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

**PSALMS-030**. **TWO INNUMERABLE SERIES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. Many, O Lord my God, are Thy wonderful works which Thou hast done, and Thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto Thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered ... 12. Innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head; therefore my heart faileth me."*

*Psalm 40:5, 12*

So then, there are two series of things which cannot be numbered, God's mercies, man's sins. This psalm has for its burden a cry for deliverance; but the Psalmist begins where it is very hard for a struggling man to begin, but where we always should begin, with grateful remembrance of God's mercy. His wondrous dealings seem to the Psalmist's thankful heart as numberless as the blades of grass which carpet the fields, or as the wavelets which glance in the moonlight and break in silver upon the sand. They come pouring out continuously, like the innumerable undulations of the ether which make upon the eyeballs the single sensation of light. He thinks not only of God's wonderful works, His realised purposes of mercy, but of His thoughts which are to us-ward, the purposes, still more wonderful, of a yet greater mercy which wait to be realised. He thinks not only of God's lovingkindness to Him, but his contemplations embrace God's goodness to his brethren--Thy thoughts which are to us-ward. And as he thinks of all this multitude of His tender mercies, his lips break into this rapturous exclamation of my text.

But there is a wonderful change in tone, in the two halves of the psalm. The deliverance that seems so complete in the earlier part is but partial. The triumph and the trust seem both to be clouded over. A frowning mass lifts itself up against the immense mass of God's mercies. The Psalmist sees himself ringed about by numberless evils, as a man tied to a stake might be by a circle of fire. Innumerable evils have compassed me about. His conscience tells him that the evils are deserved; they are his iniquities transformed which have come back to him in another shape, and have laid their hands upon him as a constable does upon a thief. Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me--they hem him in so that his vision is interrupted, the smoke from the circle of flame blinds his eyes--I cannot see. His roused conscience and his quivering heart conceive of them as more than the hairs of his head, and so courage and confidence have ebbed away from him. My heart faileth me----, and there is nothing left for him but to fling himself in his misery out of himself and on to God.

Now what I wish to do in this sermon is not so much to deal with these two verses separately as to draw some of the lessons from the very remarkable juxtaposition of these two innumerable things--God's tender mercies, and man's iniquity and evil.

**I. To begin with, let me remind you how, if we keep these two things both together in our contemplations, they suggest for us very forcibly the greatest mystery in the universe, and throw a little light upon it.**

The difficulty of difficulties, the one insoluble problem is----, given a good and perfect God, where does sorrow come from, and why is there any pain? Men have fumbled at that knot for all the years that there have been men in the world, and they have not untied it yet. They have tried to cut it and it has resisted all their knives and all their ingenuity. And there the question stands before us, grim, insoluble, the despair of all thinkers and often the torture of our own hearts, in the hours of our personal experience. Is it true that God's mercies are innumerable? If it be, what is the meaning of all this that makes me writhe and weep? Nobody has answered that question, and nobody ever will.

Only let us beware of the temptation of blinking half of the facts by reason of the clearness of our confidence or the depth of our feeling of the other half. That is always our temptation. You must have had a singularly unruffled life if there has never come to you some moment when, in the depth of your agony, you have ground your teeth together, as you said to yourself, Is there a God then at all? And does He care for me at all? And can He help me at all? And if there is, why in the name of pity does He not? Well, my brother! when such moments come to us, and they come to us all sooner or later--and I was going to add a parenthesis, which you will think strange, and say that they come to us all sooner or later, blessed be God!--when such moments come to us, do not let the black mass hide the light one from you, but copy this Psalmist, and in the energy of your faith, even though it be the extremity of your pain, grasp and grip them both; and though you have to say and to wail: Innumerable evils have compassed me about, be sure that you do not let that prevent you from saying, Many, O Lord my God! are Thy wonderful works which are to us-ward. They are more than can be numbered.

I do not enter upon this as a mere matter of philosophical speculation. It is far too serious and important a matter to be so dealt with, in a pulpit at any rate, but I would also add in one sentence that the mere thinker, who looks at the question solely from an intellectual point of view, has need to take the lesson of my two texts, and to be sure that he keeps clear before him both halves of the facts--though they seem to be as unlike each other as the eclipsed and the uneclipsed silver half of the moon--with which he has to deal.

