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

**PSALMS-067**. **GOD AND THE GODLY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"His righteousness endureth for ever."*

*Psalm 111:3 & 112:3*

These two psalms are obviously intended as a pair. They are identical in number of verses and in structure, both being acrostic, that is to say, the first clause of each commences with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second clause with the second, and so on. The general idea that runs through them is the likeness of the godly man to God. That resemblance comes very markedly to the surface at several points in the psalms, and pervades them traceably even where it is less conspicuous. The two corresponding clauses which I have read as my text are the first salient instances of it. But I propose to deal not only with them, but with a couple of others which occur in the course of the psalms, and will appear as I proceed.

The general underlying thought is a noteworthy one. The worshipper is to be like his God. So it is in idolatry; so it should be with us. Worship is, or should be, adoration of and yearning after the highest conceivable good. Such an attitude must necessarily lead to imitation, and be crowned by resemblance. Love makes like, and they who worship God are bound to, and certainly will, in proportion to the ardour and sincerity of their devotion, grow like Him whom they adore. So I desire to look with you at the instances of this resemblance or parallelism which the Psalmist emphasises.

**I. The first of them is that in the clauses which I have read as our starting-point, viz. God and the godly are alike in enduring righteousness.**

That seems a bold thing to say, especially when we remember how lofty and transcendent were the Old Testament conceptions of the righteousness of God. But, lofty as these were, this Psalmist lifts an unpresumptuous eye to the heavens, and having said of Him who dwells there, His righteousness endureth for ever, is not afraid to turn to the humble worshipper on this low earth, and declare the same thing of him. Our finite, frail, feeble lives may be really conformed to the image of the heavenly. The dewdrop with its little rainbow has a miniature of the great arch that spans the earth and rises into the high heavens. And so, though there are differences, deep and impassable, between anything that can be called creatural righteousness, and that which bears the same name in the heavens, the fact that it does bear the same name is a guarantee to us that there is an essential resemblance between the righteousness of God in its lustrous perfectness, and the righteousness of His child in its imperfect effort.

But how can we venture to run any kind of parallelism between the eternity of the one and that of the other? God's righteousness we can understand as enduring for ever, because it is inseparable from His very being; because it is manifested unbrokenly in all the works that for ever pour out from that central Source, and because it and its doings stand fast and unshaken amidst the passage of ages, and the wreck of matter and the crash of worlds. But may there not be, if not an eternity, yet a perpetuity, in our reflection of the divine righteousness which shall serve to vindicate the application of the same mighty word to both? Is it not possible that, unbroken amidst the stress of temptation, and running on without interruptions, there may be in our hearts and in our lives conformity to the divine will? And is it not possible that the transiencies of our earthly doings may be sublimed into perpetuity if there is in them the preserving salt of righteousness?

The actions of the just

Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.

And may it not be, too, that though this Psalmist may have had no clear articulate doctrine of eternal life beyond, he may have felt, and rightly felt, that there were things that were too fair to die, and that it was inconceivable that a soul which had been, in some measure, tinged with the righteousness of God could ever be altogether a prey to the law of transiency and decay which seizes upon things material and corporeal? That which is righteous is eternal, be it manifested in the acts of the unchanging God or in the acts of a dying man, and when all else has passed away, and the elements have melted with fervent heat, he that doeth the will of God, and the deeds which did it, shall abide for ever. His righteousness endureth for ever.

Now, brethren! there are two ways in which we may look at this parallelism of our text: the one is as containing a stringent requirement; the other as holding forth a mighty hope. It contains a stringent requirement. Our religion does not consist in assenting to any creed. Our religion is not wholly to consist of devout emotions and loving and joyous acts of communion and friendship with God. There must be more than these; these things there must be. For if a man is to be guided mainly by reason, there must, first of all, be creed; then there must be corresponding emotions. But creed and emotions are both meant to be forces which shall drive the wheels of life, and conduct is, after all, the crown of religion and the test of godliness. They that hold communion with God are bound to mould their lives into the likeness of His. Little children, let no man deceive you, and let not your own hearts deceive you. You are not a Christian because you believe the truths of the Gospel. You are not such a Christian as you ought to be, if your religion is more manifest in loving trust than in practical obedience which comes from trust. He that doeth righteousness is righteous, and he is to be righteous even as He is righteous. If you are God's, you will be like God. Apply the touchstone to your lives, and test your Christianity by this simple and most stringent test.

