying, I love God. They rob themselves of much peace and power thereby. We should be less chary of so saying if we thought more about God's love to us, and poked less into our own conduct.

Again, the Psalmist brings this plea--Thy servant that trusteth in Thee. He does not say, I deserve to be answered because I trust, but because I trust I am sure that I shall be answered; for it is absurd to suppose that God will look down from heaven on a soul that is depending upon Him, and will let that soul's confidence be put to shame. Dear friend! if your heart is resting upon God, be sure of this, that anything is possible rather than that you should not get from Him the blessings that you need.

The Psalmist gathers together all his pleas which refer to himself into two final clauses--I cry unto Thee daily, I lift up my soul unto Thee--which, taken together, express the constant effort of a devout heart after communion with God. To withdraw my heart from the low levels of earth, and to bear it up into communion with God, is the sure way to get what I desire, because then God Himself will be my chief desire, and they who seek the Lord shall not want any good.

But the true and prevailing plea is not in our needs, desires, or dispositions, but in God's own character, as revealed by His words and acts, and grasped by our faith. Therefore the Psalmist ends by passing from thoughts of self to thoughts of God, and builds at last on the sure foundation which underlies all his other fors and gives them all their force--For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee.

Brethren! turn all your wishes and all your annoyances into prayers. If a wish is not fit to be prayed about, it is not fit to be cherished. If a care is too small to be made a prayer, it is too small to be made a burden. Be frank with God as God is frank with you, and go to His throne, keeping back nothing of your desires or of your troubles. To carry them there will take the poison and the pain out of wasps stings, and out of else fatal wounds. We have a Name to trust to, tenderer and deeper than those which evoked the Psalmist's triumphant confidence. Let us see to it that, as the basis of our faith is firmer, our faith be stronger than his. We have a plea to urge, more persuasive and mighty than those which he pressed on God and gathered to his own heart. For Christ's sake includes all that he pled, and stretches beyond it. If we come to God through Him who declares His name to us, we shall not draw near to the Throne with self-willed desires, nor leave it with empty hands. If ye ask anything in My Name, I will do it.