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

**PSALMS-078**. **GOD'S SCRUTINY LONGED FOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"23. Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; 24. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

*Psalm 139:23-24*

This psalm begins with perhaps the grandest contemplation of the divine Omniscience that was ever put into words. It is easy to pour out platitudes upon such a subject, but the Psalmist does not content himself with generalities. He gathers all the rays, as it were, into one burning point, and focusses them upon himself: Oh, Lord! Thou hast searched me, and known me. All the more remarkable, then, is it that the psalm should end with asking God to do what it began with declaring that He does. He knows us each, altogether; whether we like it or not, whether we try to hinder it or not, whether we remember it or not. Singular, therefore, is it to find this prayer as the very climax of all the Psalmist's contemplation. It is more than the searching which was spoken of at the beginning, which is desired at the end. It is a process which has for its issue the cleansing of all the evil that is beheld. The prayer of the text is in fact the yearning of the devout soul for purity. I simply wish to consider the series of petitions here, in the hope that we may catch something of their spirit, and that some faint echo of them may sound in our desires. My purpose, then, will be best accomplished if I follow the words of the text, and look at these petitions in the order in which they stand.

**I. Note then, first, the longing for the searching of God's eye.**

Now, the word which is here rendered search is a very emphatic and picturesque one. It means to dig deep. God is prayed, as it were, to make a cutting into the man, and lay bare his inmost nature, as men do in a railway cutting, layer after layer, going ever deeper down till the bed-rock is reached. Search me--dig into me, bring the deep-lying parts to light--and know my heart; the centre of my personality, my inmost self. That is the prayer, not of fancied fitness to stand investigation, but of lowly acknowledgment. In other words, it is really a form of confession. Search me. I know Thou wilt find evil, but still--search me! It seems to me that there are two main ideas in this petition, on each of which I touch briefly.

One is, that it is a glad recognition of a fact which is very terrible to many hearts. The conception of God as knowing me altogether, down to the very roots of my being, is either the most blessed or the most unwelcome thought, according to my conception of what His heart to me is. If I think of Him, as so many of us do, as simply the austere man who gathers where he did not straw, and reaps where he did not sow; if my thought of God is mainly that of an Investigator and a Judge, with pure eyes and rigid judgment, then I shall be more ignorant of myself, and more confident in myself, than the most of men are when they bethink themselves, if I do not feel that I shrink up like a sensitive plant's leaf when a finger touches it, and would fain curl myself together, and hide from His eye something that I know lurks and poisons at the centre of my being.

The gaoler's eye at the slit in the wall of the solitary prisoner's cell is a constant terror to the man who knows that it may be upon him at every moment, and does not know where the eyehole is, or when the merciless eye may be at it, but if we love one another we do not shrink from opening out our inward baseness to each other. We can venture to tell those that are dear to us as our own hearts the things that lie in our own hearts and make them black and ugly in all eyes but love's; or if we cannot venture to do it wholly, at all events we do it more fully, and more willingly, and with more of something that is almost pleasure in the very act of confession, in proportion as we are bound by the sacred ties of love to the recipient of the confession. There is a joy, and a blessedness deeper than joy, in discovering ourselves, even our unworthy selves, when we know that the eye that looks is a loving eye.

If, then, we have rightly conceived of our relation to Him, that infinite Lover of all our hearts, who looks, with other eyes than ours, and makes allowance for us all, there will be a certain blessedness, almost like joy, in turning ourselves inside out before Him; and in feeling that every corner of our hearts lies naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Search me, O God! is the voice of confident love, which is sure of the love that contemplates the sinner.

