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

**MATTHEW-109**. **THE STONE OF STUMBLING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder."*

*Matthew 21:44*

As Christ's ministry drew to its close, its severity and its gentleness both increased; its severity to the class to whom it was always severe, and its gentleness to the class from whom it never turned away. Side by side, through all His manifestation of Himself, there were the two aspects: He showed Himself froward(if I may quote the word) to the self-righteous and the Pharisee; and He bent with more than a woman's tenderness of yearning love over the darkness and sinfulness, which in its great darkness dimly knew itself blind, and in its sinfulness stretched out a lame hand of faith, and groped after a divine deliverer. Here, in my text, there are only words of severity and awful foreboding. Christ has been telling those Pharisees and priests that the kingdom is to be taken from them, and given to a nation that brings forth the fruits thereof. He interprets for them an Old Testament figure, often recurring, which we read in the 118th Psalm (and I may just say, in passing, that we get here His interpretation of that psalm, and the vindication of our application of it, and other similar ones, to Him and His office); The stone which the builders rejected, said He, is become the head of the corner; and then, falling back on other Old Testament uses of the same figure, He weaves into one the whole of them--that in Isaiah about the sure foundation, and that in Daniel about the stone cut out without hands, which became a great mountain, crushing down all opposition,--and centres them all in Himself; as fulfilled in Himself, in His person and His work.

The two clauses of my text figuratively point to two different classes of operation on the rejecters of the Gospel. What are these two classes? Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. In the one case, the stone is represented as passive, lying quiet; in the other, it has acquired motion. In the one case, the man stumbles and hurts himself; a remediable injury, a self-inflicted injury, a natural injury, without the active operation of Christ to produce it at all; in the other case the injury is worse than remediable, it is utter, absolute, grinding destruction, and it comes from the active operation of the stone of stumbling. That is to say, the one class represents the present hurts and harms which, by the natural operation of things, without the action of Christ judicially at all, every man receives in the very act of rejecting the Gospel; and the other represents the ultimate issue of that rejection, which rejection is darkened into opposition and fixed hostility, when the stone that was laid for a foundationhas got wings (if I may so say), and comes down in judgment, crushing and destroying the antagonist utterly. Whosoever falls on this stone is broken, here and now; and on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder, hereafter and yonder.

Taking, then, into account the weaving together in this passage of the three figures from the Old Testament to which I have already referred,--the rejected stone, the foundation, and the mountain-stone of Daniel, and looking in the light of these, at the twofold issues, one present and one future, which the text distinctly brings before us,--we have just three points to which I ask your attention now. First, Every man has some kind of contact with Christ. Secondly, Rejection of Him, here and now, is harm and maiming. And, lastly, Rejection of Him, hereafter and yonder, is hopeless, endless, utter destruction.

**I. In the first place, every man has some kind of connection with Christ.**

I am not going to enter at all now upon any question about the condition of the dark places of the earthwhere the Gospel has not come as a well-known preached message; we have nothing to do with that; the principles on which they are judged is not the question before us now. I am speaking exclusively about persons who have heard the word of salvation, and are dwelling in the midst of what we call a Christian land. Christ is offered to each of us, in good faith on God's part, as a means of salvation, a foundation on which we may build. A man is free to accept or to reject that offer. If he reject it, he has not thereby cut himself off from all contact and connection with that rejected Saviour, but he still sustains a relation to Him; and the message that he has refused to believe, is exercising an influence upon his character and his destiny.

Christ comes, I say, offered to us all in good faith on the part of God, as a foundation upon which we may build. And then comes in that strange mystery, that a man, consciously free, turns away from the offered mercy, and makes Him that was intended to be the basis of his life, the foundation of his hope, the rock on which, steadfast and serene, he should build up a temple-home for his soul to dwell in,--makes Him a stumbling-stone against which, by rejection and unbelief, he breaks himself!

My friend, will you let me lay this one thing upon your heart,--you cannot hinder the Gospel from influencing you somehow. Taking it in its lowest aspects, it is one of the forces of modern society, an element in our present civilisation. It is everywhere, it obtrudes itself on you at every turn, the air is saturated with its influence. To be unaffected by such an all-pervading phenomenon is impossible. To no individual member of the great whole of a nation is it given to isolate himself utterly from the community. Whether he oppose or whether he acquiesce in current opinions, to denude himself of the possessions which belong in common to his age and state of society is in either case impracticable. That which cometh into your mind, said one of the prophets to the Jews who were trying to cut themselves loose from their national faith and their ancestral prerogatives, That which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, that ye say, We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries to serve wood and stone. Vain dream! You can no more say, I will pass the Gospel by, and it shall be nothing to me, I will simply let it alone, than you can say, I will shut myself up from other influences proper to my time and nation. You cannot go back to the old naked barbarism, and you cannot reduce the influence of Christianity, even considered merely as one of the characteristics of the times, to zero. You may fancy you are letting it alone, but it does not let you alone; it is here, and you cannot shut yourself off from it.