But again, we may look at the thought as holding forth a great hope. I do not wish to force upon Old Testament writers New Testament truth. It would be an anachronism and an absurdity to make this Psalmist responsible for anything like a clear evangelistic statement of the way by which a man may be made righteous. That waited for coming days, and eminently for Jesus Christ. But it would be quite as great a mistake to eviscerate the words of their plain implications. And when they put side by side the light and the reflection, God and the godly, it seems to me to be doing violence to their meaning for the sake of trying to make them mean less than they do, if we refuse to recognise that they have at any rate an inkling of the thought that the Original and Pattern of human righteousness was likewise the Source of it. This at least is plain, that the Psalmist thought that the fear of the Lord was not only, as he calls it at the close of the former of the two psalms, the beginning of wisdom, but also the basis of goodness, for he begins his description of the godly with it.

I believe that he felt, what is assuredly true, that no man, by his own unaided effort, can ever work out for himself a righteousness which will satisfy his own conscience, and that he must, first of all, be in touch with God, in order to receive from Him that which he cannot create. Ah, brethren! the fine linen, clean and white, which is the righteousness of saints, is woven in no earthly looms; and the lustrous light with which it glistens is such as no fuller on earth can white men's characters into. Another Psalmist has sung of the man who can stand in the holy place, He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, even righteousness from the God of his salvation, and our psalms hint, if they do not articulately declare, how that reception is possible for us, when they set forth waiting upon God as the condition of being made like Him. We translate the Psalmist's feeling after the higher truth which we know, when we desire that we may be found in Him, not having our own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is of God by faith. So much, then, for the first point of correspondence in these two psalms.

**II. God and the godly are alike in gracious compassion.**

If you will turn to the two psalms for a moment, and look at the last clauses of the two fourth verses, you will see how that thought is brought out. In the former psalm we read, The Lord is gracious and full of compassion: in the latter we find, he (the upright man) is gracious and full of compassion, and righteous.

I need not trouble you with any remarks about certain difficulties that lie in the rendering of that latter verse. Suffice it to say that they are such as to make more emphatic the intentional resemblance between the godly as there described, and God as described in the previous one. Of both it is said gracious and full of compassion.

Now that great truth of which I have been speaking, the divine righteousness, is like white Alpine snow, sublime, but cold, awful and repellent, when taken by itself. Our hearts need something more than a righteous God if we are ever to worship and draw near. Just as the white snow on the high peak needs to be flushed with the roseate hue of the morning before it can become tender, and create longings, so the righteousness of the great white Throne has to be tinged with the ruddy heart-hue of gracious compassion if men are to be moved to adore and to love. Each enhances the other. What God hath joined together, in Himself, let not man put asunder; nor talk about the stern Deity of the Old Testament, and pit Him against the compassionate Father of the New. He is righteous, but the proclaimers of His righteousness in old days never forgot to blend with the righteousness the mercy; and the combination heightens the lustre of both attributes.

The same combination is absolutely needful in the copy, as is emphatically set forth in our text by the addition of and righteous, in the case of the man. For whilst with God the tyro attributes do lie, side by side, in perfect harmony, in us men there is always danger that the one shall trench upon the territory of the other, and that he who has cultivated the habit of looking upon sorrows and sins with compassion and tenderness shall somewhat lose the power of looking at them with righteousness. So our text, in regard to man, proclaims more emphatically than it needs to do in regard to the perfect God, that ever his highest beauty of compassion must be wedded to righteousness, and ever his truest strength of righteousness must be softened with compassion.

But beyond that, note how, wherever there is the loving and childlike contemplation of God, there will be an analogy in our compassion, to His perfectness. We are transformed by beholding. The sun strikes a poor little pane of glass in a cottage miles away, and it flashes with some likeness of the sun and casts a light across the plain. The man whose face is turned Godwards will have beauty pass into his face, and all that look upon him will see as it had been the countenance of an angel.

