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

**PSALMS-058**. **THE CRY OF THE MORTAL TO THE UNDYING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish Thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it."*

*Psalm 90:17*

If any reliance is to be placed upon the superscription of this psalm, it is one of the oldest, as it certainly is of the grandest, pieces of religious poetry in the world. It is said to be A prayer of Moses, the man of God, and whether that be historically true or no, the tone of the psalm naturally suggests the great lawgiver, whose special task it was to write deep upon the conscience of the Jewish people the thought of the wages of sin as being death.

Hence the sombre magnificence and sad music of the psalm, which contemplates a thousand generations in succession as sliding away into the dreadful past, and sinking as beneath a flood. This thought of the fleeting years, dashed and troubled by many a sin, and by the righteous retribution of God, sent the Psalmist to his knees, and he found the only refuge from it in these prayers. These two petitions of our text, the closing words of the psalm, are the cry forced from a heart that has dared to look Death in the eyes, and has discovered that the world after all is a place of graves.

Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish Thou the work of our hands upon us. There are two thoughts there--the cry of the mortal for the beauty of the Eternal; and the cry of the worker in a perishable world for the perpetuity of his work. Look at these two thoughts briefly.

**I. We have here, first, the yearning and longing cry of the mortal for the beauty of the Eternal.**

The word translated beauty in my text is, like the Greek equivalent in the New Testament, and like the English word grace, which corresponds to them both susceptible of a double meaning. Grace means both kindness and loveliness, or, as we might distinguish both graciousness and gracefulness. And that double idea is inherent in the word, as it is inherent in the attribute of God to which it refers. For that twofold meaning of the one word suggests the truth that God's lovingkindness and communicating mercy is His beauty, and that the fairest thing about Him, notwithstanding the splendours that surround His character, and the flashing lights that come from His many-sided glory, is that He loves and pities and gives Himself. God is all fair, but the central and substantial beauty of the divine nature is that it is a stooping nature, which bows to weak and unworthy souls, and on them pours out the full abundance of its manifold gifts. So the beauty of the Lord means, by no quibble or quirk, but by reason of the essential loveliness of His lovingkindness, both God's loveliness and God's goodness; God's graciousness and God's gracefulness (if I may use such a word).

The prayer of the Psalmist that this beauty may be upon us conceives of it as given to us from above and as coming floating down from heaven, like that white Dove that fell upon Christ's head, fair and meek, gentle and lovely, and resting on our anointed heads, like a diadem and an aureole of glory.

Now that communicating graciousness, with its large gifts and its resulting beauty, is the one thing that we need in view of mortality and sorrow and change and trouble. The psalm speaks about all our years being passed away in Thy wrath, about the very inmost recesses of our secret unworthiness being turned inside out, and made to look blacker than ever when the bright sunshine of His face falls upon them. From that thought of God's wrath and omniscience the poet turns, as we must turn, to the other thought of His gentle longsuffering, of His forbearing love, of His infinite pity, of His communicating mercy. As a support in view both of our dreary and yet short years, and our certain mortality, and in the contemplation of the evils within and suffering from without, that harass us all, there is but one thing for us to do--namely, to fling ourselves into the arms of God, and in the spirit of this great petition, to ask that upon us there may fall the dewy benediction of His gentle beauty.

That longing is meant to be kindled in our hearts by all the discipline of life. Life is not worth living unless it does that for us; and there is no value nor meaning either in our joys or in our sorrows, unless both the one and the other send us to Him. Our gladness and our disappointments, our hopes fulfilled and our hopes dissipated and unanswered are but, as it were, the two wings by which, on either side, our spirits are to be lifted to God. The solemn pathos of the earlier portion of this psalm--the funeral march of generations--leads up to the prayerful confidence of these closing petitions, in which the sadness of the minor key in which it began has passed into a brighter strain. The thought of the fleeting years swept away as with a flood, and of the generations that blossom for a day and are mown down and wither when their swift night falls, is saddening and paralysing unless it suggests by contrast the thought of Him who, Himself unmoved, moves the rolling years, and is the dwelling-place of each succeeding generation. Such contemplations are wholesome and religious only when they drive us to the eternal God, that in Him we may find the stable foundation which imparts its own perpetuity to every life built upon it. We have experienced so many things in vain, and we are of the fools that, being brayed in a mortar, are only brayed fools after all, unless life, with its sorrows and its changes, has blown us, as with a hurricane, right into the centre of rest, and unless its sorrows and changes have taught us this as the one aspiration of our souls: Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and then, let what may come, come, let what can pass, pass, we shall have all that we need for life and peace.

