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

**PSALMS-077**. **THE CHARGE OF THE WATCHERS IN THE TEMPLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the House of the Lord. 2. Lift up your hands in the Sanctuary, and bless the Lord. 3. The Lord that made Heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion."*

*Psalm 134:1-3*

This psalm, the shortest but one in the whole Psalter, will be more intelligible if we observe that in the first part of it more than one person is addressed, and in the last verse a single person. It begins with Bless ye the Lord; and the latter words are, The Lord bless thee. No doubt, when used in the Temple service, the first part was chanted by one half of the choir, and the other part by the other. Who are the persons addressed in the first portion? The answer stands plain in the psalm itself. They are, All ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the House of the Lord. That is to say, the priests or Levites whose charge it was to patrol the Temple through the hours of night and darkness, to see that all was safe and right there, and to do such other priestly and ministerial work as was needful; they are called upon to lift up their hands in--or rather towards--the Sanctuary, and to bless the Lord.

The charge is given to these watching priests, these nightly warders, by some single person--we know not whom. Perhaps by the High Priest, perhaps by the captain of their band. They listen to the exhortation to praise, and answer, in the last words of this little psalm, by invoking a blessing on the head of the unnamed speaker who gave the charge. So we have in this antiphonal choral psalm a little snatch of musical ritual falling into two parts--the charge to the watchers and the answering invocation. We may find a good deal of practical teaching in it. Let us look, then, at this choral charge and the response to it.

**I. The charge to the watchers.**

We do not know what the office of these watchers was, but in the second Temple, to the period of which this psalm may possibly belong, their duties were carefully defined, and Rabbinical literature has preserved a minute account of the work of the nightly patrol.

According to the authorities, two hundred and forty priests and Levites were the nightly guard, distributed over twenty-one stations. The captain of the guard visited these stations throughout the night with flaming torches before him, and saluted each with Peace be unto thee. If he found the sentinel asleep he beat him with his staff, and had authority to burn his cloak (which the drowsy guard had rolled up for a pillow). We all remember who warned His disciples to watch, lest coming suddenly He should find them asleep. We may remember, too, the blessing pronounced in the Apocalypse on Him who watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked. Shortly before daybreak the captain of the guard came, as the Talmud says: All times were not equal. Sometimes he came at cockcrow, or near it, before or after it. He went to one of the posts where the priests were stationed, and opened a wicket which led into the court. Here the priests, who marched behind him torch in hand, divided into two companies which went one to the east, and one to the west, carefully ascertaining that all was well. When they met each company reported "It is peace." Then the duties of the watch were ended, and the priests who were to prepare for the daily sacrifice entered on their tasks.

Our psalm may be the chant and answering chant with which the nightly charge was given over to the watchers, or it may be, as some commentators suppose, the call and counter-call with which the watchers greeted each other when they met.

Figure then, to yourselves, the band of white-robed priests gathered in the court of the Temple, their flashing torches touching pillar and angle with strange light, the city sunk in silence and sleep, and ere they part to their posts the chant rung in their ears:--Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord which by night stand in the House of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the Sanctuary, and bless the Lord! Notice, then, that the priests duty is to praise. It is because they are the servants of the Lord that, therefore, it is their business to bless the Lord. It is because they stand in the House of the Lord that it is theirs to bless the Lord. They who are gathered into His House, they who hold communion with Him, they who can feel that the gate of the Father's dwelling, like the gate of the Father's heart, is always open to them, they who have been called in from their wanderings in a homeless wilderness, and given a place and a name in His House better than of sons and daughters, have been so blessed in order that, filled with thanksgiving for such an entrance into God's dwelling and of such an adoption into His family, their silent lips may be filled with thanksgiving and their redeemed hands be uplifted in praise.

So for us Christians. We are servants of the Lord--His priests. That we stand in the House of the Lord expresses not only the fact of our great privilege of confiding approach to Him and communion with Him, whereby we may ever abide in the very Holy of Holies and be in the secret place of the Most High, even while we are busy in the world, but it also points to our duty of ministering; for the word stand is employed to designate the attendance of the priests in their office, and is almost equivalent to serve. To bless the Lord, then, is the work to which we are especially called. If we are made a royal priesthood, it is that we should show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. The purpose of that full horn of plenty, charged with blessings which God has emptied upon our heads, is that our dumb lips may be touched into thankfulness, because our selfish hearts have been wooed and charmed into love and life.

The Rabbis had a saying that there were two sorts of angels: the angels that served, and the angels that praised; of which, according to their teaching, the latter were the higher in degree. It was only a half-truth, for true service is praise.

