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

**1 CORINTHIANS-005**. **THE TESTING FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble: 13. Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is."*

*1 Corinthians 3:12-13*

Before I enter upon the ideas which the words suggest, my exegetical conscience binds me to point out that the original application of the text is not exactly that which I purpose to make of it now. The context shows that the Apostle is thinking about the special subject of Christian teachers and their work, and that the builders of whom he speaks are the men in the Corinthian Church, some of them his allies and some of them his rivals, who were superimposing upon the foundation of the preaching of Jesus Christ other doctrines and principles. The wood, hay, stubble are the vapid and trivial doctrines which the false teachers were introducing into the Church. The gold, silver, and precious stones are the solid and substantial verities which Paul and his friends were proclaiming. And it is about these, and not about the Christian life in the general, that the tremendous metaphors of my text are uttered.

But whilst that is true, the principles involved have a much wider range than the one case to which the Apostle applies them. And, though I may be slightly deflecting the text from its original direction, I am not doing violence to it, if I take it as declaring some very plain and solemn truths applicable to all Christian people, in their task of building up a life and character on the foundation of Jesus Christ; truths which are a great deal too much forgotten in our modern popular Christianity, and which it concerns us all very clearly to keep in view. There are three things here that I wish to say a word about--the patchwork building, the testing fire, the fate of the builders.

**I. First, the patchwork structure.**

If any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble. In the original application of the metaphor, Paul is thinking of all these teachers in that church at Corinth as being engaged in building the one structure--I venture to deflect here, and to regard each of us as rearing our own structure of life and character on the foundation of the preached and accepted Christ.

Now, what the Apostle says is that these builders were, some of them, laying valuable things like gold and silver and costly stones--by which he does not mean jewels, but marbles, alabasters, polished porphyry or granite, and the like; sumptuous building materials, which were employed in great palaces or temples--and that some of them were bringing timber, hay, stubble, reeds gathered from the marshes or the like, and filling in with such trash as that. That is a picture of what a great many Christian people are doing in their own lives--the same man building one course of squared and solid and precious stones, and topping them with rubbish. You will see in the walls of Jerusalem, at the base, five or six courses of those massive blocks which are the wonders of the world yet; well jointed, well laid, well cemented, and then on the top of them a mass of poor stuff, heaped together anyhow; scamped work--may I use a modern vulgarism?--jerry-building. You may go to some modern village, on an ancient historic site, and you will find built into the mud walls of the hovels in which the people are living, a marble slab with fair carving on it, or the drum of a great column of veined marble, and on the top of that, timber and clay mixed together.

That is the type of the sort of life that hosts of Christian people are living. For, mark, all the builders are on the foundation. Paul is not speaking about mere professed Christians who had no faith at all in them, and no real union with Jesus Christ. These builders were on the foundation; they were building on the foundation, there was a principle deep down in their lives--which really lay at the bottom of their lives--and yet had not come to such dominating power as to mould and purify and make harmonious with itself the life that was reared upon it. We all know that that is the condition of many men, that they have what really are the fundamental bases of their lives, in belief and aim and direction; and which yet are not strong enough to master the whole of the life, and to manifest themselves through it. Especially it is the condition of some Christian people. They have a real faith, but it is of the feeblest and most rudimentary kind. They are on the foundation, but their lives are interlaced with the most heterogeneous mixty-maxty of good and evil, of lofty, high, self-sacrificing thoughts and heavenward aspirations, of resolutions never carried out into practice; and side by side with these there shall be meannesses, selfishnesses, tempers, dispositions all contradictory of the former impulses. One moment they are all fire and love, the next moment ice and selfishness. One day they are all for God, the next day all for the world, the flesh, and the devil. Jacob sees the open heavens and the face of God and vows; to-morrow he meets Laban and drops to shifty ways. Peter leaves all and follows his Master, and in a little while the fervour has gone, and the fire has died down into grey ashes, and a flippant servant-girl's tongue leads him to say I know not the man. Gold, silver, precious stones, and topping them, wood, hay, stubble!

The inconsistencies of the Christian life are what my text, in the application that I am venturing to make of it, suggests to us. Ah, dear friends! we do not need to go to Jacob and Peter; let us look at our own hearts, and if we will honestly examine one day of our lives, I think we shall understand how it is possible for a man, on the foundation, yet to build upon it these worthless and combustible things, wood, hay, stubble.

We are not to suppose that one man builds only gold, silver, precious stones. There is none of us that does that. And we are not to suppose that any man who is on the foundations has so little grasp of it, as that he builds only wood, hay, stubble.

There is none of us who has not intermingled his building, and there is none of us, if we are Christians at all, who has not sometimes laid a course of precious stones. If your faith is doing nothing for you except bringing to you a belief that you are not going to hell when you die, then it is no faith at all. Faith without works is dead. So there is a mingling in the best, and--thank God!--there is a mingling of good with evil, in the worst of real Christian people.

**II. Note here, the testing fire.**

Paul points to two things, the day and the fire.

The day shall declare it, that is the day on which Jesus Christ comes to be the Judge; and it, that is the day, shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall test every man's work. Now, it is to be noticed that here we are moving altogether in the region of lofty symbolism, and that the metaphor of the testing fire is suggested by the previous enumeration of building materials, gold and silver being capable of being assayed by flame; and wood, hay, stubble being combustible, and sure to be destroyed thereby. The fire here is not an emblem of punishment; it is not an emblem of cleansing. There is no reference to anything in the nature of what Roman Catholics call purgatorial fires. The allusion is simply to some stringent and searching means of testing the quality of a man's work, and of revealing that quality.