And then, note further, that this gracious gentleness and long-suffering, giving mercy of God, when it comes down upon a man, makes him, too, beautiful with a reflected beauty. If the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, it will cover over our foulness and deformity. For whosoever possesses in any real fashion God's great mercy will have his spirit moulded into the likeness of that mercy. We cannot have it without reflecting it, we cannot possess it without being assimilated to it. Therefore, to have the grace of God makes us both gracious and graceful. And the true refining influence for a character is that into it there shall come the gift of that endless pity and patient love, which will transfigure us into some faint likeness of itself, so that we shall walk among men, able, in some poor measure, after the manner of our Master, to say, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. He said it in a sense and in a measure which we cannot reach, but the assimilation to and reflection of the divine character is our aim, or ought to be, if we are Christians. Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and change us into the same image from glory to glory.

**II. We have here the cry of the worker in a fleeting world for the perpetuity of his work.**

Establish, or make firm, the work of our hands upon us, yea the work of our hands establish Thou it. The thought that everything is passing away so swiftly and inevitably, as the earlier part of the psalm suggests, might lead a man to say, What is the use of my doing anything? I may just as well sit down here, and let things slide, if they are all going to be swallowed up in the black bottomless gulf of forgetfulness. The contemplation has actually produced two opposite effects, Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die, is quite as fair an inference from the fact as is Awake to righteousness and sin not, if the fact itself only be taken into account. There is nothing religious in the clearest conviction of mortality, if it stands alone. It may be the ally of profligate and cynical sensuality quite as easily as it may be the preacher of asceticism. It may make men inactive, from their sense of the insignificant and fleeting nature of all human works, or it may stimulate to intensest effort, from the thought, I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh. All depends on whether we link the conviction of mortality with that of eternity, and think of our perishable selves as in relationship with the unchanging God.

This prayer expresses a deep longing, natural to all men, and which yet seems incompatible with the stern facts of mortality and decay. We should all like to have our work exempted from the common lot. What pathetically futile attempts to secure this are pyramids, and rock-inscriptions, and storied tombs, and posthumous memoirs, and rich men's wills! Why should any of us expect that the laws of nature should be suspended for our benefit, and our work made lasting while everything beside changes like the shadows of the clouds? Is there any way by which such exceptional permanence can be secured for our poor deeds? Yes, certainly. Let us commit them to God, praying this prayer, Establish Thou the work of our hands upon us.

Our work will be established if it is His work. This prayer in our text follows another prayer (verse 16)--namely, Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants. That is to say, My work will be perpetual when the work of my hands is God's work done through me. When you bring your wills into harmony with God's will, and so all your effort, even about the little things of daily life, is in consonance with His will, and in the line of His purpose, then your work will stand. If otherwise, it will be like some slow-moving and frail carriage going in the one direction and meeting an express train thundering in the other. When the crash comes, the opposing motion of the weaker will be stopped, reversed, and the frail thing will be smashed to atoms. So, all work which is man's and not God's will sooner or later be reduced to impotence and either annihilated or reversed, and made to run in the opposite direction. But if our work runs parallel with God's, then the rushing impetus of His work will catch up our little deeds into the swiftness of its own motion, and will carry them along with itself, as a railway train will lift straws and bits of paper that are lying by the rails, and give them motion for a while. If my will runs in the line of His, and if the work of my hands is Thy work, it is not in vain that we shall cry Establish it upon us, for it will last as long as He does.

In like manner, all work will be perpetual that is done with the beauty of the Lord our God upon the doers of it. Whosoever has that grace in his heart, whosoever is in contact with the communicating mercy of God, and has had his character in some measure refined and ennobled and beautified by possession thereof, will do work that has in it the element of perpetuity.

And our work will stand if we quietly leave it in His hands. Quietly do it to Him, never mind about results, but look after motives. You cannot influence results, let God look after them; you can influence motives. Be sure that they are right, and if they are, the work will be eternal.

Eternal? What do you mean by eternal? how can a man's work be that? Part of the answer is that it may be made permanent in its issues by being taken up into the great whole of God's working through His servants, which results at last in the establishment of His eternal kingdom. Just as a drop of water that falls upon the moor finds its way into the brook, and goes down the glen and on into the river, and then into the sea, and is there, though undistinguishable, so in the great summing up of everything at the end, the tiniest deed that was done for God, though it was done far away up amongst the mountain solitudes where no eye saw, shall live and be represented, in its effects on others and in its glad issues to the doer.

In the highest fashion the Psalmist's cry for the perpetuity of the fleeting deeds of dying generations will be answered in that region in which his dimmer eye saw little but the sullen flood that swept away youth and strength and wisdom, but in which we can see the solid land beyond the river, and the happy company who rejoice with the joy of harvest, and bear with them the sheaves, whereof the seed was sown on this bank, in tears and fears. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord. Their works do follow them. The world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.