But it is not merely as a subtle and diffused influence that the Gospel exercises a permanent effect upon us. It is presented to each of us here individually, in the definite form of an actual offer of salvation for each, and of an actual demand of trust from each. The words pass into our souls, and thenceforward we can never be the same as if they had not been there. The smallest ray of light falling on a sensitive plate produces a chemical change that can never be undone again, and the light of Christ's love, once brought to the knowledge and presented for the acceptance of a soul, stamps on it an ineffaceable sign of its having been there. The Gospel once heard, is always the Gospel which has been heard. Nothing can alter that. Once heard, it is henceforward a perpetual element in the whole condition, character, and destiny of the hearer.

Christ does something to every one of us. His Gospel will tell upon you, it is telling upon you. If you disbelieve it, you are not the same as if you had never heard it. Never is the box of ointment opened without some savour from it abiding in every nostril to which its odour is wafted. Only the alternative, the awful either, or, is open for each--the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death. To come back to the illustration of the text, Christ is something, and does something to every one of us. He is either the rock on which I build, poor, weak, sinful creature as I am, getting security, and sanctity, and strength from Him, I being a living stonebuilt upon the living stone, and partaking of the vitality of the foundation; or else He is the other thing, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to them which stumble at the word. Christ stands for ever in some kind of relation to, and exercises for ever some kind of influence on, every man who has heard the Gospel.

**II. The immediate issue of rejection of Him is loss and maiming.**

Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken. Just think for a moment, by way of illustrating this principle, first of all, of the positive harm which you do to yourself in the act of turning away from the mercy offered you in Christ; and then think for a moment of the negative loss which you sustain by the same act.

Note the positive harm. Am I uncharitable when I say that no man ever yet passively neglected the message of love in God's Son; but that always this is the rude outline of the experience of people who know what it is to have a Saviour offered to them, and know what it is to put Him away,--that there is a feeble and transitory movement of heart and will; that Conscience says, Thou oughtest; that Will says, I would; that the heart is touched by some sense of that great and gentle vision of light and love which passes before the eye; that the man, as it were, like some fever-ridden patient, lifts himself up for an instant from the bed on which he is lying, and puts out a hand, and then falls back again, the vacillating, fevered, paralysed will recoiling from the resolution, and the conscience having power to say, Thou oughtest, but no power to enforce the execution of its decrees, and the heart turning away from the salvation that it would have found in the love of love, to the loss that it finds in the love of self and earth? Or in other words, is it not true that every man who rejects Christ does in simple verity reject Him, and not merely neglect Him; that there is always an effort, that there is a struggle, feeble, perhaps, but real, which ends in the turning away? It is not that you stand there, and simply let Him go past. That were bad enough; but the fact is worse than that. It is that you turn your back upon Him. It is not that His hand is laid on yours, and yours remains dead and cold, and does not open to clasp it; but it is that His hand being laid on yours, you clench yours the tighter, and will not have it. And so every man (I believe) who rejects Christ does these things thereby--wounds his own conscience, hardens his own heart, makes himself a worse man, just because he has had a glimpse, and has willingly, and almost consciously, loved darkness rather than light. Oh, brethren, the message of love can never come into a human soul, and pass away from it unreceived, without leaving that spirit worse, with all its lowest characteristics strengthened, and all its best ones depressed, by the fact of rejection. I have nothing to do now with pursuing that process to its end; but the natural result--if there were no future Judgment at all, if there were no movement ever given to the stone that you ought to build on--the natural result of the simple rejection of the Gospel is that, bit by bit, all the lingering remains of nobleness that hover about the man, like scent about a broken vase, pass away; and that, step by step, through the simple process of saying, I will not have Christ to rule over me, the whole being degenerates, until manhood becomes devil-hood, and the soul is lost by its own want of faith. Unbelief is its own judgment; unbelief is its own condemnation; unbelief, as sin, is punished, like all other sins, by the perpetuation of deeper and darker forms of itself. Every time that you stifle a conviction, fight down a conviction, or drive away a conviction; and every time that you feebly move towards the decision, I will trust Him, and love Him, and be His, yet fail to realise it, you have harmed your soul, you have made yourself a worse man, you have lowered the tone of your conscience, you have enfeebled your will, you have made your heart harder against love, you have drawn another horny scale over the eye, that will prevent you from seeing the light that is yonder; you have, as much as in you is, withdrawn from God, and approximated to the other pole of the universe (if I may say that), to the dark and deadly antagonist of mercy, and goodness, and truth, and grace. Whosoever falls on this stone, by the natural result of his unbelief, shall be brokenand maimed, and shall mar his own nature.

