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

**1 CORINTHIANS-024**. **REMAINING AND FALLING ASLEEP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"After that He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep."*

*1 Corinthians 15:6*

There were, then, some five-and-twenty years after the Resurrection, several hundred disciples who were known amongst the churches as having been eyewitnesses of the risen Saviour. The greater part survived; some, evidently a very few, had died. The proportion of the living to the dead, after five-and-twenty years, is generally the opposite. The greater part have fallen asleep; some, a comparatively few, remain unto this present. Possibly there was some divine intervention which supernaturally prolonged the lives of these witnesses, in order that their testimony might be the more lasting. But, be that as it may, they evidently were men of mark, and some kind of honour and observance surrounded them, as was very natural, and as appears from the fact that Paul here knows so accurately (and can appeal to His fellow-Christians accurate knowledge) the proportion between the survivors and the departed. We read of one of them in the Acts of the Apostles at a later date than this, one Mnason, an original disciple.

So we get a glimpse into the conditions of life in the early Church, interesting and of value in an evidential point of view. But my purpose at present is to draw your attention to the remarkable language in which the Apostle here speaks of the living and the dead amongst these witnesses. In neither case does he use the simple, common words living or dead; but in the one clause he speaks of their remaining, and in the other of their falling asleep; both phrases being significant, and, as I take it, both being traced up to the fact of their having seen the risen Lord as the cause why their life could be described as a remaining, and their death as a falling asleep. In other words, we have here brought before us, by these two striking expressions, the transforming effect upon life and upon death of the faith in a risen Lord, whether grounded on sight or not. And it is simply to these two points that I desire to turn now.

**I. First, then, we have to consider what life may become to those who see the risen Christ.**

The greater part remain until this present. Now the word remain is no mere synonym for living or surviving. It not only tells us the fact that the survivors were living, but the kind of life that they did live. It is very significant that it is the same expression as our Lord used in the profound prophetic words, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Now we are told in John's Gospel that that saying went abroad amongst the brethren, and inasmuch as it was a matter of common notoriety in the early Church, it is by no means a violent supposition that it may be floating in Paul's memory here, and may determine his selection of this remarkable expression they remain, or they tarry, and they were tarrying till the Master came. So, then, I think if we give due weight to the significance of the phrase, we get two or three thoughts worth pondering.

One of them is that the sight of a risen Christ will make life calm and tranquil. Fancy one of these 500 brethren, after that vision, going back to his quiet rural home in some little village amongst the hills of Galilee. How small and remote from Him, and unworthy to ruffle or disturb the heart in which the memory of that vision was burning, would seem the things that otherwise would have been important and distracting! The faith which we have in the risen Christ ought to do the same thing for us, and will do it in the measure in which there shines clearly before that inward eye, which is our true means of apprehending Him, the vision which shone before the outward gaze of that company of wondering witnesses. If we build our nests amidst the tossing branches of the world's trees, they will sway with every wind, and perhaps be blown from their hold altogether by such a storm as we all have sometimes to meet. But we may build our nests in the clefts of the rock, like the doves, and be quiet, as they are. Distractions will cease to distract, and troubles will cease to agitate, and across the heaving surface of the great ocean there will come a Form beneath whose feet the waves smooth themselves, and at whose voice the winds are still. They who see Christ need not be troubled. The ship that is empty is tossed upon the ocean, that which is well laden is steady. The heart that has Christ for a passenger need not fear being rocked by any storm. Calmness will come with the vision of the Lord, and we shall abide or remain, for there will be no need for us to flee from this Refuge to that, nor shall we be driven from our secure abode by any contingencies. He that believeth shall not make haste.

It is a good thing to cultivate the disposition that says about most of the trifles of this life, It does not much matter; but the only way to prevent wholesome contempt of the world's trivialities from degenerating into supercilious indifference is, to base it upon Christ, discerned as near us and bestowing upon us the calmness of His risen life. Make Him your scale of importance, and nothing will be too small to demand and be worthy of the best efforts of your work, but nothing will be too great to sweep you away from the serenity of your faith.

