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

**PSALMS-080**. **THE PRAYER OF PRAYERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Teach me to do Thy will; for Thou art my God! Thy spirit is good; lead me into the land of uprightness."*

*Psalm 143:10*

These two clauses mean substantially the same thing. The Psalmist's longings are expressed in the first of them in plain words, and in the second in a figure. To do God's will is to be in the land of uprightness. That phrase, in its literal application, means a stretch of level country, and hence is naturally employed as an emblem of a moral or religious condition. A life of obedience to the will of God is likened to some far stretching plain, easy to traverse, broken by no barren mountains or frowning cliffs, but basking, peaceful and fruitful, beneath the smile of God. Into such a garden of the Lord the Psalmist prays to be led.

In each case his prayer is based upon a motive or plea. Thou art my God; his faith apprehends a personal bond between him and God, and feels that that bond obliges God to teach him His will. If we adopt the reading in our Bibles of our second clause a still deeper and more wonderful plea is presented there. Thy Spirit is good, and therefore the trusting spirit has a right to ask to be made good likewise. The relation of the believing spirit to God not only obliges God to teach it His will, but to make it partaker of His own image and conformed to His own purity. So high on wings of faith and desire soared this man, who, at the beginning of his psalm, was crushed to the dust by enemies and by dangers. So high we may rise by like means.

**I. Notice, then, first, the supreme desire of the devout soul.**

We do not know who wrote this psalm. The superscription says that it was David's, and although its place in the Psalter seems to suggest another author, the peculiar fervour and closeness of intimacy with God which breathes through it are like the Davidic psalms, and seem to confirm the superscription. If so, it will naturally fall into its place with the others which were pressed from his heart by the rebellion of Absalom. But be that as it may, whosoever wrote the psalm, was a man in extremest misery and peril, and as he says of himself, persecuted, overwhelmed, desolate. The tempest blows him to the Throne of God, and when he is there, what does he ask? Deliverance? Scarcely. In one clause, and again at the end, as if by a kind of after-thought, he asks for the removal of the calamities. But the main burden of his prayer is for a closer knowledge of God, the sound of His lovingkindness in his inward ear, light to show him the way wherein he should walk, and the sweet sunshine of God's face upon his heart. There is a better thing to ask than exemption from sorrows, even grace to bear them rightly. The supreme desire of the devout soul is practical conformity to the will of God. For the prayer of our text is not Teach me to know Thy will. The Psalmist, indeed, has asked that in a previous clause--Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk. But knowledge is not all that we need, and the gulf between knowledge and practice is so deep that after we have prayed that we may be caused to know the way, and have received the answer, there still remains the need for God's help that knowledge may become life, and that all which we understand we may do. To such practical conformity to the will of God all other aspects of religion are meant to be subservient.

Christianity is a revelation of truth, but to accept it as such is not enough. Christianity brings to me exemption from punishment, escape from hell, deliverance from condemnation and guilt, and by some of us, that is apt to be regarded as the whole Gospel; but pardon is only a means to an end. Christianity brings to us the possibility of indulgence in sweet and blessed emotions, and a fervour of feeling which to experience is the ante-past of heaven, and for some of us, all our religion goes off in vaporous emotion; but feeling alone is not Christianity. Our religion brings to us sweet and gracious consolations, but it is a poor affair if we only use it as an anodyne and a comfort. Our Christianity brings to us glorious hopes that flash lustre into the darkness, and make the solitude of the grave companionship, and the end of earth the beginning of life, but it is a poor affair if the mightiest operation of our religion be relegated to a future, and flung on to the close. All these things, the truth which the Gospel brings, the pardon and peace of conscience which it ensures, the joyful emotion which it sets loose from the ice of indifference, the sweet consolations with which it pillows the weary head and bandages the bleeding heart, and the great hopes which flash light into glazing eyes, and make the end glorious with the rays of a beginning, and the western heaven bright with the promise of a new day--all these things are but subservient means to this highest purpose, that we should do the will of God, and be conformed to His image. They whose religion has not reached that apex have yet to understand its highest meaning. The river of the water of life that proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb is not sent merely to refresh thirsty lips, and to bring music into the silence of a waterless desert, but it is sent to drive the wheels of life. Action, not thought, is the end of God's revelation, and the perfecting of man.