If we have, in any real and deep measure, received mercy we shall reflect mercy. Remember the parable of the unmerciful debtor. The servant that cast himself at his lord's feet, and got the acquittal of his debt, and went out and gripped his fellow-servant by the throat, leaving the marks of his fingernails on his windpipe, with his Pay me that thou owest! had all the pardon cancelled, and all the debt laid upon his shoulders again. If we owe all our hope and peace to a forgiving God, how can we make anything else the law of our lives than that, having received mercy, we should show mercy? The test of your being a forgiven man is your forgivingness. There is no getting away from that plain principle, which modifies the declaration of the freedom of God's full pardon.

But I would have you notice, further, as a very remarkable illustration of this correspondence between the gracious and compassionate Lord and His servant, that in the verses which follow respectively the two about which I am now speaking, the same idea is wrought out in another shape. In the psalm dealing with the divine character and works we read, immediately after the declaration that He is gracious and full of compassion, this--He hath given meat to them that fear Him; and the corresponding clause in the second of our psalms is followed by this--to translate accurately--It is well with the man who showeth favour and lendeth. So man's open-handedness in regard to money is put down side by side with God's open-handedness in regard to giving meat unto them that fear Him. And again, in the ninth verse of each psalm, we have the same thought set forth in another fashion. He sent redemption unto His people, says the one; He hath dispersed, He hath given to the poor, says the other. That is to say, our paltry giving may be paralleled with the unspeakable gifts which God has bestowed, if they come from a love which is like His. It does not matter though they are so small and His are so great; there is a resemblance. The tiniest crystal may be like the hugest. God gives to us the possession of things in order that we may enjoy the luxury, which is one of the elements in the blessedness of the blessed God, who is blessed because He is the giving God, the luxury of giving. Poor though our bestowments must be, they are not unlike His. The little burn amongst the heather carves its tiny bed, and impels its baby ripples by the same laws which roll the waters of the Amazon, and every fall that it makes over a shelf of rock a foot high is a miniature Niagara.

**III. So, lastly, we have still another point, not so much of resemblance as of correspondence, in the firmness of God's utterances and of the godly heart.**

In the first of our two psalms we read, in the seventh verse, All His commandments are sure. In the second we read, in the corresponding verse, his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord. The former psalm goes on, His commandments stand fast for ever and ever; and the next psalm, in the corresponding verse, says his heart is established, the original employing the same word in both cases, which in our version is rendered, in the one place, stand fast, and in the other established. So that the Psalmist is thinking of a correspondence between the stability of God's utterances and the stability of the heart that clasps them in faith.

His commandments are not only precepts which enjoin duty. All which God says is law, whether it be directly in the nature of guiding precept, or whether it be in the nature of revealing truth, or whether it be in the nature of promise. It is sure, reliable, utterly trustworthy. We may be certain that it will direct us aright, that it will reveal to us absolute truth, that it will hold forth no flattering and false promises. And it is established. The one fixed point amidst the whirl of things is the uttered will of God.

Therefore, the heart that builds there builds safely. And there should be a correspondence, whether there is or no, between the faithfulness of the Speaker and the faith of the hearer. A man who is doubtful about the solidity of the parapet which keeps him from toppling over into the abyss will lean gingerly upon it, until he has found out that it is firm. The man that knows how strong is the stay on which he rests ought to lean hard upon it. Lean hard upon God, put all your weight upon Him. You cannot put too much, you cannot lean too hard. The harder the better; the better He is pleased, and the more He breathes support and strength into us. And, brethren! if thus we build an established faith on that sure foundation, and match the unchangeableness of God in Christ with the constancy of our faith in Him, then, He that believeth shall never make haste, and as my psalm says, He shall not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.

The upshot of the whole matter is--we cannot work out for ourselves a righteousness that will satisfy our own consciences, nor secure for ourselves a strength that will give peace to our hearts, and stability to our lives, by any other means than by cleaving fast to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We have borne the image of the earthly long enough; let us open our hearts to God in Christ. Let us yield ourselves to Him; let us gaze upon Him with fixed eyes of love, and labour to make our own what He bestows upon us. Thus living near Him, we shall be bathed in His light, and show forth something of His beauty. Godliness is God-likeness. It is of no use to say that we are God's children if we have none of the family likeness. If ye were Abraham's sons ye would do the works of Abraham, said Christ to the Jews. If we are God's sons we shall do the works of God. Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect; be ye merciful as your Father is merciful. And if thus we here, dwelling with Christ, are being conformed to the image of His Son, we shall one day be satisfied when we awake in His likeness.