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

**PSALMS-072**. **A STRANGER IN THE EARTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. I am a stranger in the earth: hide not Thy commandments from me... . 64. The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy: teach me Thy statutes."*

*Psalm 119:19, 64*

There is something very remarkable in the variety-in-monotony of this, the longest of the psalms. Though it be the longest it is in one sense the simplest, inasmuch as there is but one thought in it, beaten out into all manner of forms and based upon all various considerations. It reminds one of the great violinist who out of one string managed to bring such music and melody.

The one thought is the infinite preciousness of God's law, by which, of course, is not meant the written record of that law which lies in Scripture, but the utterances of God's law in any form, by which men may receive it. You will find that that wider signification of the word law, commandment, statute, is essential to the understanding of every portion of this psalm.

And now these two petitions which I have put together base the prayer, which they both offer, in slightly varied form (Teach me Thy statutes, or Hide not Thy commandments from me,) upon two diverse considerations, which, taken in conjunction, are extremely interesting.

The two facts on which the one petition rests, are like two great piers on two opposite sides of a river, each of which holds one end of the arch. The earth is full of Thy mercy; ay! but I am a stranger upon the earth. These two things are both true, and from each of them, and still more from both of them taken together, rises up this petition. Let us look then at the facts, and then at the prayer that is built upon them.

Take first that thought of the rejoicing earth, full of God's mercy as some cup is full of rich wine, or as the flowers in the morning are filled with dew. The Bible does not look at the external world, the material universe, from a scientific point of view, nor does it look at it from a poetical point of view, but from a simply religious one. Nothing that modern science has taught us to say about the world in the least affects this principle which the Psalmist lays down, that it is all full of God's mercy. The thought is intended to exclude man and man's ways and all connected with him, as we shall see presently, but the Psalmist looks out upon the earth and all the rest of its inhabitants, and he is sure of two things: one, that God's direct act is at work in it all, so as that every creature that lives, and everything that is, lives and is because God is there, and working there; and next, that everything about us is the object of loving thoughts of God's; and has, as it were, some reflection of God's smile cast across it like the light of flowers upon the grass. Spring days with life re-orient out of dust, and the annual miracle beginning again all round, with the birds in the trees, that even dwellers in towns can hear singing as if their hearts would burst for very mirth and hopefulness, the blossoms beginning to push above the frosty ground, and the life breaking out of the branches that were stiff and dry all through the winter, proclaim the same truth as the Psalmist was contemplating when he spoke thus. He looks all round, and everywhere sees the signature of a loving divine Hand.

The earth is full to brimming of Thy mercy. It takes faith to see that; it takes a deeper and a firmer hold of the thought of a present God than most men have, to feel that. For the most of us, the world has got to be very empty of God now. We hear rather the creaking of the wheels of a great machine, or see the workings of a blind, impersonal force. But I believe that all that is precious and good in the growth of knowledge since the old days when this Psalmist wrote may be joyfully accepted by us, and deep down below all we may see the deeper, larger truth of the living purpose and will of God Himself. And I know no reason why twentieth-century men, full to the fingertips of modern scientific thought, may not say as heartily as the old Psalmist said, The earth, O Lord! is full of Thy mercy.

But then there is another side to all this. Amidst all this sunny play of gladness, and apocalypse of blessing, there stands one exception. Hearken to the other word of my texts, I am a stranger upon the earth. Man is out of joint with the great whole, out of harmony with the music, the only hungry one at the feast. All other creatures are admirably adapted for the place they fill, and the place they fill is sufficient for them. But I stand here, knowing that I do not belong to this goodly fellowship, feeling that I am an exception to the rule. As Colonel Gardiner said, I looked at the dog, and I wished that I was a dog. Ah! many another man has felt, Why is it that whilst every creature, the motes that dance in the sunbeam, and the minutest living things, however insignificant, are all filled to the very brim of their capacity--why is it that I, the roof and crown of things, stand here, a sad and solitary stranger, having made acquaintance with grief; having learned what they know not, the burden of toil and care, cursed with forecast and anticipation, saddened by memory, torn by desires? We look before and after, and pine for what is not. All other beings fit their place, and their place fits them like a glove upon a fair hand, but I stand here a stranger upon the earth. And the more I feel, or at least the more I am convinced that it is full of God's mercy, the more I feel that there is something else which I need to make me, in my fashion, as really and as completely blessed as the lowest of His creatures.