So then, we come just to this, that for people on the foundation, there is a Day of revelation and testing of their life's work. It is a great misfortune that so-called Evangelical Christianity does not say as much as the New Testament says about the judgment that is to be passed on the house of God. People seem to think that the great doctrine of salvation, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy, is, somehow or other, interfered with when we proclaim, as Paul proclaims, speaking to Christian people, We must be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, and declares that Every man will receive the things done in his body, according to that he has done, whether it be good or bad. Paul saw no contradiction, and there is no contradiction. But a great many professing Christians seem to think that the great blessing of their salvation by faith is, that they are exempt from that future revelation and testing and judgment of their acts. That is not the New Testament teaching. But, on the contrary, Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, was originally said to a church of Christian people. And here we come full front against that solemn truth, that the Lord will gather together His saints, those that have made a covenant with Him by sacrifice, that He may judge His people. Never mind about the drapery, the symbolism, the expression in material forms with which that future judgment is arranged, in order that we may the more easily grasp it. Remember that these pictures in the New Testament of a future judgment are highly symbolical, and not to be interpreted as if they were plain prose; but also remember that the heart of them is this, that there comes for Christian people as for all others, a time when the light will shine down upon their past, and will flash its rays into the dark chambers of memory, and when men will--to themselves if not to others--be revealed in the day when the Lord shall judge the secrets of men according to my Gospel.

We have all experience enough of how but a few years, a change of circumstances, or a growth into another stage of development, give us fresh eyes with which to estimate the moral quality of our past. Many a thing, which we thought to be all right at the time when we did it, looks to us now very questionable and a plain mistake. And when we shift our stations to up yonder, and get rid of all this blinding medium of flesh and sense, and have the issues of our acts in our possession, and before our sight--ah! we shall think very differently of a great many things from what we think of them now. Judgment will begin at the house of God.

And there is the other thought, that the fire which reveals and tests has also in it a power of destruction. Gold and silver will lose no atom of their weight, and will be brightened into greater lustre as they flash back the beams. The timber and the stubble will go up in a flare, and die down into black ashes. That is highly metaphorical, of course. What does it mean? It means that some men's work will be crumpled up and perish, and be as of none effect, leaving a great, black sorrowful gap in the continuity of the structure, and that other men's work will stand. Everything that we do is, in one sense, immortal, because it is represented in our final character and condition, just as a thin stratum of rock will represent forests of ferns that grew for one summer millenniums ago, or clouds of insects that danced for an hour in the sun. But whilst that is so, and nothing human ever dies, on the other hand, deeds which have been in accordance, as it were, with the great stream that sweeps the universe on its bosom will float on that surface and never sink. Acts which have gone against the rush of God's will through creation will be like a child's go-cart that comes against the engine of an express train--be reduced, first, to stillness, all the motion knocked out of them, and then will be crushed to atoms. Deeds which stand the test will abide in blessed issue for the doer, and deeds which do not will pass away in smoke, and leave only ashes. Some of us, building on the foundation, have built more rubbish than solid work, and that will be

Cast as rubbish to the void

When God has made the pile complete.

**III. So, lastly, we have here the fate of the two builders.**

The one man gets wages. That is not the bare notion of salvation, for both builders are conceived of as on the foundation, and both are saved. He gets wages. Yes, of course! The architect has to give his certificate before the builder gets his cheque. The weaver, who has been working his hand-loom at his own house, has to take his web to the counting-house and have it overlooked before he gets his pay. And the man who has built gold, silver, precious stones, will have--over and above the initial salvation--in himself the blessed consequences, and unfold the large results, of his faithful service; while the other man, inasmuch as he has not such work, cannot have the consequences of it, and gets no wages; or at least his pay is subject to heavy deductions for the spoiled bits in the cloth, and for the gaps in the wall.

The Apostle employs a tremendous metaphor here, which is masked in our Authorised Version, but is restored in the Revised. He shall be saved, yet so as (not by but) through fire; the picture being that of a man surrounded by a conflagration, and making a rush through the flames to get to a place of safety. Paul says that he will get through, because down below all inconsistency and worldliness, there was a little of that which ought to have been above all the inconsistency and the worldliness--a true faith in Jesus Christ. But because it was so imperfect, so feeble, so little operative in his life as that it could not keep him from piling up inconsistencies into his wall, therefore his salvation is so as through the fire.

Brethren, I dare not enlarge upon that great metaphor. It is meant for us professing Christians, real and imperfect Christians--it is meant for us; and it just tells us that there are degrees in that future blessedness proportioned to present faithfulness. We begin there where we left off here. That future is not a dead level; and they who have earnestly striven to work out their faith into their lives shall summer high upon the hills of God. One man, like Paul in his shipwreck, shall lose ship and lading, though on broken pieces of the ship he may escape safe to land; and another shall make the harbour with full cargo of works of faith, to be turned into gold when he lands. If we build, as we all may, on that foundation, gold and silver and precious stones, an entrance shall be ministered unto us abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; whilst if we bring a preponderance of wood, hay, stubble, we shall be saved, yet so as through the fire.