I need not dwell on the negative evil results of unbelief; the loss of that which is the only guide for a man, the taking away, or rather the failing to possess, that great love above us, that divine Spirit in us, by which only we are ever made what we ought to be. This only I would leave with you, in this part of my subject, Whoever is not in Christ is maimed. Only he that is a man in Christhas come to the measure of the stature of a perfect man. There, and there alone, do we get the power which will make us full-grown. There alone is the soul planted in that good soil in which, growing, it becomes as a rounded, perfect tree, with leaves and fruits in their season. All other men are half-men, quarter-men, fragments of men, parts of humanity exaggerated and contorted and distorted from the reconciling whole which the Christian ought to be, and in proportion to his Christianity is on the road to be, and one day will assuredly and actually be, a complete and entire man, wanting nothing; nothing maimed, nothing broken, the realisation of the ideal of humanity, the renewed copy of the second Adam, the Lord from heaven.

There is another consideration closely connected with this second part of my subject, that I just mention and pass on. Not only by the act of rejection of Christ do we harm and maim ourselves, but also all attempts at opposition--formal opposition--to the Gospel as a system, stand self-convicted and self-condemned to speedy decay. What a commentary upon that word, Whosoever falls on this stone shall be broken, is the whole history of the heresies of the Church and the assaults of unbelief! Man after man, rich in gifts, endowed often with far larger and nobler faculties than the people who oppose him, with indomitable perseverance, a martyr to his error, sets himself up against the truth that is sphered in Jesus Christ; and the great divine message simply goes on its way, and all the babblement and noise are like so many bats flying against a light, or like the sea-birds that come sweeping up in the tempest and the night, to the hospitable Pharos that is upon the rock, and smite themselves dead against it. Sceptics well known in their generation, who made people's hearts tremble for the ark of God, what has become of them? Their books lie dusty and undisturbed on the top shelf of libraries; whilst there the Bible stands, with all the scribblings wiped off the page, as though they had never been! Opponents fire their small shot against the great Rock of Ages, and the little pellets fall flattened, and only scale off a bit of the moss that has gathered there! My brother, let the history of the past teach you and me, with other deeper thoughts, a very calm and triumphant confidence about all that opponents say nowadays; for all the modern opposition to this Gospel will go as all the past has done, and the newest systems which cut and carve at Christianity, will go to the tomb where all the rest have gone; and dead old infidelities will rise up from their thrones, and say to the bran-new ones of this generation, when their day is worked out, Are ye also become weak as we? art thou also become like one of us?Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: personally, he will be harmed; and his opinions, and his books, and his talk, and all his argumentation, will come to nothing, like the waves that break into impotent foam against the rocky cliffs.

**III. Last of all, the issue, the ultimate issue, of unbelief is irremediable destruction when Christ begins to move.**

The former clause has spoken about the harm that naturally follows unbelief whilst the Gospel is being preached; the latter clause speaks about the active agency of Christ when the end shall have come, and the preaching of the Gospel shall have merged into the act of judgment. I do not mean to dwell, brethren, upon that thought; it seems to me far too awful a one to be handled by my hands, at any rate. Let us leave it in the vagueness and dreadfulness of the words of Him who never spoke exaggerated words, and who, when He said, It shall grind him to powder, meant (as it seems to me) nothing less than a destruction which, contrasted with the former remediable wounding and breaking, was a destruction utter, and hopeless, and everlasting, and without remedy. Ground--ground to powder! Any life left in that? any gathering up of that, and making a man of it again? All the humanity battered out of it, and the life clean gone from it! Does not that sound very much like everlasting destruction from the presence of God and from the glory of His power? Christ, silent now, will begin to speak; passive now, will begin to act. The stone comes down, and the fall of it will be awful. I remember, away up in a lonely Highland valley, where beneath a tall black cliff, all weather-worn, and cracked, and seamed, there lies at the foot, resting on the greensward that creeps round its base, a huge rock, that has fallen from the face of the precipice. A shepherd was passing beneath it; and suddenly, when the finger of God's will touched it, and rent it from its ancient bed in the everlasting rock, it came down, leaping and bounding from pinnacle to pinnacle--and it fell; and the man that was beneath it is there now! Ground to powder. Ah, my brethren, that is not my illustration--that is Christ's. Therefore I say to you, since all that stand against Him shall become as the chaff of the summer threshing-floor, and be swept utterly away, make Him the foundation on which you build; and when the storm sweeps away every refuge of lies, you will be safe and serene, builded upon the Rock of Ages.