But whatever the form in which praise may come, whether it be in the form of vocal thanksgiving, or whether it be the glad surrender of the heart, manifested in the conscious discharge of the most trivial duties, whether we lift up our hands in the Sanctuary, and bless the Lord with them, or whether we turn our hands to the tools of our daily occupation and handle them for His sake, alike we maybe praising Him. And the thing for us to remember is that the place where we, if we are Christians, stand, and the character which we, if we are Christians, sustain, bind us to live blessing and praising Him whilst we live. Behold!--as if He would point to all the crowded list of God's great mercies--Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord that ... stand in the house of the Lord.

And then there is another point that comes out of this charge to the watchers, viz. the necessity of strenuously trying to unite together service of God and communion with God. These priests might have said--When we go our rounds through the empty and echoing corridors of the dark Temple, we perform the charge which God gave us; and it needs not that we pray. We are working for Him and doing the work which He appointed us; and that is better than all external ritual. But this unknown speaker who charges them knew better than that. The priests service under the Old Covenant was very unspiritual service. Their work was sometimes very repulsive and always purely external work, which might be done without one trace of religion or devotion in it. And so the speaker here warns them, as it were, against the temptation which besets all men that are concerned in the outward service of the house of God, to confound the mere outward service with inward devotion. The charge bids us remember that the more sedulously our hands and thoughts are employed about the externals of religious duties, the more must we see to it that our inmost spirits are baptized into fellowship with God.

It is not enough to patrol the Temple courts unless we lift up our hands to the sanctuary, and with our hearts bless the Lord. And all we who in any degree and any department are officially or semi-officially connected with the work of the Christian Church have very earnestly and especially to lay this to heart. We ministers, deacons, Sunday-school teachers, tract distributors, have much need to take care that we do not confound watching in the courts of the Temple with lifting up our own hands and hearts to our Father that is in heaven; and remember that the more outward work we do, the more inward life we ought to have. The higher the stem of the tree grows and the broader its branches spread the deeper must strike and the wider must extend its underground roots, if it is not to be blown over and become a withered ruin.

And so all you Christian men and women! will you take the plain lesson that is here? All ye that stand ready for service, and doing service, all ye that stand in the house of the Lord, behold your peril and your duty--and bless ye the Lord, and remember that the more work the more prayer to keep it from rotting; the more effort the more communion; and that at the end we shall discover with alarm, and with shame confess I kept others vineyards and my own vineyard have I not kept; unless, like our Master, we prepare for a day of work and toil in the Temple by a night of quiet communion with our Father on the mountainside.

And then there is another lesson here which I only touch, and that is that all times are times for blessing God. Ye who by night stand in the house of the Lord, bless the Lord: so though no sacrifice was smoking on the altar, and no choral songs went up from the company of praising priests in the ritual service; and although the nightfall had silenced the worship and scattered the worshippers, yet some low murmur of praise would be echoing through the empty halls all the night long, and the voice of thanksgiving and of blessing would blend with the clank of the priests feet on the marble pavements as they went their patrolling rounds; and their torches would send up a smoke not less acceptable than the wreathing columns of the incense that had filled the day. And so as in some convents you will find a monk kneeling on the steps of the altar at each hour of the four-and-twenty, adoring the Sacrament exposed upon it, so (but in inmost reality and not in a mere vulgar outside form that means nothing) in the Christian heart there should be a perpetual adoration and a continual praise--a prayer without ceasing. What is it that comes first of all into your minds when you wake in the middle of the night? Yesterday's business, to-morrow's vanities, or God's present love and your dependence upon Him?

In the night of sorrow, too, do our songs go up, and do we hear and obey the charge which commands not only perpetual adoration, but bids us fill the night with music and with praise? Well for us if it be, anticipating the time when they rest not day nor night saying, Holy! Holy! Holy! Now, that is the priests charge. Look for a moment at the answering blessing: The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.

Thee? Whom? Him who gave the solemn charge. Their obedience to it is implied in the blessing which the priests invoke on the head of the unnamed speaker. So they express their joyful consent to his charge, and their desires for his welfare whose clear voice has summoned them to their high duty and privilege. They obey, and their first prayer is a prayer for him.

May we venture to draw from this interchange of counsel and benediction a simple lesson as to the best form in which mutual goodwill and friendship may express itself? It is by the interchange of stimulus to God's service and praise, and of grateful prayer. He is my best friend who stirs me up to make my whole life a strong sweet song of thanksgiving to God for all His numberless mercies to me. Even if the exhortation becomes rebuke, faithful are such wounds. It is but a shallow affection which can be eloquent on other subjects of common interests, but is dumb on this, the deepest of all; which can counsel wisely and rebuke gently in regard to other matters, but has never a word to say to its dearest concerning duty to the God of all mercies.