Remember, the one does not contradict the other; but let us ask ourselves if the one does not explain the other. If it be that these mercies are so innumerable as my first text says, may it not be that they go deep down beneath, and include in their number, the experience that seems most opposite to them, even the sorrow that afflicts our lives? Must it not be, that the innumerable sum of God's mercies has not to have subtracted from it, but has to have added to it, the sum which also at intervals appears to us innumerable, of our sorrows and our burdens? Perhaps the explanation does not go to the bottom of the bottomless, but it goes a long way down towards it. Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth makes a bridge across the gulf which seems to part the opposing cliffs, these two sets effect, and turn the darker into a form in which the brighter reveals itself. All things work together for good. And God's innumerable mercies include the whole sum total of my sorrows.

**II. So, again, notice how the blending of these two thoughts together heightens the impression of each.**

All artists, and all other people know the power of contrast. White never looks so white as when it is relieved against black; black never so intense as when it is relieved against white. A white flower in the twilight gleams out in spectral distinctness, paler and fairer than it looked in the blazing sunshine. So, if we take and put these two things together--the dark mass of man's miseries and the radiant brightness of God's mercies, each heightens the colour of the other.

Only, let me observe, as I have already suggested that, in the second of my two texts, whilst the Psalmist starts from the innumerable evils that have compassed him about, he passes from these to the earlier evils which he had done. It is pain that says, Innumerable evils have compassed me about. It is conscience that says, Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me. His wrong-doing has come back to him like the boomerang that the Australian savage throws, which may strike its aim but returns to the hand that flung it. It has come back in the shape of a sorrow. And so Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me is the deepening of the earliest word of my text. Therefore, I am not reading a double meaning into it, but the double meaning is in it when I see here a reference both to a man's manifold sorrows and to a man's multiplied transgressions. Taking the latter into consideration, the contrast between these two heightens both of them.

God's mercies never seem so fair, so wonderful, as when they are looked at in conjunction with man's sin. Man's sin never seems so foul and hideous as when it is looked at close against God's mercies. You cannot estimate the conduct of one of two parties to a transaction unless you have the conduct of the other before you. You cannot understand a father's love unless you take into account the prodigal son's sullen unthankfulness, or his unthankfulness without remembering his father's love. You cannot estimate the clemency of a patient monarch unless you know the blackness and persistency of the treason of his rebellious subjects, nor their treason, except when seen in connection with his clemency. You cannot estimate the long-suffering of a friend unless you know the crimes against friendship of which his friend has been guilty, nor the blackness of his treachery without the knowledge of the other's loyalty to him. So we do not see the radiant brightness of God's loving-kindness to us until we look at it from the depth of the darkness of our own sin. The stars are seen from the bottom of the well. The loving-kindness of God becomes wonderful when we think of the sort of people on whom it has been lavished. And my evil is never apprehended in its true hideousness until I have set it black and ugly, but searched through and through, and revealed in every deformed outline, and in every hideous lineament, by the light against which I see it. You must take both in order to understand either.

And not only so, but actually these two opposites, which are ever warring with one another in a duel, most merciful, patient, and long-suffering on His part--these two elements do intensify one another, not only in our estimation but in reality. For it is man's sin that has drawn out the deepest and most wonderful tenderness of the divine heart; and it is God's love partly recognised and rejected, which leads men to the darkest evil. Man's sin has heightened God's love to this climax and consummation of all tenderness, that He has sent us His Son. And God's love thus heightened has darkened and deepened man's sin. God's chiefest gift is His Son. Man's darkest sin is the rejection of Christ. The clearest light makes the blackest shadow, the tenderer the love, the more criminal the apathy and selfishness which oppose it.

My brother! let us put these two great things together, and learn how the sin heightens the love, and how the love aggravates the sin.

**III. That leads me to another point, that the keeping of these two thoughts together should lead us all to conscious penitence.**

The Psalmist's words are not the mere complaint of a soul in affliction, they are also the acknowledgment of a conscience repenting. The contemplation of these two numberless series should affect us all in a like manner.