And for us Christian people, to whom all these attributes of Deity are gathered together and brought very near our hearts and our experiences in the person of our Brother Christ, the thought of such knowledge of us becomes still more blessed. Just as the Apostle who was conscious of many sins, could say to his Master, not in petulance, but in deeply-moved confidence, Thou knowest all things! Why dost Thou ask me questions? Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest, notwithstanding my denials, that I love Thee, so may we turn to Jesus Christ, who knows what is in men, and who knows each man, and may be sure that the eye which looks upon our unworthiness pities our sinfulness, and is ready to bear it all away. There is a deeper gladness in pouring out our hearts to our loving Lord than in locking them in sullen silence, with the vain conceit that we thereby hide ourselves from Him. Make a clean breast of your evil, and you will find that the act has in it a blessedness all unique and poignant. Pour out your hearts before Him, O ye people! God is a refuge for us.

This prayer is also an expression of absolute willingness to submit to the searching process. God is represented in my text as searching the secrets of a man's heart, not that God may know, but that the man may know. By His Spirit He will come into the innermost corners of our nature, if this prayer is a real expression of our desire, and there the illumination of His presence will flash light into all the dark places of our experience and of our natures. We cannot afford to be in ignorance of these. Pestilence breathes in the unventilated, unlighted, uncleansed recesses of a neglected nature. It is only on condition of the light of God's convincing Spirit being cast into every part of our being that we shall be able to overcome and annihilate the creeping swarms of microscopic sins that are there, minute but mighty in their myriads to destroy a man's soul. Search me is the expression of a penitence that knows itself to be full of evil, that does not know all the evil of which it is full, that needs enlightenment, that desires deliverance, that is sure of the love that looks, and that so spreads itself, as a bleacher spreads some piece of stained cloth in the gracious sunshine and sprinkles it with the pure water of heaven that all the stains may melt away.

It is useless to ask God to search us if we lock our hearts against His searching. The mere natural exercise, if I may so say, of the divine attribute of Omniscience we cannot hinder. He knows us thereby altogether, whether we like it or not; but the searching of my text is one which He cannot put in force without our consent. We have to confess our sins unto the Lord ere this kind of divine scrutiny can be brought to bear. By His natural Omniscience, He knows them altogether, but the seeing which is preparatory to destroying them depends on our willingness to submit ourselves to the often painful process by which He drags our sins to light. Do you want Him to come and search your hearts, and tell you in your spirits what He has found there? Do you desire to know your hidden evil? Then keep close to Him, and tell Him what the sin is which you know to be sin; and ask Him to show you what the sins are which, as yet, you have not grown up to the height of understanding and acknowledging.

**II. Next, there follows the longing for the divine testing of our thoughts.**

Now you will have observed, I suppose, that in the second clause of my text, try me, and know my thoughts the result of the investigation is somewhat different from that of the previous clause. The searching issued in a divine knowledge of the heart; the trying, or testing, issues in a divine knowledge of the thoughts. The distinction between these two, in the Biblical use of the expressions, is not precisely the same as in our modern popular speech. We are accustomed to talk of the heart as being the seat of emotions, affections, feelings, whereas we relegate thoughts to the head. But Scripture does not quite take that metaphorical view. In it the heart is the centre of personal being, and out of it there come, not only emotions and loves, but thoughts and intents. The difference, then, between these two, heart and thoughts is this, the one is the workshop and the other is the product. The heart is the place where the thoughts are elaborated. So you see the process of the Psalmist's prayer is from the centre a little outwards, first the inmost self, and then the thoughts, meaning thereby the whole web of activities, both intellectual and emotional, of which the heart, in his sense of the word, is the seat and source. In like manner as the field of investigation is somewhat shifted in the second petition, so the manner of investigation is correspondingly different. Search is the divine scrutiny of the inner man by the eye; test is the trial as metals are tried and proved by the fiery furnace.

So, then, the innermost man is searched by the divine knowledge, and the thoughts which the innermost man produces are tested by the divine providence. And our second petition is for a trial by facts, by external agencies, of the true nature and character of the purposes, desires, designs, intentions, as well as of the affections and loves and joys. That is to say, this second prayer submits absolutely to any discipline, fiery and fierce and bitter, by which the true character of a man's activities may be made clear to himself. Oh! it is a prayer easily offered; hard to stand by. It is a prayer often answered in ways that drive us almost to despair. It means, Do anything with me, put me into any seven-fold heated furnace of sorrow, do anything that will melt my hardness, and run off my dross, which Thy great ladle will then skim away, that the surface may be clear, and the substance without alloy.

