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

**1 CORINTHIANS-002**. **PERISHING OR BEING SAVED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."*

*1 Corinthians 1:18*

The starting-point of my remarks is the observation that a slight variation of rendering, which will be found in the Revised Version, brings out the true meaning of these words. Instead of reading them that perish and us which are saved, we ought to read them that are perishing, and us which are being saved. That is to say, the Apostle represents the two contrasted conditions, not so much as fixed states, either present or future, but rather as processes which are going on, and are manifestly, in the present, incomplete. That opens some very solemn and intensely practical considerations.

Then I may further note that this antithesis includes the whole of the persons to whom the Gospel is preached. In one or other of these two classes they all stand. Further, we have to observe that the consideration which determines the class to which men belong, is the attitude which they respectively take to the preaching of the Cross. If it be, and because it is, foolishness to some, they belong to the catalogue of the perishing. If it be, and because it is, the power of God to others, they belong to the class of those who are in process of being saved.

So, then, we have the ground cleared for two or three very simple, but, as it seems to me, very important thoughts.

**I. I desire, first, to look at the two contrasted conditions, perishing and being saved.**

Now we shall best, I think, understand the force of the darker of these two terms if we first ask what is the force of the brighter and more radiant. If we understand what the Apostle means by saving and salvation we shall understand also what he means by perishing.

If, then, we turn for a moment to Scripture analogy and teaching, we find that that threadbare word salvation, which we all take it for granted that we understand, and which, like a well-worn coin, has been so passed from hand to hand that it scarcely remains legible--that well-worn word salvation starts from a double metaphorical meaning. It means either--and is used for both--being healed or being made safe. In the one sense it is often employed in the Gospel narratives of our Lord's miracles, and it involves the metaphor of a sick man and his cure; in the other it involves the metaphor of a man in peril and his deliverance and security. The negative side, then, of the Gospel idea of salvation is the making whole from a disease, and the making safe from a danger. Negatively, it is the removal from each of us of the one sickness, which is sin; and the one danger, which is the reaping of the fruits and consequences of sin, in their variety as guilt, remorse, habit, and slavery under it, perverted relation to God, a fearful apprehension of penal consequences here, and, if there be a hereafter, there, too. The sickness of soul and the perils that threaten life, flow from the central fact of sin, and salvation consists, negatively, in the sweeping away of all of these, whether the sin itself, or the fatal facility with which we yield to it, or the desolation and perversion which it brings into all the faculties and susceptibilities, or the perversion of relation to God, and the consequent evils, here and hereafter, which throng around the evil-doer. The sick man is healed, and the man in peril is set in safety.

But, besides that, there is a great deal more. The cure is incomplete till the full tide of health follows convalescence. When God saves, He does not only bar up the iron gate through which the hosts of evil rush out upon the defenceless soul, but He flings wide the golden gate through which the glad troops of blessings and of graces flock around the delivered spirit, and enrich it with all joys and with all beauties. So the positive side of salvation is the investiture of the saved man with throbbing health through all his veins, and the strength that comes from a divine life. It is the bestowal upon the delivered man of everything that he needs for blessedness and for duty. All good conferred, and every evil banned back into its dark den, such is the Christian conception of salvation. It is much that the negative should be accomplished, but it is little in comparison with the rich fulness of positive endowments, of happiness, and of holiness which make an integral part of the salvation of God.

This, then, being the one side, what about the other? If this be salvation, its precise opposite is the Scriptural idea of perishing. Utter ruin lies in the word, the entire failure to be what God meant a man to be. That is in it, and no contortions of arbitrary interpretation can knock that solemn significance out of the dreadful expression. If salvation be the cure of the sickness, perishing is the fatal end of the unchecked disease. If salvation be the deliverance from the outstretched claws of the harpy evils that crowd about the trembling soul, then perishing is the fixing of their poisoned talons into their prey, and their rending of it into fragments.

