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

**PSALMS-057**. **CONTINUAL SUNSHINE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance."*

*Psalm 89:15*

The Psalmist has just been setting forth, in sublime language, the glories of the divine character--God's strength, His universal sway, the justice and judgment which are the foundation of His Throne, the mercy and truth which go as heralds before His face. A heathen singing of any of his gods would have gone on to describe the form and features of the god or goddess who came behind the heralds, but the Psalmist remembers Thou shalt not make unto thyself any ... likeness of God. A sacred reverence checks his song. He veils his face in his mantle while He whom no man can see and live passes by. Then he breaks into rapturous exclamations which are very prosaically and poorly represented by our version. For the text is not a mere statement, as it is made to be by reading Blessed is the people, but it is a burst of adoring wonder, and should be read, Oh! the blessedness of the people that know the joyful sound.

Now, the force of this exclamation is increased if we observe that the word that is rendered joyful sound is the technical word for the trumpet blast at Jewish feasts. The purpose of these blasts, like those of the heralds at the coronation of a king, was to proclaim the presence of God, the King of Israel, in the festival, as well as to express the gladness of the worshippers. Thus the Psalmist, when he says, Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound, has no reference, as we ordinarily take him to have, to the preaching of the Gospel, but to the trumpet-blasts that proclaimed the present God and throbbed with the gladness of the waiting worshippers. So that this exclamation is equivalent to Oh! how blessed are the people who are sure that they have God with them! and who, being sure, bow before Him in loving worship. It is to be further noticed that the subsequent words of the text state the first element which it indicates of that blessedness of a devout life, They shall walk, O Lord! in the light of Thy countenance.

**I. We deal first with the meaning of this phrase.**

Of course, the light of Thy countenance is a very obvious and natural symbol for favour, complacency, goodwill on the part of Him that is conceived of as looking on any one. We read, for instance, in reference to a much lower subject in the Book of Proverbs, In the light of the king's countenance is life, and his favour is as a cloud of the latter rain. Again we have, in the Levitical benediction, the phrase accompanied in the parallel clauses by what is really an explanation of it, The Lord cause His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. So that the simple and obvious meaning of the words, the light of Thy countenance, is the favour and lovingkindness of God manifested in that gracious Face which He turns to His servants. As for the other chief word in the clause, to walk is the equivalent throughout Scripture for the conduct of the active life and daily conversation of a man, and to walk in the light is simply to have the consciousness of the divine Presence and the experience of the divine lovingkindness and friendship as a road on which we travel our life's journey, or an atmosphere round us in which all our activities are done and in which we ever remain, as a diver in his bell, to keep evil and sin from us.

There is only one more remark in the nature of explanation which I make, and that is that the expression here for walking is cast in the original into a form which grammarians call intensive, strengthening the simple idea expressed by the word. We may express its force if we read, They walk continually in the light of Thy countenance.

Is not that just a definition of the Christian life as an unbroken realisation of the divine Presence, and an unbroken experience of the lovingkindness and favour of God? Is not that religion in its truest, simplest essence, in its purest expression? The people who are sure that they have their King in their midst, and who feel that He is looking down upon them with tender pity, with loving care, with nothing but friendship and sweetness in His heart, these people, says the Psalmist, are blessed. So much, then, for the meaning of the word.

**II. Consider the possibility of such a condition being ours.**

Can such a thing be? Is it possible for a man to go through life carrying this atmosphere constantly with him? Can the continuity which, as I remarked, is expressed by the original accurately rendered, be kept up through an ordinary life that has all manner of work to do, or are we only to hear the joyful sound, now and then, at rare intervals, on set occasions, answering to these ancient feasts? Which of the two is it to be, dear brethren? There is no need whatever why any amount of hard work, or outward occupations of the most secular character, or any amount of distractions, should break for us the continuity of that consciousness and of that experience. We may carry God with us wherever we go, if only we remember that where we cannot carry Him with us we ought not to go. We may carry Him with us into all the dusty roads of life; we may always walk on the sunny side of the street if we like. We may always bear our own sunshine with us. And although we are bound to be diligent in business, and some of us have had to take a heavy lift of a great deal of hard work, and much of it apparently standing in no sort of relation to our religious life, yet for all that it is possible to bend all to this one direction, and to make everything a means of bringing us nearer to God and fuller of the conscious enjoyment of His presence. And if we have not learned to do that with our daily work, then our daily work is a curse to us. If we have allowed it to become so absorbing or distracting as that it dims and darkens our sense of the divine Presence, then it is time for us to see what is wrong in the method or in the amount of work which is thus darkening our consciences. I know it is hard, I know that an absolute attainment of such an ideal is perhaps beyond us, but I know that we can approach--I was going to say infinitely, but a better word is indefinitely--nearer it than any of us have ever yet done. As the psalm goes on to say in the next clause, it is possible for us to rejoice in His Name all the day. Ay, even at your tasks, and at your counters, and in your kitchens, and in my study, it is possible for us; and if our hearts are what and where they ought to be, the possibility will be realised. Earthly duty has no necessary effect of veiling the consciousness of God.