Now there is a superficial kind of popular religion which has a great deal to say about the first of these texts; and very little or next to nothing about the second. It is a very defective kind of religion that says:--Many, O Lord my God! are Thy thoughts which are to us-ward, but has never been down on its knees with the confession Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me. But defective as it is, it is all the religion which many people have, and I doubt not, some of my hearers have no more. I would press on you all this truth, that there is no deep personal religion without a deep consciousness of personal transgression. Have you got that, my brother? Have you ever had it? Have you ever known what it is so to look at God's love that it smites you into tears of repentance when you think of the way you have requited Him? If you have not, I do not think the sense of God's love has gone very deeply into you, notwithstanding all that you say; and sure I am that you have never got to the point where you can understand it most clearly and most deeply. The sense of sin, the consciousness of personal demerit, the feeling that I have gone against Him and His loving law,--that is as important and as essential an element in all deep personal religion as the clear and thankful apprehension of the love of God. Nay, more; there never has been and there never will be in a man's heart, a worthy adequate apprehension of, and response to, the wonderful love of God, except it be accompanied with a sense of sin. I, therefore, urge this upon you that, for the vigour of your own personal religion, you must keep these two things well together. Beware of such a shallow, easy-going, matter-of-course, taking for granted God's infinite love, that it makes you think very little of your own sins against that love.

And remember, on the other hand, that the only way, or at least by far the surest way, to learn the depth and the darkness of my own transgression is by bringing my heart under the influence of that great love of God in Jesus Christ. It is not preaching hell that will break a man's heart down into true repentance. It is not thundering over him with the terrors of law and trying to prick his conscience that will bring him to a deep real knowledge of his sin. These may be subordinate and auxiliary, but the real power that convinces of sin is the love of God. The one light which illuminates the dark recesses of one's own heart, and makes us feel how dark they are, and how full of creeping unclean things, is the light of the love of God that shines in Jesus Christ, the light that shines from the Cross of Calvary. Oh, dear friends! if we are ever to know the greatness of God's love we must feel our personal sin which that great love has forgiven and purged away, and if we are ever to know the depth of our own evil, we must measure it by His wonderful tenderness. We must set our sins in the light of His countenance, and contrast that supreme sacrifice with our own selfish loveless lives, that the contrast may subdue us to penitence and melt us to tears.

**IV. Lastly, looking at these two numberless series together will bring into the deepest penitence a joyful confidence.**

There are regions of experience the very opposite of that error of which I have just been speaking. There are some of us, perhaps, who have so profound a sense of their own shortcomings and sins that the mists rising from these have blurred the sky to us and shut out the sun. Some of you, perhaps, may be saying to yourselves that you cannot get hold of God's love because your sin seems to you to be so great, or may be saying to yourselves that it is impossible that you should ever get the victory over this evil of yours, because it has laid hold upon you with so tight a grasp. If there be in any heart listening to me now any inclination to doubt the infinite love of God, or the infinite possibility of cleansing from all sin, let me come with the simple word, Bind these two texts together, and never so look at your own evil as to lose sight of the infinite mercy of God. It is safe to say--ay! it is blessed to say--Mine iniquities are more than the hairs of mine head, when we can also say, Thy thoughts to me are more than can be numbered.

There are not two innumerable series, there is only one. There is a limit and a number to my sins and to yours, but God's mercies are properly numberless. They overlap all our sins, they stretch beyond our sins in all dimensions. They go beneath them, they encompass them, and they will thin them away and cause them to disappear. My sins may be many, God's mercies are more. My sins may be inveterate, God's mercy is from everlasting. My sins may be strong, God's mercy is omnipotent. My sins may seem to have laid upon me, God can rescue me from their grip. They are a film on the surface of the deep ocean of His love. My sins may be as the sand which is by the seashore, innumerable, the love of God in Jesus Christ is like the great sea which rolls over the sands and buries them. My sins may rise mountains high, but His mercies are a great deep which will cover the mountains to their very summit. Ah! my sin is enormous, God's mercy is inexhaustible. With Thee is plenteous redemption, and He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.