**II. And the true response to any loving exhortation to bless God, or any religious impulse which we receive from one another, is to invoke God's blessing on faithful lips that have given us counsel.**

This is the best recompense to Christian teachers. If any poor words of ours have come to any of your hearts with power for conviction, or instruction, or encouragement, let your response be, I beseech you, The Lord that hath made heaven and earth bless thee. We need your prayers. We are weak, often sad, often discouraged. We are tempted ever to handle God's truth professionally, instead of living on it for ourselves. We are tempted to think that our work is in vain, and to lose heart because we do not see the spiritual results which we would fain reap. And in many an hour of languor and despondency, when the wheels of life turn heavily and the sky seems very far away, and our message seems to have lost its grandeur and certainty to ourselves, and our handling of it looks as if it had been one long failure, then we need and may be helped by the voice of cheer coming through the night from those whom we have tried to counsel: The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee.

But observe, further, the two kinds of blessing which answer to one another--God's blessing of man, and man's blessing of God. The one is communicative, the other receptive and responsive. The one is the great stream which pours itself over the precipice; the other is the basin into which it falls and the showers of spray which rise from its surface, rainbowed in the sunshine, as the cataract of divine mercies comes down upon it. God blesses us when He gives. We bless God when we thankfully take, and praise the Giver. God's blessing then, must ever come first. We love Him because He first loved us. Ours is but the echo of His, but the acknowledgment of the divine act, which must precede our recognition of it as the dawn must come in order that the birds may wake to sing.

Our highest service is to take the gifts of God, and with glad hearts to praise the Giver.

Our blessings are but words. God's blessings are realities. We wish good to one another when we bless each other. But He does good to men when He blesses them. Our wishes may be deep and warm, but, alas! how ineffectual. They flutter round the heads of those whom we would bless, but how seldom do they actually rest upon their brows. But God's blessings are powers. They never miss their mark. Whom He blesses are blessed indeed.

That experience of the ineffectual emptiness of blessings from the most loving hearts gives point to the emphatic designation here of the Lord which made heaven and earth, a formula which is common in this connection. It brings before the eye of faith the mighty Name, and the mighty work of Him in whose blessing we shall be rich. He is the Lord, the Eternal and the Covenant King. He has made heaven and earth. If He who lives above all limitations of time, the Source of life, who has the fulness of life in Himself, He who has revealed Himself to Israel and bound Himself to fulfil His covenant with all who plead it, He whose sovereign effortless power willed and spake into being the azure deeps of heaven with all its stars, and the solid earth with its tribes--if He, with such infinite resources to bestow on us as we need, if He blesses us, it will be with no vain wishes nor with the invoking of the goodwill of a higher power, but with the veritable communication of good, and we shall be blessed indeed.

Observe, too, the channel through which God's blessings come--out of Zion. For the Jew, the fulness of divine glory dwelt between the Cherubim, and the richest of the divine blessings were bestowed on the waiting worshippers there, and no doubt it is still true that God dwells in Zion, and blesses men from thence. The New Testament analogue to the Old Testament Temple is no outward building. That would be absurd confusing of the very nature of type and antitype. A material type must have a spiritual fulfilment. A rite cannot correspond to a rite, nor a building to a building. But the correspondence in Christianity to the Temple where God dwelt, and from which He scattered His blessings is twofold--one proper and original, the other secondary and derived. In the true sense, Jesus Christ is the Temple. In Him God dwelt; in Him, man meets God; in Him was the place of revelation; in Him the place of sacrifice. In this place is one greater than the Temple, and the abiding of Jehovah above the mercy-seat was but a material symbol, shadowing and foretelling the true indwelling of all the fulness of the Godhead bodily in that true Tabernacle which the Lord hath pitched and not man. So the great fountain of all possible good and benediction which was opened for the believing Jew in Zion, is opened for us in Jesus Christ who stood in the very court of the Temple, and called in tones of clear, loud invitation: If any man thirst let him come unto Me and drink. We may each pass through the rent veil into the holiest of all, and there, laying our hand on Jesus, touch God, and opening our empty palm extended to Him, can receive from Him all the blessing that we need.

There is another application of the Temple symbol in the New Testament--a derivative and secondary one--to the Church, that is, to the aggregate of believers. In it God dwells through Christ. Receiving His Spirit, instinct with His life, it is His Body, and as in His earthly life He spake of the Temple of His "literal" body, so now that Church becomes the Temple of God, being builded through the ages. In that Zion all God's best blessings are possessed and stored, that the Church may, by faithful service, impart them to the world. Whosoever desires to possess these blessings must enter thither--not by any ceremonial act, or outward profession, but by becoming one of those who put their whole heart's confidence in Jesus Christ. Within that sacred enclosure we receive whatever divine love and power can give. If we are knit to Christ by our faith, we share in proportion to our faith in all the wealth of blessing with which God has blessed Him. We possess Christ and in Him all. The ancient benediction, which came from the lips of the priestly watchers, and rang through the empty corridors of the darkened Temple, asked for much: The Lord who made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion. But the Apostolic assurance sounds a yet deeper and more wonderful note of confidence when it proclaims that already, however to ourselves we may seem sad and needy, and however little we may have counted our treasures or made them our own, God hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.