Again, the vision of the risen Christ will also lead to patient persistence in duty. If we have Him before us, the distasteful duty which He sets us will not be distasteful, and the small tasks, in which great faithfulness may be manifested, will cease to be small. If we have Him before us we have in that risen Christ the great and lasting Example of how patient continuance in well-doing triumphs over the sorrows that it bears, by and in patiently bearing them, and is crowned at last with glory and honour. The risen Christ is the Pattern for the men who will not be turned aside from the path of duty by any obstacles, dangers, or threats. The risen Christ is the signal Example of glory following upon faithfulness, and of the crown being the result of the Cross. The risen Christ is the manifest Helper of them that put their trust in Him; and one of the plainest lessons and of the most imperative commands which come from the believing gaze upon that Lord who died because He would do the will of the Father, and is throned and crowned in the heavens because He died, is--By patient continuance in well-doing let us commit the keeping of our souls to Him: and abide in the calling wherewith we are called.

And, again, the sight of the risen Christ leads to a life of calm expectancy. If I will that He tarry till I come conveys that shade of meaning. The Apostle was to wait for the Lord from Heaven, and that vision which was given to these 500 men sent them home to their abodes to make all the rest of their lives one calm aspiration for, and patient expectation of, the return of the Lord. These primitive Christians expected that Jesus Christ would come speedily. That expectation was disappointed in so far as the date was concerned, but after nineteen centuries it still remains true that all vigorous and vital Christian life must have in it, as a very important element of its vitality, the onward look which ever is anticipating, which often is desiring, and which constantly is confident of, the coming of the Lord from Heaven. The Resurrection has for its consequences, its sequel and corollary, first the Ascension; then the long tract of time during which Jesus Christ is absent, but still in divine presence rules the world; and, finally, His coming again in that same body in which the disciples saw Him depart from them. And no Christian life is up to the level of its privileges, nor has any Christian faith grasped the whole articles of its creed, except that which sets in the very centre of all its visions of the future that great thought--He shall come again.

Questions of chronology have nothing to do with that. It stands there before us, the certain fact, made certain and inevitable by the past facts of the Cross and the Grave and Olivet. He has come, He will come; He has gone, He will come back. And for us the life that we live in the flesh ought to be a life of waiting for God's Son from Heaven, and of patient, confident expectancy that when He shall be manifested we also shall be manifested with Him in glory.

So much, then, for life--calm, persistent in every duty, and animated by that blessed and far-off, but certain, hope, and all of these founded upon the vision and the faith of a risen Lord. What have fears and cares and distractions and faint-heartedness and gloomy sorrow to do with the eyes that have beheld the Christ, and with the lives that are based on faith in the risen Lord?

**II. So, secondly, consider what death becomes to those who have seen Christ risen from the dead.**

Some are fallen asleep. Now that most natural and obvious metaphor for death is not only a Christian idea, but is found, as would be expected, in many tongues, but yet with a great and significant difference. The Christian reason for calling death a sleep embraces a great deal more than the heathen reason for doing so, and in some respects is precisely the opposite of that, inasmuch as to most others who have used the word, death has been a sleep that knew no waking, whereas the very pith and centre of the Christian reason for employing the symbol are that it makes our waking sure. We have here what the act of dying and the condition of the dead become by virtue of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

They have fallen asleep. The act of dying is but a laying one's self down to rest, and a dropping out of consciousness of the surrounding world. It is very remarkable and very beautiful that the new Testament scarcely ever employs the words dying and death for the act of separating body and spirit, or for the condition either of the spirit parted from the body, or of the body parted from the spirit. It keeps those grim words for the reality, the separation of the soul from God; and it only exceptionally uses them for the shadow and the symbol, the physical fact of the parting of the man from the house which here he has dwelt in. But the reason why Christianity uses these periphrases or metaphors, these euphemisms for death, is the opposite of the reason why the world uses them. The world is so afraid of dying that it durst not name the grim, ugly thing. The Christian, or at least the Christian faith, is so little afraid of death that it does not think such a trivial matter worth calling by the name, but only names it falling asleep.

Even when the circumstances of that dropping off to slumber are painful and violent, the Bible still employs the term. Is it not striking that the first martyr, kneeling outside the city, bruised by stones and dying a bloody death, should have been said to fall asleep? If ever there was an instance in which the gentle metaphor seemed all inappropriate it was that cruel death, amidst a howling crowd, and with fatal bruises, and bleeding limbs mangled by the heavy rocks that lay upon them. But yet, when he had said this he fell asleep. If that be true of such a death, no physical pains of any kind make the sweet word inappropriate for any.

We have here not only the designation of the act of dying, but that of the condition of the dead. They are fallen asleep, and they continue asleep. How many great thoughts gather round that metaphor on which it is needless for me to try to dilate! They will suggest themselves without many words to you all.