Of course that is metaphor, but no metaphor can be half so dreadful as the plain, prosaic fact that the exact opposite of the salvation, which consists in the healing from sin and the deliverance from danger, and in the endowment with all gifts good and beautiful, is the Christian idea of the alternative perishing. Then it means the disease running its course. It means the dangers laying hold of the man in peril. It means the withdrawal, or the non-bestowal, of all which is good, whether it be good of holiness or good of happiness. It does not mean, as it seems to me, the cessation of conscious existence, any more than salvation means the bestowal of conscious existence. But he who perishes knows that he has perished, even as he knows the process while he is in the process of perishing. Therefore, we have to think of the gradual fading away from consciousness, and dying out of a life, of many things beautiful and sweet and gracious, of the gradual increase of distance from Him, union with whom is the condition of true life, of the gradual sinking into the pit of utter ruin, of the gradual increase of that awful death in life and life in death in which living consciousness makes the conscious subject aware that he is lost; lost to God, lost to himself.

Brethren, it is no part of my business to enlarge upon such awful thoughts, but the brighter the light of salvation, the darker the eclipse of ruin which rings it round. This, then, is the first contrast.

**II. Now note, secondly, the progressiveness of both members of the alternative.**

All states of heart or mind tend to increase, by the very fact of continuance. Life is a process, and every part of a spiritual being is in living motion and continuous action in a given direction. So the law for the world, and for every man in it, in all regions of his life, quite as much as in the religious, is To him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance.

Look, then, at this thought of the process by which these two conditions become more and more confirmed, consolidated, and complete. Salvation is a progressive fact. In the New Testament we have that great idea looked at from three points of view. Sometimes it is spoken of as having been accomplished in the past in the case of every believing soul--Ye have been saved is said more than once. Sometimes it is spoken of as being accomplished in the present--Ye are saved is said more than once. And sometimes it is relegated to the future--Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed, and the like. But there are a number of New Testament passages which coincide with this text in regarding salvation as, not the work of any one moment, but as a continuous operation running through life, not a point either in the past, present, or future, but a continued life. As, for instance, The Lord added to the Church daily those that were being saved. By one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are being sanctified. And in a passage in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which, in some respects, is an exact parallel to that of my text, we read of the preaching of the Gospel as being a savour of Christ in them that are being saved, and in them that are perishing.

So the process of being saved is going on as long as a Christian man lives in this world; and every one who professes to be Christ's follower ought, day by day, to be growing more and more saved, more fully filled with that Divine Spirit, more entirely the conqueror of his own lusts and passions and evil, more and more invested with all the gifts of holiness and of blessedness which Jesus Christ is ready to bestow upon him.

Ah, brethren! that notion of a progressive salvation at work in all true Christians has all but faded away out of the beliefs, as it has all but disappeared from the experience, of hosts of you that call yourselves Christ's followers, and are not a bit further on than you were ten years ago; are no more healed of your corruptions (perhaps less so, for relapses are dangerous) than you were then--have not advanced any further into the depths of God than when you first got a glimpse of Him as loving, and your Father, in Jesus Christ--are contented to linger, like some weak band of invaders in a strange land, on the borders and coasts, instead of pressing inwards and making it all your own. Growing Christians--may I venture to say?--are not the majority of professing Christians.

And, on the other side, as certainly, there are progressive deterioration and approximation to disintegration and ruin. How many men there are listening to me now who were far nearer being delivered from their sins when they were lads than they have ever been since! How many in whom the sensibility to the message of salvation has disappeared, in whom the world has ossified their consciences and their hearts, in whom there is a more entire and unstruggling submission to low things and selfish things and worldly things and wicked things, than there used to be! I am sure that there are not a few among us now who were far better, and far happier, when they were poor and young, and could still thrill with generous emotion and tremble at the Word of God, than they are to-day. Why! there are some of you that could no more bring back your former loftier impulses, and compunction of spirit and throbs of desire towards Christ and His salvation, than you could bring back the birds nests or the snows of your youthful years. You are perishing, in the very process of going down and down into the dark.