But, then, let us remember that we shall most imperfectly apprehend the whole sweep and blessedness of this great supreme aim of the devout soul, if we regard this doing of God's will as merely the external act of obedience to an external command. Simple doing is not enough; the deed must be the fruit of love. The aim of the Christian life is not obedience to a law that is recognised as authoritative, but joyful moulding of ourselves after a law that is felt to be sweet and loving. I delight to do Thy will, yea! Thy law is within my heart. Only when thus the will yields itself in loving and glad conformity to the will of God is true obedience possible for us. Brother! is that your Christianity? Do you desire, more than anything besides, that what He wills you should will, and that His law should be stamped upon your hearts, and all your rebellious desires and purposes should be brought into a sweet captivity which is freedom, and an obedience to Christ which is kingship over the universe and yourselves?

**II. Note, secondly, the divine teaching and touch which are required for this conformity.**

The Psalmist betakes himself to prayer, because he knows that of himself he cannot bring his will into this attitude of harmonious submission. And his prayer for teaching is deepened in the second clause of our text into a petition, which is substantially the same in meaning, but yet sets the felt need and the coveted help in a still more striking light, in its cry for the touch of God's good spirit to guide, as by a hand grasping the Psalmist's hand, into the paths of obedience.

We may learn from this prayer, then, that practical conformity to God's will can never be attained by our own efforts. Remember all the hindrances that rise between us and it; these wild passions of ours, this obstinate gravitating of tastes and desires towards earth, these animal necessities, these spiritual perversities, which make up so much of us all--how can we coerce these into submission? Our better selves sit within like some prisoned king, surrounded and fooled by the rebel powers of his revolted subjects; and our best recourse is to send an embassy to the Over-lord, the Sovereign King, praying Him to come to our help. We cannot will to will as God wills, but we can turn ourselves to Him, and ask Him to put the power within us which shall subdue the evil, conquer the rebels, and make us masters of our own else anarchic and troubled spirits. For all honest attempts to make the will of God our wills, the one secret of success is confident and continual appeal to Him. A man must have gone a very little way, very superficially and perfunctorily, on the path of seeking to make himself what he ought to be, unless he has found out that he cannot do it, and unless he has found out that there is only one way to do it, and that is to go to God and say, O Lord! I am baffled and beaten. I put the reins into Thy hand; do Thou inspire and direct and sanctify.

That practical conformity to the will of God requires divine teaching, but yet that teaching must be no outward thing. It is not enough that we should have communicated to us, as from without, the clearest knowledge of what we ought to be. There must be more than that. Our Psalmist's prayer was a prophecy. He said, Teach me to do Thy will. And he thought, no doubt, of an inward teaching which should mould his nature as well as enlighten it; of the communication of impulses as well as of conceptions; of something which should make him love the divine will, as well as of something which should make him know it.

You and I have Jesus Christ for our Teacher, the answer to the psalm. His teaching is inward and deep and real, and answers to all the necessities of the case. We have His example to stand as our perfect law. If we want to know what is God's will, we have only to turn to that life; and however different from ours His may have been in its outward circumstances, and however fragmentary and brief its records in the Gospels may sometimes seem to us, yet in these little booklets, telling of the quiet life of the carpenter's Son, there is guidance for every man and woman in all circumstances, however complicated, and we do not need anything more to teach us what God's will is than the life of Jesus Christ. His teaching goes deeper than example. He comes into our hearts, He moulds our wills. His teaching is by inward impulses and communications of desire and power to do, as well as of light to know. A law has been given which can give life. As the modeller will take a piece of wax into his hand, and by warmth and manipulation make it soft and pliable, so Jesus Christ, if we let Him, will take our hard hearts into His hands, and by gentle, loving, subtle touches, will shape them into the pattern of His own perfect beauty, and will mould all their vagrant inclinations and aberrant distortions into one immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men teaching that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, controlling ourselves, righteously, fulfilling all our obligations to our fellows, and godly, referring everything to Him, in this present world.