There lies in it the idea of repose. They rest from their labours. Sleep restores strength, and withdraws a man at once from effort on the outer world, and from communication from it. We may carry the analogy into that unseen world. We know nothing about the relations to an external universe of the departed who sleep in Jesus. It may be that, if they sleep in Him, since He knows all, they, through Him, may know, too, something--so much as He pleases to impart to them--of what is happening here. And it may even be that, if they sleep in Him, and He wields the energies of Omnipotence, they, through Him, may have some service to do, even while they wait for their house which is from heaven. But there is no need for, nor profit in, such speculations. It is enough that the sweet emblem suggests repose, and that in that sleep there are folded around the sleepers the arms of the Christ on whose bosom they rest, as an infant does on its first and happiest home--its mother's breast.

But then, besides that, the emblem suggests the idea of continuous and conscious existence. A man asleep does not cease to be a man; a dead man does not cease to live. It has often been argued from this metaphor that we are to conceive of the space between death and the resurrection as being a period of unconsciousness, but the analogies seem to me to be in the opposite direction. A sleeping man does not cease to know himself to be, and he does not cease to know himself to be himself. That mysterious consciousness of personal identity survives the passage from waking to sleep, as dreams sufficiently show us. And, therefore, they that sleep know themselves to be.

And, finally, the emblem suggests the idea of waking. Sleep is a parenthesis. If the night comes, the morning comes. If winter comes, can spring be far behind? They that sleep will awake, and be satisfied when they awake with Thy likeness. And so these three things--repose, conscious, continuous existence, and the certainty of awaking--all lie in that metaphor.

Now, then, the risen Christ is the only ground of such hope, and faith in Him is the only state of mind which is entitled to cherish it. Nothing proves immortality except that open grave. Every other foundation is too weak to bear the weight of such a superstructure. The current of present opinion shows, I think, that neither metaphysical nor ethical arguments for the future life will stand the force of the disintegrating criticism which is brought to bear upon that hope by the fashionable materialism of this generation. There is one barrier that will resist that force, and only one, and that is the historical facts that Jesus Christ died, and that Jesus Christ has risen again. He rose; therefore death is not the end of individual existence. He rose; therefore life beyond the grave is possible for humanity. He rose; therefore His sacrifice for the world's sin is accepted, and I may be delivered from my guilt and my burden. He rose; therefore He is declared to be the Son of God with power. He rose; therefore we, if we trust Him, may partake in His Resurrection and in some reflection of His glory. The old Greek architects were often careless of the solidity of the soil on which they built their temples, and so, many of them have fallen in ruins. The Temple of Immortality can be built only upon the rock of that proclamation--Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. And we, dear brethren, should have all our hopes founded upon that one fact.

So then, for us, the calm, peaceful passage from life into what else is the great darkness is possible on condition of our having beheld the risen Lord. These witnesses of whom my text speaks, Paul would suggest to us, laid themselves quietly down to sleep, because before them there still hovered the memory of the vision which they had beheld. Faith in the risen Christ is the anchor of the soul in death, and there is nothing else by which we can hold then.

As the same Apostle, in one of his other letters, puts it, the belief that Christ is risen is not only the irrefragable ground of our hope that we, too, shall rise, but has the power to change the whole aspect of our death. Did you ever observe the emphasis with which He says, If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him? His death was death indeed, and faith in it softens ours to sleep. He bore the reality that we might never need to know it, and if our poor hearts are resting upon that dear Lord, then the flames are but painted ones and will not burn, and we shall pass through them, and no smell of fire will be upon us, and all that will be consumed will be the bonds which bind us. He has abolished death. The physical fact remains, but all which to men makes the idea of death is gone if we trust the risen Lord. So that, between two men dying under precisely the same circumstances, of the same disease, in adjacent beds in the same hospital, there may be such a difference as that the same word cannot be applied to the experiences of both.

My dear friends, we have each of us to pass through that last struggle; but we may make it either a quiet going to sleep with a loved Face bending over our closing eyes, like a mother's over her child's cradle, and the same Face meeting us when we open them in the morning of heaven; or we may make it a reluctant departure from all that we care for, and a trembling advance into all from which conscience and heart shrink.

Which is it going to be to you? The answer depends upon that to another question. Are you looking to that Christ that died and is alive for evermore as your life and your salvation? Do you hold fast that Gospel which Paul preached, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures? If you do, life will be a calm, persevering, expectant waiting upon Him, and death will be nothing more terrible than falling asleep.