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

**COLOSSIANS-007**. **THANKFUL FOR INHERITANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."*

*Colossians 1:12 (R.V.)*

It is interesting to notice how much the thought of inheritance seems to have been filling the Apostle's mind during his writing of Ephesians and Colossians. Its recurrence is one of the points of contact between them. For example, in Ephesians, we read, In whom also were made a heritage (1:11); An earnest of our inheritance (1:14); His inheritance in the saints (1:18); Inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ (5:5). We notice too that in the address to the Elders of the Church at Ephesus, we read of the inheritance among all them that are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

In the text the climax of the Apostle's prayer is presented as thankfulness, the perpetual recognition of the Divine hand in all that befalls us, the perpetual confidence that all which befalls us is good, and the perpetual gushing out towards Him of love and praise. The highest diligence, the most strenuous fruit-bearing, and the most submissive patience and longsuffering would be incomplete without the consecration of a grateful heart, and the noblest beauty of a Christian character would lack its rarest lustre. This crown of Christian perfectness the Apostle regards as being called into action mainly by the contemplation of that great act and continuous work of God's Fatherly love by which he makes us fit for our portion of the inheritance which the same love has prepared for us. That inheritance is the great cause for Christian thankfulness; the more immediate cause is His preparation of us for it. So we have three points here to consider; the inheritance; God's Fatherly preparation of His children for it; the continual temper of thankfulness which these should evoke.

**I. The Inheritance.**

The frequent recurrence of this idea in the Old Testament supplies Paul with a thought which he uses to set forth the most characteristic blessings of the New. The promised land belonged to Israel, and each member of each tribe had his own little holding in the tribal territory. Christians have in common the higher spiritual blessings which Christ brings, and Himself is, and each individual has his own portion of, the general good.

We must begin by dismissing from our minds the common idea, which a shallow experience tends to find confirmed by the associations ordinarily attached to the word inheritance, that it is entered upon by death. No doubt, that great change does effect an unspeakable change in our fitness for, and consequently in our possession of, the gifts which we receive from Christ's pierced hands, and, as the Apostle has told us, the highest of these possessed on earth is but the earnest of the inheritance; but we must ever bear in mind that the distinction between a Christian life on earth and one in heaven is by no means so sharply drawn in Scripture as it generally is by us, and that death has by no means so great importance as we faithlessly attribute to it. The life here and hereafter is like a road which passes the frontiers of two kingdoms divided by a bridged river, but runs on in the same direction on both sides of the stream. The flood had to be forded until Jesus bridged it. The elements of the future and the present are the same, as the apostolic metaphor of the earnest of the inheritance teaches us. The handful of soil which constitutes the arles is part of the broad acres made over by it.

We should be saved from many unworthy conceptions of the future life, if we held more steadfastly to the great truth that God Himself is the portion of the inheritance. The human spirit is too great and too exacting to be satisfied with anything less than Him, and the possession of Him opens out into every blessedness, and includes all the minor joys and privileges that can gladden and enrich the soul. We degrade the future if we think of it only, or even chiefly, as a state in which faculties are enlarged, and sorrows and sins are for ever ended. Neither such negatives as no night there, neither sorrow nor crime, no more pain, nor such metaphors as white robes and golden crowns and seats on thrones are enough. We are heirs of God, and only as we possess Him, and know that we are His, and He is ours, are we rich to all intents of bliss. That inheritance is here set forth as being in light and as belonging to saints. Light is the element and atmosphere of God. He is in light. He is the fountain of all light. He is light; perfect in wisdom, perfect in purity. The sun has its spots, but in Him is no darkness at all. Moons wax and wane, shadows of eclipse fall, stars have their time to set, but He is the Father of lights with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning. All that light is focussed in Jesus the Light of the world. That Light fills the earth, but here it shineth in darkness that obstructs its rays. But there must be a place and a time where the manifestation of God corresponds with the reality of God, where His beams pour out and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof, nothing which they do not bless, nothing which does not flash them back rejoicing. There is a land whereof the Lord God is the Light. In it is the inheritance of the saints, and in its light live the nations of the saved, and have God for their companion. All darkness of ignorance, of sorrow, and of sin will fade away as the night flees and ceases to be, before the rising sun.

The phrase to be partakers is accurately rendered for the portion, and carries a distinct allusion to the partition of the promised land to Israel by which each man had his lot or share in the common inheritance. So the one word inheritance brings with it blessed thoughts of a common possession of a happy society in which no man's gain is another's loss, and all envyings, rivalries, and jealousies have ceased to be, and the other word, the portion, suggests the individual possession by each of his own vision and experience. Each man's portion is capable of growth; each has as much of God as he can hold. The measure of his desire is the measure of his capacity. There are infinite differences in the portions of the saints on earth, and heaven is robbed of one of its chief charms unless we recognise that there are infinite differences among the saints there. For both states the charter by which the portion is held is Be it unto thee even as thou wilt, and in both the law holds To him that hath shall be given.

**II. The Fatherly preparation for the Inheritance.**

It is obvious from all which we have been saying that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. The inheritance being what it is, the possession, the enjoyment of communion with a Holy God, it is absolutely incapable of being entered upon by any who are unholy. That is true about both the partial possession of the earnest of it here and of its fulness hereafter. In the present life all tolerated sin bars us out from enjoying God, and in the future nothing can enter that defileth nor whatsoever worketh or maketh a lie. There are many people who think that they would like to go to heaven, but who would find it difficult to answer such questions as these: Do you like to think of God? Do you find any joy in holy thoughts? What do you feel about prayer? Does the name of Christ make your heart leap? Is righteousness your passion? If you have to answer these questions with a silence which is the saddest negative, what do you think you would do in heaven? I remember that the Greenlanders told the Moravian missionaries who were trying to move them by conventional pictures of its delights, that the heaven which these pious souls had painted would not do for them, for there were no seals there. There are thousands of us who, if we spoke the truth, would say the same thing, with the necessary variations arising from our environment. There is not a spinning-mill in it all. How would some of us like that? There is not a ledger, nor a theatre, no novels, no amusements. Would it not be intolerable ennui to be put down in such an order of things? You would be like the Israelites, loathing this light bread and hungering for the strong-smelling and savoury-tasting leeks and garlic, even if in order to taste them you had to be slaves again.

Heaven would be no heaven to you if you could go there and be thus minded. But you could not. God Himself cannot carry men thither but by fitting them for it. It is not a place so much as a state, and the mighty hand that works on one side of the thick curtain preparing the inheritance in light for the saints, is equally busy on this side making the saints meet for the inheritance.

I do not wish to enter here on grammatical niceties, but I must point out that the form of the word which the Apostle employs to express it points to an act in the past which still runs on.

The Revised Version's rendering, made us meet, is preferable to the Authorised Version's, because of its omission of the hath which relegates the whole process of preparation to the past. And it is of importance to recognise that the difference between these two representations of the divine preparation is not a piece of pedantry, for that preparation has indeed its beginnings in the past of every Christian soul, but is continuous throughout its whole earthly experience. There is the great act of forgiveness and justifying which is cotemporaneous with the earliest and most imperfect faith, and there is the being born again, the implanting of a new life which is the life of Christ Himself, and has no spot nor wrinkle nor any such thing. That new life is infantile, but it is there, the real man, and it will grow and conquer. Take an extreme case and suppose a man who has just received forgiveness for his past and the endowment of a new nature. Though he were to die at that moment he would still in the basis of his being and real self be meet for the inheritance. He who truly trusts in Jesus is passed from death unto life, though the habits of sins which are forgiven still cling to him, and his new life has not yet exercised a controlling power or begun to build up character. So Christians ought not to think that, because they are conscious of much unholiness, they are not ready for the inheritance. The wild brigand through whose glazing eyeballs faith looked out to his fellow-sufferer on the central cross was adjudged meet to be with him in Paradise, and if all his deeds of violence and wild outrages on the laws of God and man did not make him unmeet, who amongst us need write bitter things against himself? The preparation is further effected through all the future earthly life. The only true way to regard everything that befalls us here is to see in it the Fatherly discipline preparing us for a fuller possession of a richer inheritance. Gains and losses, joys and sorrows, and all the endless variety of experiences through which we all have to pass, are an unintelligible mystery unless we apply to them this solution, He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness. It is not a blind Fate or a still blinder Chance that hurtles sorrows and changes at us, but a loving Father; and we do not grasp the meaning of our lives unless we feel, even about their darkest moments, that the end of them all is to make us more capable of possessing more of Himself.

**III. The thankfulness which these thoughts should evoke.**

Thankfulness ought to be a sweet duty. It is a joy to cherish gratitude. Generous hearts do not need to be told to be thankful, and they who are only thankful to order are not thankful at all. In nothing is the ordinary experience of the ordinary Christian more defective, and significant of the deficiencies of their faith, than in the tepidness and interruptedness of their gratitude. The blessings bestowed are continuous and unspeakable. The thanks returned are grudging and scanty. The river that flows from God is full of water and pours out unceasingly, and all that we return is a tiny trickle, often choked and sometimes lost in the sands.

Our thankfulness ought to be constant. The fire on the altar should never be quenched. The odour of the sweet-smelling incense should ever ascend. Why is it that we have so little of this grace which the Apostle in our text regards as the precious stone that binds all Christian graces together, the sparkling crest of the wave of a Christian life? Mainly because we have so little of the habit of regarding all things as God's Fatherly discipline and meditating on that for which they are making us meet. We need a far more habitual contemplation of our inheritance, of our experience as lovingly given by God to fit us for it and of the darkest hours which would otherwise try our faith and silence our praise as necessary parts of that preparation. If this be our habitual attitude of mind, and these be ever present to us, our song will be always of His mercy and our whole lives a thank-offering.

The text is a prophecy describing the inheritance in its perfect form. Earthly life must be ended before it is fully understood. Down in the valleys we praised God, but tears and mysteries sometimes saddened our songs; but now on the summit surveying all behind, and knowing by a blessed eternity of experience to what it has led, even an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, we shall praise Him with a new song for ever.

Thankfulness is the one element of worship common to earth and heaven, to angels and to us. Whilst they sing, Bless the Lord all ye His hosts, redeemed men have still better reason to join in the chorus and answer, Bless the Lord, O my soul.