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

**PSALMS-065**. **GOD'S PROMISES TESTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Until the time that his word came, the word of the Lord tried him."*

*Psalm 105:19*

I do not think I shall be mistaken if I affirm that these words do not convey any very clear idea to most readers. They were spoken with reference to Joseph, during the period of his imprisonment. For the understanding of them I think we must observe that there is a contrast drawn between two words, his (i.e. Joseph's) and God's. If we lay firm hold of that clue, I think it will lead us into clear daylight, and it will be obvious that Joseph's word, which delayed its coming, or fulfilment, was either his boyish narrative of the dreams that foreshadowed his exaltation, or less probably, his words to his fellow-prisoners in the interpretation of their dreams. In either case, the terminus ad quem, the point to which our attention is directed, is the period when that word came to be fulfilled, and what my text says is that during that long season of unfulfilled hope, the word of God, which was revealed in Joseph's dream, and was the ground on which his own word rested--did what? Encouraged, heartened, strengthened him? No, that unfulfilled promise might encourage or discourage him; but the Psalmist fixes our thoughts on another effect which, whether it encouraged or discouraged, it certainly had, namely, that it tested him, and found out what stuff he was made of, and whether there was staying power enough in him to hold on, in unconquerable faith, to a promise made long since, communicated by no more reliable method than a dream, and of the fulfilment of which not the faintest sign had, for all these weary years, appeared. His circumstances, judged by appearances, shattered his early visions, and bade him believe them to be no more than the boyish aspirations which grown men dismiss or find melt away of themselves when life's realities wake the dreamer. We might either say that the non-fulfilment of the promise tested Joseph, or that the promise, by its non-fulfilment, tested him. The Psalmist chooses the latter more forcible and half paradoxical mode of speech. It proved the depth and vitality of his faith, and his ability to see things that are not as though they were. Will this man be able continually through years of poverty and imprisonment to keep his eye on the light beyond, to see his star through clouds? Will he despise the light affliction, in the potent and immovable belief that it is but for a moment? Thus, for all these years the great blessed word, or the hope that was built upon it, tested Joseph in the very depths of his soul. And is not that just what our anticipations, built upon God's assurances, whether they are in regard to earthly matters that seem long in coming, or whether they, as they ought to do, travel beyond the bounds of the material, to grasp the hope which is the promise, the hope of eternal life, ought to do for us, test us and find out what sort of people we are? And they do!

Let us go back to the man in our text. According to some commentators, he was imprisoned for something like ten years. We do not know how long his Egyptian bondage had lasted, nor how long before that his endurance of the active ill-will of his surly brothers had gone on. But at all events his chrysalis stage was very long, and one would not have wondered if he had said to himself, down in that desert pit or in that Egyptian dungeon, Ah, yes! they were dreams, and only dreams, or if he had, as so many of us do, turned his back on his youthful visions, and gained the sad power of being able to smile at his old hopes and ambitions. Brethren! especially you young men and women, cherish your youthful dreams. They are often the prophecies of capacities and possibilities, signs of what God means you to make yourselves. But that is apart from my subject. Suppose we had clear before us, with unwavering confidence in its reality, the great promise which God has given us, do you not think that its presence would purify our souls, and give power and dignity to our lives?

The promise was a test, says my text. The word which it employs to designate the manner of testing or trying, is one drawn from the smelting operations of the goldsmith, by which, heat being applied, the mass is made fluid and the dross is run off, and as the result of the trial, there flows out gold refined by fire.

Having these promises, dearly beloved! let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit. Every man who hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure. The result of the great promise of eternal life and of the hope that it kindles is meant to be that it shall purge our spirits from meanness, from sense, from undue dependence upon the miserable trivialities of to-day, that it shall emancipate us from slavery to the moment, and lead us into the liberty of the eternities, while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things which are not seen. Oh! if we would only see clearly and habitually before us--for we could if we would--what God's heart inclines Him to do for us, and what He certainly will do for us, in the far-off future, if we will only let Him, do you not think that these trifles that put us off our equanimity this morning would have been borne with a little more composure? Do you not think that the things that looked so huge when we were down abreast of them would, by the laws of perspective, diminish in their proportions as we rose steadily above them, until all the hubbub in the valley was unheard on the mountain peak, and the great trees that waved their giant branches below and shut out the sky from our eyes while we were among them would dwindle to a green smear on the plain, and all the foes show scarce so gross as beetles, from the height from which we look down upon them? Get up beside God's promise, if you would take the true dimensions of cares and tasks, and burdens and sorrows. Then, brother! you will learn the truth of the paradox, light ... but for a moment; though often they all but crush the burden-bearing shoulder and seem to last through slow years.