That practical conformity to the divine will requires, still further, the operation of the divine Spirit as our Guide. Thy Spirit is good lead me into the land of uprightness. There is only one power that can draw us out of the far-off land of rebellious disobedience, where the prodigals and the swine's husks and the famine and the rags are, into the land of uprightness, and that is, the communicated Spirit of God, which is given to all them that desire Him, and will lead them in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. It is He that works in us, the willing and the doing, according to His own good pleasure. He shall guide you, said the Master, into all truth--not merely into its knowledge, but into its performance, not merely into truth of conception, but into truth of practice, which is righteousness, and the fulfilling of the Law.

**III. Lastly, note the divine guarantee that this practical conformity shall be ours.**

The Psalmist pleads with God a double motive--His relation to us and His own perfectness, Thou art my God; therefore teach me. Thy Spirit is good; therefore lead me into the land of uprightness. I can but glance for a moment at these two pleas of the prayer.

Note, then, first, God's personal relation to the devout soul, as the guarantee that that soul shall be taught, not merely to know, but also to do His will. If He be my God, there can be no deeper desire in His heart, than that His will should be my will. And this He desires, not from any masterfulness or love of dominion, but only from love to us. If He be my God, and therefore longing to have me obedient, He will not withhold what is needed to make me so. God is no hard Taskmaster who sets us to make bricks without straw. Whatsoever He commands He gives, and His commandments are always second and His gifts first. He bestows Himself and then He says, For the love's sake, do My will. Be sure that the sacred bond which knits us to Him is regarded by Him, the faithful Creator, as an obligation which He recognises and respects and will discharge. We have a right to go to Him and to say to Him, Thou art my God; and Thou wilt not be what Thou art, nor do what Thou hast pledged Thyself to do, unless Thou makest me to know and to do Thy will.

And on the other hand, if we have taken Him for ours, and have the bond knit from our side as well as from His, then the fact of our faith gives us a claim on Him which He is sure to honour. The soul that can say, I have taken Thee for mine, has a hold on God which God is only too glad to recognise and to vindicate. And whoever, humbly trusting to that great Father in the heavens, feels that he belongs to God, and that God belongs to him, is warranted in praying, Teach me, and make me, to do Thy will, and in being confident of an answer.

And there is the other plea with Him and guarantee for us, drawn from God's own moral character and perfectness. The last clause of my text may either be read as our Bible has it, Thy Spirit is good; lead me, or Let Thy good Spirit lead me. In either case the goodness of the divine Spirit is the plea on which the prayer is grounded. The goodness here referred to is, as I take it, not merely beneficence and kindliness, but rather goodness in its broader and loftier sense of perfect moral purity. So that the thought just comes to this--we have the right to expect that we shall be made participant of the divine nature for so sweet, so deep, so tender is the tie that knits a devout soul to God, that nothing short of conformity to the perfect purity of God can satisfy the aspirations of the creature, or discharge the obligations of the Creator.

It is a daring thought. The Psalmist's desire was a prophecy. The New Testament vindicates and fulfils it when it says We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Since He now dwells in the land of uprightness, who once dwelt among us in this weary world of confusion and of sin, then we one day shall be with Him. Christ's heart cannot be satisfied, Christ's Cross cannot be rewarded, the divine nature cannot be at rest, the purpose of redemption cannot be accomplished, until all who have trusted in Christ be partakers of divine purity, and all the wanderers be led by devious and yet by right paths, by crooked and yet by straight ways, by places rough and yet smooth, into the land of uprightness. Where and what He is, there and that shall also His servants be.

My brother! if to do the will of God is to dwell in the land of uprightness, disobedience is to dwell in a dry and thirsty land, barren and dreary, horrid with frowning rocks and jagged cliffs, where every stone cuts the feet and every step is a blunder, and all the paths end at last on the edge of an abyss, and crumble into nothingness beneath the despairing foot that treads them. Do you see to it that you walk in ways of righteousness which are paths of peace; and look for all the help you need, with assured faith, to Him who shall guide us by His counsel and afterwards receive us to His glory.