The Psalmist tells us what that something more is: I am a stranger upon the earth; hide not Thy commandments from me. That is my food, that is what I need; that is the one thing that will make our souls feel at rest, that we shall have not merely a Bible in our hands, but the will of God, the knowledge and the love of the will of God, in our hearts. When we can say I delight to do Thy will, and my whole being seeks to lay itself beneath the mould of Thine impressing purpose, and to be shaped accordingly; Oh! then, then the care and the toil and the sorrow and the restlessness and the sense of transiency, all change. Some of them pass away altogether; those of them that survive are transfigured from darkness to glory. Just as some gloomy cliff, impending over the plain, when the rising sun smites upon it, is changed into a rosy and golden glory, so the frowning peaks that look down upon us, are all transmuted and glorified, when once the light of God's recognised will falls upon them.

All is right that seems most wrong,

If it be His sweet will.

And when He has not hidden His commandments from us, but we have them in our hearts, for the joy and the strength of our lives, then, then it does not matter, though we have to say, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have their roosting-places, and I only, in creation, have not where to lay my head. If we have His will in our hearts, and are humbly and yet lovingly trying to do it, then toil becomes easy, and work becomes blessedness. If we have His will in our hearts, and are seeking to cleave to it, then and only then, do we cease to feel that it is sad that we should be strangers upon the earth, because then and then only can we say we seek for a better country, that is, a heavenly.

Oh, dear friends! we shall be cursed with restlessness and weighed upon with sore distress; and a fleeting world will, by its very fleetingness, be a misery to us, until we have learned to yield our wills to God, and to drink in His law as the joy and the rejoicing of our hearts. A stranger upon the earth needs the statutes of the Lord, he needs no more, and then they will be as the Psalmist says in another place, his song in the house of his pilgrimage.

But the first of our two texts suggests further to us the certainty that this petition shall not be in vain. If the thought, I am a stranger in the earth, teaches us our need of God's commandments, the thought, the earth is full of Thy mercies, assures us that we shall get what we need.

Surely it is not going to be the case that we only are to be left hungry when all other creatures sit at His table and feast there. Surely He who knows what each living thing requires, and opens His hand, and satisfies their desires, is not going to leave the nobler famishing of an immortal soul uncared for.

Surely if all through the universe besides, we see that the measure of a creature's capacity is the measure of God's gift to it, there is not going to be, there need not be, any disproportion between what we require and what we possess. Surely if His ear can hear and translate, and His loving hand can open to satisfy, the croaking of the young raven when it cries, He will neither mistake nor neglect the voice of a man's heart, when it is asking what is so in accordance with His will as that He should let him know and love His statutes.

It is not meant to be the case that we lie in the middle of His creation, the one exception to the universal law, like Gideon's fleece, dry and dusty, while every poor bit of bush and grass round about is soaked with His dew. If the earth is full of Thy mercy, Thou thereby hast pledged Thyself that my heart shall be full of Thy law and Thy grace, if I desire it.

And so, dear brethren! whilst the one of these twin considerations should send us to our knees, the other should hearten and wing our prayers. And if, on the one hand, we feel that to bring us up to the level of the poorest of His creatures, we need a firm grasp and a hearty love of His law deep in our spirits, on the other hand, the fact that the feeblest and the poorest of His creatures is saturated and soaked with as much of God's goodness as it can suck in, may make us quite sure that our souls will not vainly pant after Him in a dry and thirsty land where no water is. The earth, O Lord! is full of Thy mercy. Am I to be empty of the highest mercy, the knowledge of Thy will? Never! never!

And so, Say not, Who shall ascend up into the heavens? say not, Who shall pass over the sea to bring Thy law near, that we may hear and do it? Behold! the word is very nigh thee. The law, the will of God, and the power to perform it are braided together, in inextricable union, in Jesus Christ Himself; and the prayer of my psalm most deeply understood, turns itself all into this:--Give me Christ, more of the knowledge of Him who is my law and Thine uttered will; more of the love of Him whom to love is to be at home everywhere, and to be filled with Thy mercy; more of the likeness to Him whom to imitate is holiness; whom to resemble is perfection. The earth is full of Thy mercy. The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth. And of that fulness can all we receive. Then will we be strangers here no longer; and our hearts will be replenished with a better mercy than all the universe beside is capable of containing.