The word of the Lord tried him, and because it tried him, it purified him. If we give credence, as we ought to, to that word, it will purify us, and it will test of what contexture our faith is. The further away the object of any hope is, the more noble the cherishing of it makes a life. The trivial, short-lived anticipations which do not look beyond the end of next week are far less operative in making strong and noble characters than are those, of whatever kind they may be otherwise, which look far ahead and need years for their realisation. It is a blessing to have the mark far, far away, because that means that the arm that pulls the bow must draw more strongly, and the eye that sees the goal must gaze more intently. Be thankful for the promise that cannot be fulfilled in this world because it lifts us above the low levels, and already makes us feel as if we were endowed with immortality.

The word will test our patience, and it will test our willingness, though we be heirs of the kingdom, to do humble tasks. Christian men in this world are sons of a King, and look forward to a royal inheritance, but in the meantime they have, as it were, to keep a little huckster's shop in a back alley. But if we adequately realised the promise of our inheritance, the meanness of our surroundings and the triviality of our occupations would not make us mean or trivial, but our souls would be like stars and dwell apart while we travelled on life's common way in cheerful godliness, and did small duties in such a manner as to make them great.

Because Joseph was sure that God's long-lingering word would be fulfilled, he did not mind though he had to be the lackey of his brothers, the Midianites chattel, Potiphar's slave, Pharaoh's prisoner, and a servant of servants in his dungeon. So with us, the measure of our willing acceptance of our present tasks, burdens, humiliations, and limitations is the measure of our firm faith in the promise that tarries.

If we hope for what we see not, then do we with patience wait for it, says the Apostle, though most of us would have said exactly the opposite. We generally suppose that the more ardent the hope, the more is it impatient of delay. Paul had learned better. The more certain the assurance, the better we can tolerate the procrastination of its fulfilment.

So, brethren! God's greatest gift to us, like all His other gifts, has in it the quality of testing us; and we can come to a pretty fair approximation to an estimate of what sort of Christian people we are, by observing how we deal with God's promises of help according to our need here and of heaven hereafter. How do we deal with them? Why, a sadly large number of us never think about them at all; and a large proportion of the others would a great deal rather stay working in the huckster's shop in the back alley, than go home to the King. I am quite sure that if the inmost sentiments of the bulk of professing Christians about a future life were dragged into light, these would be a revelation of a faith all honeycombed with insincerity. God tests us, and it is a sharp test if we submit ourselves to it; He tests us by His promises. Child, wilt thou believe? is the first testing question put to us by these. Wilt thou keep them hid in thy heart? is the next. Wilt thou go out towards them in desire? is the next. Wilt thou live worthy of them? is the last. The word of the Lord tried him.

So let us be thankful for the delays of love, for the wide gap between promise and realisation. It was for Joseph's sake that the slow years were multiplied between the first gleam of his future and the full sunshine of his exaltation. And it is for our sakes that God in like manner protracts the period of anticipation and non-fulfilment. If the vision tarry, wait for it. Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus their brother very dearly. When He heard, therefore, that he was sick, He abode still two days--to give time for Lazarus to die--in the same place where He was. Ay, and when each sister came to Him with her most natural and yet most faithless Lord! if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died, He only said, If thou wouldst believe thou shouldst see the glory of God. Was not Lazarus dearer, restored from the grave, than he would have been, raised from his sickbed? Is not the delaying of the blessing a means of increase of the blessing? And shall not we be sure that however long He that shall come may seem to tarry ere He comes, when He has come they who have waited for His coming more than they that watch for the morning and have sometimes been ready to cry out: Hath the Lord forgotten? Doth His promise fail for ever more? will be ashamed of their impatient moments and will humbly and thankfully exclaim: He came at the very right time and did not tarry. Until the time that his word came, the word of the Lord tried him, and the coming of that word was all the more blessed for every heavy-laden hour of hope deferred, which, by God's grace, did not make the heart sick, but prepared it for fuller possession of the blessings enhanced by the delays of love.