Nor is there any reason why our troubles, sorrows, losses, solitude should darken that sunshine. I know that that is hard, too, perhaps harder than the other. It is more difficult to have a sense of the sunshine of the divine Presence shining through the clouds of disaster and sorrow than even it is to have it shining through the dust that is raised by traffic and secular occupation. But it is possible. There is nothing in all the sky so grand as clouds smitten by sunshine, and the light is never so glorious as when it is flashed back from them and dyes their piled bosoms with all celestial colours. There is no experience of God's Presence so blessed as that of a man who, in the midst of sorrow, has yet with him the assurance of the Father's friendship and favour and love, and so can say as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. This sunshine shines in the foulest corners, and the most thunder-laden clouds only flash back its glories in new forms.

There is only one thing that breaks the continuity of that blessedness, and that is our own sin. We carry our own weather with us, whether we will or no, and we can bring winter into the middle of summer by flinging God away from us, and summer into the midst of winter by grappling Him to our hearts. There is only one thing that necessarily breaks our sense of His Presence, and that is that our hearts should turn away from His face. A man can work hard and yet feel that God is with him. A man can be weighed upon by many distresses and yet feel that God is with him and loves him; but a man cannot commit the least tiny sin and love it, and feel at the same time that God is with him. The heart is like a sensitive photographic plate, it registers the variations in the sunshine; and the one hindrance that makes it impossible for God's light to fall upon my soul with the assurance of friendship and the sense of sweetness, is that I should be hugging some evil to my heart. It is not the dusty highway of life nor the dark vales of weeping and of the shadow of death through which we sometimes have to pass that make it impossible for this sunlight to pour down upon us, but it is our gathering round ourselves of the poisonous mists of sin through which that light cannot pierce; or if it pierce, pierces transformed and robbed of all its beauty.

**III. Let me note next the blessedness which draws out the Psalmist's rapturous exclamation.**

The same phrase is employed in one of the other psalms, which, I think, bears in its contents the confirmation of the attribution of it to David. When he was fleeing before his rebellious son, at the very lowest ebb of his fortunes, away on the uplands of Moab, a discrowned king, a fugitive in danger of death at every moment, he sang a psalm in which these words occur: There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift up the light of Thy countenance upon us; and then follows, Thou hast put gladness into my heart more than when their corn and wine abound. The speech of the many, Who will show us any good? is contrasted with the prayer of the one, Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us. That is blessedness. It is the only thing that makes the heart to be at rest. It is the only thing that makes life truly worth living, the only thing that brings sweetness which has no after taint of bitterness and breeds no fear of its passing away. To have that unsetting sunshine streaming down upon my open heart, and to carry about with me whithersoever I go, like some melody from hidden singers sounding in my ears, the Name and the Love of my Father God--that and that only, brother, is true rest and abiding blessedness. There are many other joys far more turbulent, more poignant, but they all pass. Many of them leave a nauseous taste in the mouth when they are swallowed; all of them leave us the poorer for having had them and having them no more. For one who is not a Christian I do not know that it is

Better to have loved and lost

Than never to have loved at all.

But for those to whom God's Face is as a Sun, life in all its possibilities is blessed; and there is no blessedness besides. So let us keep near Him, walking in the light, in our changeful days, as He is in the light in His essential and unalterable being; and that light will be to us all which it is taken in Scripture to symbolise--knowledge and joy and purity; and in us, too, there will be no darkness at all.

But there is one last word that I must say, and that is that a possible terror is intertwined with this blessedness. The next psalm to this says, with a kind of tremulous awe in the Psalmist's voice: Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance. In that sense all of us, good and bad, lovers of God and those that are careless about Him, walk all the day long in the light of His face, and He sees and marks all our else hidden evil. It needs something more than any of us can do to make the thought that we do stand in the full glaring of that great searchlight, not turned occasionally but focussed steadily on us individually, a joy and a blessing to us. And what we need is offered us when we read, His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength, and I fell at His feet as dead. And He laid His hand upon me and said, Fear not! I am He that liveth and was dead; and behold! I am alive for ever more. If we put our poor trust in the Eternal Light that was manifest in Christ, then we shall walk in the sunshine of His face on earth, and that lamp will burn for us in the darkness of the grave and lead us at last into the ever-blazing centre of the Sun itself.