Now, notice, that the Apostle treats these two classes as covering the whole ground of the hearers of the Word, and as alternatives. If not in the one class we are in the other. Ah, brethren! life is no level plane, but a steep incline, on which there is no standing still, and if you try to stand still, down you go. Either up or down must be the motion. If you are not more of a Christian than you were a year ago, you are less. If you are not more saved--for there is a degree of comparison--if you are not more saved, you are less saved.

Now, do not let that go over your head as pulpit thunder, meaning nothing. It means you, and, whether you feel or think it or not, one or other of these two solemn developments is at this moment going on in you. And that is not a thought to be put lightly on one side.

Further, note what a light such considerations as these, that salvation and perishing are vital processes--going on all the time, as the Americans say--throw upon the future. Clearly the two processes are incomplete here. You get the direction of the line, but not its natural termination. And thus a heaven and a hell are demanded by the phenomena of growing goodness and of growing badness which we see round about us. The arc of the circle is partially swept. Are the compasses going to stop at the point where the grave comes in? By no means. Round they will go, and will complete the circle. But that is not all. The necessity for progress will persist after death; and all through the duration of immortal being, goodness, blessedness, holiness, Godlikeness, will, on the one hand, grow in brighter lustre; and on the other, alienation from God, loss of the noble elements of the nature, and all the other doleful darknesses which attend that conception of a lost man, will increase likewise. And so, two people, sitting side by side here now, may start from the same level, and by the operation of the one principle the one may rise, and rise, and rise, till he is lost in God, and so finds himself, and the other sink, and sink, and sink, into the obscurity of woe and evil that lies beneath every human life as a possibility.

**III. And now, lastly, notice the determining attitude to the Cross which settles the class to which we belong.**

Paul, in my text, is explaining his reason for not preaching the Gospel with what he calls the words of man's wisdom, and he says, in effect, It would be of no use if I did, because what settles whether the Cross shall look "foolishness" to a man or not is the man's whole moral condition, and what settles whether a man shall find it to be "the power of God" or not is whether he has passed into the region of those that are being saved.

So there are two thoughts suggested which sound as if they were illogically combined, but which yet are both true. It is true that men perish, or are saved, because the Cross is to them respectively foolishness or the power of God; and the other thing is also true, that the Cross is to them foolishness, or the power of God because, respectively, they are perishing or being saved. That is not putting the cart before the horse, but both aspects of the truth are true.

If you see nothing in Jesus Christ, and His death for us all, except foolishness, something unfit to do you any good, and unnecessary to be taken into account in your lives--oh, my friends! that is the condemnation of your eyes, and not of the thing you look at. If a man, gazing on the sun at twelve o'clock on a June day, says to me, It is not bright, the only thing I have to say to him is, Friend, you had better go to an oculist. And if to us the Cross is foolishness, it is because already a process of perishing has gone so far that it has attacked our capacity of recognising the wisdom and love of God when we see them.

But, on the other hand, if we clasp that Cross in simple trust, we find that it is the power which saves us out of all sins, sorrows, and dangers, and shall save us at last into His heavenly kingdom.

Dear friends, that message leaves no man exactly as it found him. My words, I feel, in this sermon, have been very poor, set by the side of the greatness of the theme; but, poor as they have been, you will not be exactly the same man after them, if you have listened to them, as you were before. The difference may be very imperceptible, but it will be real. One more, almost invisible, film, over the eyeball; one more thin layer of wax in the ear; one more fold of insensibility round heart and conscience--or else some yielding to the love; some finger put out to take the salvation; some lightening of the pressure of the sickness; some removal of the peril and the danger. The same sun hurts diseased eyes, and gladdens sound ones. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. This Child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel. To the one He is the savour of life unto life; to the other He is the savour of death unto death. Which is He, for He is one of them, to you?