Do you pray that prayer, brother! knowing all that it means, and being willing to take the answer, in forms that may rack your heart, and sadden your whole lives? If you are wise, you will. Better to go crippled into life than, having two hands or two feet, to be cast into hell fire! Better to be saved though maimed, than to be entire and lost.

Try me. It is an awful prayer. Let us not offer it lightly, or unadvisedly; but if we are wise let it be our inmost desire. And when the answer comes, and sorrows fall, do not let us murmur, do not let us kick, do not let us wonder, but let us say, Thou art a God that hearest prayer, and I will glorify God in the fires. Then the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, shall be found unto praise and honour and glory.

**III. The next petition of my text is a longing for the casting out of evil.**

See if there be any wicked way in me. Now, that if is not the if of doubt whether any such ways are in the man, but it is the if of consciousness that there are such, though what they are he may not clearly discern. And so, it is the if of humility--knowing that he is not justified because he knows nothing against himself--and not the if of presumption.

I have only time to observe here, in a word or two, what would well deserve more expanded treatment, and that is, the very striking and significant expression here employed for this evil way that the Psalmist desires to be detected, that it may be cast out. The word rendered wicked--or more properly, wickedness--is literally forced labour, which was, in old times, and still is in some countries, laid upon the inhabitants at the command of authority; and then, because forced labour is grievous labour, it comes to mean sorrow. So the way of wickedness that the Psalmist feels is in him is the way of compulsory service, and the way that leads to sorrow. That is to say, all sin is slavery, and all sin leads to a bitter and a bad end, and its fruit is death. And so, because the man feels that his better self is in bondage, and shudderingly apprehends that the courses which he pursues can only end in bitterness and misery, he turns to God and asks Him that He would enlighten him as to what these fatal courses are. See if there be any way of wickedness in me, because he is quite sure that the evil which God sees, God will help him to overcome.

Ah, friends! we all have such ways deeply lodged within us, and we do not always know that we have; but if we will turn ourselves to Him, He will prevent our condemning ourselves in things that we allow and increasing the sensitiveness of our consciences, He will teach us that many things that we did not know to be wrong are harmful.

As soon as we learn that they are, He will help us to cast them out. God has nothing to do with our evil but to fight against it. Be sure of this, that whatsoever evil in us He thus searches and shows us. He does so in order to fling it from us. He goes down into the cellars of our hearts, with the candle of His Spirit in His hand, in order that He may lay hold of all the explosives there, and having drenched them so that they shall not catch fire, may cast them clean out so that they may not blow us to destruction.

**IV. The last petition of my text is for guidance in the everlasting way.**

The ways of wickedness are in us; the way everlasting we need to be led into. That is to say, naturally we incline to evil; it must be the divine hand and the divine Spirit that lead our feet in the paths of righteousness. When we ask Him to guide us in the way everlasting, we ask that we may know what is duty, and that we may incline to do it. And He answers it by the gift of His divine Spirit, by the quickening of our consciences, by bringing nearer to our hearts the great Example who has left us His footsteps as a legacy that we may tread in them.

Whosoever walks in Christ's footsteps is walking in the way everlasting, for that path is rightly so named which leads to eternal blessedness. It is everlasting, too, inasmuch as nothing of human effort or work abides except that which is in conformity with the will of God, and inasmuch as it, and it alone, is not broken short off by death, but runs, borne upon one mighty arch that spans the gorge, clean across the black abyss, and continues straight on in the same course, only with a swifter upward gradient, through all the ages of eternity. The man who here has lived for God will live yonder as he has lived here, only more completely and more joyously for ever. A highway shall be there, and a way, and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads.