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

**MARK-046**. **SALTED WITH FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Every one shall be salted with fire."*

*Mark 9:49*

Our Lord has just been uttering some of the most solemn words that ever came from His gracious lips. He has been enjoining the severest self-suppression, extending even to mutilation and excision of the eye, the hand, or the foot, that might cause us to stumble. He has been giving that sharp lesson on the ground of plain common sense and enlightened self-regard. It is better, obviously, to live maimed than to die whole. The man who elects to keep a mortified limb, and thereby to lose life, is a suicide and a fool. It is a solemn thought that a similar mad choice is possible in the moral and spiritual region.

To these stern injunctions, accompanied by the awful sanctions of that consideration, our Lord appends the words of my text. They are obscure and have often been misunderstood. This is not the place to enter on a discussion of the various explanations that have been proposed of them. A word or two is all that is needful to put us in possession of the point of view from which I wish to lay them on your hearts at this time.

I take the every oneof my text to mean not mankind generally, but every individual of the class whom our Lord is addressing--that is to say, His disciples. He is laying down the law for all Christians. I take the paradox which brings together saltingand fire, to refer, not to salt as a means of communicating savour to food, but as a means of preserving from putrefaction. And I take the firehere to refer, not to the same process which is hinted at in the awful preceding words, the fire in not quenched, but to be set in opposition to that fire, and to mean something entirely different. There is a fire that destroys, and there is a fire that preserves; and the alternative for every man is to choose between the destructive and the conserving influences. Christian disciples have to submit to be salted with fire, lest a worse thing befall them,

**I. And so the first point that I would ask you to notice here is--that fiery cleansing to which every Christian must yield.**

Now I have already referred to the relation between the words of my text and those immediately preceding, as being in some sense one of opposition and contrast. I think we are put on the right track for understanding the solemn words of this text if we remember the great saying of John the Baptist, where, in precisely similar fashion, there are set side by side the two conceptions of the chaff being cast into the unquenchable fire (the same expression as in our text), and He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

The salting fire, then, which cleanses and preserves, and to which every Christian soul must submit itself, to be purged thereby, is, as I take it, primarily and fundamentally the fire of that Divine Spirit which Christ Himself told us that He had come to cast upon the earth, and yearned, in a passion of desire, to see kindled. The very frequent use of the emblem in this same signification throughout Scripture, I suppose I need not recall to you. It seems to me that the only worthy interpretation of the words before us, which goes down into their depths and harmonises with the whole of the rest of the teaching of Scripture, is that which recognises these words of my text as no unwelcome threat, as no bitter necessity, but as a joyful promise bringing to men, laden and burdened with their sins, the good news that it is possible for them to be purged from them entirely by the fiery ministration of that Divine Spirit. Just as we take a piece of foul clay and put it into the furnace, and can see, as it gets red-hot, the stains melt away, as a cloud does in the blue, from its surface, so if we will plunge ourselves into the influences of that divine power which Christ has come to communicate to the world, our sin and all our impurities will melt from off us, and we shall be clean. No amount of scrubbing with soap and water will do it. The stain is a great deal too deep for that, and a mightier solvent than any that we can apply, if unaided and unsupplied from above, is needed to make us clean. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean, especially when the would-be bringer is himself the unclean thing? Surely not one. Unless there be a power ab extra, unparticipant of man's evils, and yet capable of mingling with the evil man's inmost nature, and dealing with it, then I believe that universal experience and our individual experience tell us that there is no hope that we shall ever get rid of our transgressions.

Brethren, for a man by his own unaided effort, however powerful, continuous, and wisely directed it may be, to cleanse himself utterly from his iniquity, is as hopeless as it would be for him to sit down with a hammer and a chisel and try by mechanical means to get all the iron out of a piece of ironstone. The union is chemical, not mechanical. And so hammers and chisels will only get a very little of the metal out. The one solvent is fire. Put the obstinate crude ore into your furnace, and get the temperature up, and the molten metal will run clear. There should be mountains of scoriae, the dross and relics of our abandoned sins, around us all.

If we desire to be delivered, let us go into the fire. It will burn up all our evil, and it will burn up nothing else. Keep close to Christ. Lay your hearts open to the hallowing influences of the motives and the examples that lie in the story of His life and death. Seek for the fiery touch of that transforming Spirit, and be sure that you quench Him not, nor grieve Him. And then your weakness will be reinvigorated by celestial powers, and the live coal upon your lips will burn up all your iniquity.

But, subordinately to this deepest meaning, as I take it, of the great symbol of our text, let me remind you of another possible application of it, which follows from the preceding. God's Spirit cleanses men mainly by raising their spirits to a higher temperature. For coldness is akin to sin, and heavenly warmth is akin to righteousness. Enthusiasm always ennobles, delivers men, even on the lower reaches of life and conduct from many a meanness and many a sin. And when it becomes a warmth of spirit kindled by the reception of the fire of God, then it becomes the solvent which breaks the connection between me and my evil. It is the cold Christian who makes no progress in conquering his sin. The one who is filled with the love of God, and has the ardent convictions and the burning enthusiasm which that love ought to produce in our hearts, is the man who will conquer and eject his evils.

Nor must we forget that there is still another possible application of the words. For whilst, on the one hand, the Divine Spirit's method of delivering us is very largely that of imparting to us the warmth of ardent, devout emotion; on the other hand, a part of this method is the passing of us through the fiery trials and outward disciplines of life. Every one shall be salted with firein that sense. And we have learned, dear brethren, but little of the loving kindness of the Lord if we are not able to say, I have grown more in likeness to Jesus Christ by rightly accepted sorrows than by anything besides. Be not afraid of calamities; be not stumbled by disaster. Take the fiery trial which is sent to you as being intended to bring about, at the last, the discovery unto praise and honour and gloryof your faith, that is much more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire. Every one shall be salted with fire, the Christian law of life is, Submit to the fiery cleansing. Alas! alas! for the many thousands of professing Christians who are wrapping themselves in such thick folds of non-conducting material that that fiery energy can only play on the surface of their lives, instead of searching them to the depths. Do you see to it, dear brethren, that you lay open your whole natures, down to the very inmost roots, to the penetrating, searching, cleansing power of that Spirit. And let us all go and say to Him, Search me, O God! and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me.

**II. Notice the painfulness of this fiery cleansing.**

The same ideas substantially are conveyed in my text as are expressed, in different imagery, by the solemn words that precede it. The salting with firecomes substantially to the same thing as the amputation of the hand and foot, and the plucking out of the eye, that cause to stumble. The metaphor expresses a painful process. It is no pleasant thing to submit the bleeding stump to the actual cautery, and to press it, all sensitive, upon the hot plate that will stop the flow of blood. But such pain of shrinking nerves is to be borne, and to be courted, if we are wise, rather than to carry the hand or the eye that led astray unmutilated into total destruction. Surely that is common sense.

The process is painful because we are weak. The highest ideal of Christian progress would be realised if one of the metaphors with which our Lord expresses it were adequate to cover the whole ground, and we grew as the wheat grows, first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But the tranquillity of vegetable growth, and the peaceful progress which it symbolises, are not all that you and I have to expect. Emblems of a very different kind have to be associated with that of the quiet serenity of the growing corn, in order to describe all that a Christian man has to experience in the work of becoming like his Master. It is a fight as well as a growth; it is a building requiring our continuity of effort, as well as a growth. There is something to be got rid of as well as much to be appropriated. We do not only need to become better, we need to become less bad. Squatters have camped on the land, and cling to it and hold it vi et armis; and these have to be ejected before peaceful settlement is possible.

One might go on multiplying metaphors ad libitum, in order to bring out the one thought that it needs huge courage to bear being sanctified, or, if you do not like the theological word, to bear being made better. It is no holiday task, and unless we are willing to have a great deal that is against the grain done to us, and in us, and by us, we shall never achieve it. We have to accept the pain. Desires have to be thwarted, and that is not pleasant. Self has to be suppressed, and that is not delightsome. A growing conviction of the depth of one's own evil has to be cherished, and that is not a grateful thought for any of us. Pains external, which are felt by reason of disciplinary sorrows, are not worthy to be named in the same day as those more recondite and inward agonies. But, brother, they are all lightas compared with the exceeding weight of glory, coming from conformity to the example of our Master, which they prepare for us.

And so I bring you Christ's message: He will have no man to enlist in His army under false pretences. He will not deceive any of us by telling us that it is all easy work and plain sailing. Salting by fire can never be other than to the worse self an agony, just because it is to the better self a rapture. And so let us make up our minds that no man is taken to heaven in his sleep, and that the road is a rough one, judging from the point of view of flesh and sense; but though rough, narrow, often studded with sharp edges, like the plough coulters that they used to lay in the path in the old rude ordeals, it still leads straight to the goal, and bleeding feet are little to pay for a seat at Christ's right hand.

**III. Lastly, notice the preservative result of this painful cleansing.**

Our Lord brings together, in our text, as is often His wont, two apparently contradictory ideas, in order, by the paradox, to fix our attention the more vividly upon His words. Fire destroys; salt preserves. They are opposites. But yet the opposites may be united in one mighty reality, a fire which preserves and does not destroy. The deepest truth is that the cleansing fire which the Christ will give us preserves us, because it destroys that which is destroying us. If you kill the germs of putrefaction in a hit of dead flesh, you preserve the flesh; and if you bring to bear upon a man the power which will kill the thing that is killing him, its destructive influence is the condition of its conserving one.

And so it is, in regard to that great spiritual influence which Jesus Christ is ready to give to every one of us. It slays that which is slaying us, for our sins destroy in us the true life of a man, and make us but parables of walking death. When the three Hebrews were cast into the fiery furnace in Babylon, the flames burned nothing but their bonds, and they walked at liberty in the fire. And so it will be with us. We shall be preserved by that which slays the sins that would otherwise slay us.

Let me lay on your hearts before I close the solemn alternative to which I have already referred, and which is suggested by the connection of my text with the preceding words. There is a fire that destroys and is not quenched. Christ's previous words are much too metaphorical for us to build dogmatic definitions upon. But Jesus Christ did not exaggerate. If here and now sin has so destructive an effect upon a man, O, who will venture to say that he knows the limits of its murderous power in that future life, when retribution shall begin with new energy and under new conditions? Brethren, whilst I dare not enlarge, I still less dare to suppress; and I ask you to remember that not I, or any man, but Jesus Christ Himself, has put before each of us this alternative--either the fire unquenchable, which destroys a man, or the merciful fire, which slays his sins and saves him alive.

Social reformers, philanthropists, you that have tried and failed to overcome your evil, and who feel the loathly thing so intertwisted with your being that to pluck it from your heart is to tear away the very heart's walls themselves, here is a hope for you. Closely as our evil is twisted in with the fibres of our character, there is a hand that can untwine the coils, and cast away the sin, and preserve the soul. And although we sometimes feel as if our sinfulness and our sin were so incorporated with ourselves that it made oneself, with a man's head and a serpent's tail, let us take the joyful assurance that if we trust ourselves to Christ, and open our hearts to His power, we can shake off the venomous beast into the fire and live a fuller life, because the fire has consumed that which would otherwise have consumed us.