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

**1 THESSALONIANS-005**. **SLEEPING THROUGH JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Them also which sleep in Jesus ...."*

*1 Thessalonians 4:14*

That expression is not unusual, in various forms, in the Apostle's writings. It suggests a very tender and wonderful thought of closeness and union between our Lord and the living dead, so close as that He is, as it were, the atmosphere in which they move, or the house in which they dwell. But, tender and wonderful as the thought is, it is not exactly the Apostle's idea here. For, accurately rendered--and accuracy in regard to Scripture language is not pedantry--the words run, Them which sleep through Jesus.

Now, that is a strange phrase, and, I suppose, its strangeness is the reason why our translators have softened it down to the more familiar and obvious in Jesus. We can understand living through Christ, on being sacred through Christ, but what can sleeping through Christ mean? I shall hope to answer the question presently, but, in the meantime, I only wish to point out what the Apostle does say, and to plead for letting him say it, strange though it sounds. For the strange and the difficult phrases of Scripture are like the hard quartz reefs in which gold is, and if we slur them over we are likely to loose the treasure. Let us try if we can find what the gold here may be.

Now, there are only two thoughts that I wish to dwell upon as suggested by these words. One is the softened aspect of death, and of the state of the Christian dead; and the other is the ground or cause of that softened aspect.

**I. First, then, the softened aspect of death, and of the state of the Christian dead.**

It is to Jesus primarily that the New Testament writers owe their use of this gracious emblem of sleep. For, as you remember, the word was twice upon our Lord's lips; once when, over the twelve-years-old maid from whom life had barely ebbed away, He said, She is not dead, but sleepeth; and once when in regard of the man Lazarus, from whom life had removed further, He said, Our friend sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep. But Jesus was not the originator of the expression. You find it in the Old Testament, where the prophet Daniel, speaking of the end of the days and the bodily Resurrection, designates those who share in it as them that sleep in the dust of the earth. And the Old Testament was not the sole origin of the phrase. For it is too natural, too much in accordance with the visibilities of death, not to have suggested itself to many hearts, and been shrined in many languages. Many an inscription of Greek and Roman date speaks of death under this figure; but almost always it is with the added, deepened note of despair, that it is a sleep which knows no waking, but lasts through eternal night.

Now, the Christian thought associated with this emblem is the precise opposite of the pagan one. The pagan heart shrank from naming the ugly thing because it was so ugly. So dark and deep a dread coiled round the man, as he contemplated it, that he sought to drape the dreadfulness in some kind of thin, transparent veil, and to put the buffer of a word between him and its hideousness. But the Christian's motive for the use of the word is the precise opposite. He uses the gentler expression because the thing has become gentler.

It is profoundly significant that throughout the whole of the New Testament the plain, naked word death is usually applied, not to the physical fact which we ordinarily designate by the name, but to the grim thing of which that physical fact is only the emblem and the parable, viz., the true death which lies in the separation of the soul from God; whilst predominately the New Testament usage calls the physical fact by some other gentler form of expression, because, as I say, the gentleness has enfolded the thing to be designated.

For instance, you find one class of representations which speak of death as being a departing and a being with Christ; or which call it, as one of the apostles does, an exodus, where it is softened down to be merely a change of environment, a change of locality. Then another class of representations speak of it as putting off this my tabernacle, or, the dissolution of the earthly house--where there is a broad, firm line of demarcation drawn between the inhabitant and the habitation, and the thing is softened down to be a mere change of dwelling. Again, another class of expressions speak of it as being an offering, where the main idea is that of a voluntary surrender, a sacrifice or libation of myself, and my life poured out upon the altar of God. But sweetest, deepest, most appealing to all our hearts, is that emblem of my text, them that sleep. It is used, if I count rightly, some fourteen times in the New Testament, and it carries with it large and plain lessons, on which I touch but for a moment. What, then, does this metaphor say to us?

Well, it speaks first of rest. That is not altogether an attractive conception to some of us. If it be taken exclusively it is by no means wholesome. I suppose that the young, and the strong, and the eager, and the ambitious, and the prosperous rather shrink from the notion of their activities being stiffened into slumber. But, dear friends, there are some of us like tired children in a fair, who would fain have done with the weariness, who have made experience of the distractions and bewildering changes, whose backs are stiffened with toil, whose hearts are heavy with loss. And to all of us, in some moods, the prospect of shuffling off this weary coil of responsibilities and duties and tasks and sorrows, and of passing into indisturbance and repose, appeals. I believe, for my part, that, after all, the deepest longing of men--though they search for it through toil and effort--is for repose. As the poet has taught us, there is no joy but calm. Every heart is weary enough, and heavy laden, and labouring enough, to feel the sweetness of a promise of rest:--

Sleep, full of rest from head to foot, Lie still, dry dust, secure of change.

Yes! but the rest of which our emblem speaks is, as I believe, only applicable to the bodily frame. The word sleep is a transcript of what sense enlightened by faith sees in that still form, with the folded hands and the quiet face and the closed eyes. But let us remember that this repose, deep and blessed as it is, is not, as some would say, the repose of unconsciousness. I do not believe, and I would have you not believe, that this emblem refers to the vigorous, spiritual life, or that the passage from out of the toil and moil of earth into the calm of the darkness beyond has any power in limiting or suspending the vital force of the man.

Why, the very metaphor itself tells us that the sleeper is not unconscious. He is parted from the outer world, he is unaware of externals. When Stephen knelt below the old wall, and was surrounded by howling fanatics that slew him, one moment he was gashed with stones and tortured, and the next he fell on sleep. They might howl, and the stones fly as they would, and he was all unaware of it. Like Jonah sleeping in the hold, what mattered the roaring of the storm to him? But separation from externals does not mean suspense of life or of consciousness, and the slumberer often dreams, and is aware of himself persistently throughout his slumber. Nay! some of his faculties are set at liberty to work more energetically, because his connection with the outer world is for the time suspended.

And so I say that what on the hither side is sleep, on the further side is awaking, and that the complex whole of the condition of the sainted dead may be described with equal truth by either metaphor; they sleep in Jesus; or, when I awake I shall be satisfied with Thy likeness.

Scripture, as it seems to me, distinctly carries this limitation of the emblem. For what does it mean when the Apostle says that to depart and to be with Christ is far better? Surely he who thus spoke conceived that these two things were contemporaneous, the departing and the being with Him. And surely he who thus spoke could not have conceived that a millennium-long parenthesis of slumberous unconsciousness was to intervene between the moment of his decease and the moment of his fellowship with Jesus. How could a man prefer that dormant state to the state here, of working for and living with the Lord? Surely, being with Him must mean that we know where we are, and who is our companion.

And what does that text mean: Ye are come unto the spirits of just men made perfect, unless it means that of these two classes of persons who are thus regarded as brought into living fellowship, each is aware of the other? Does perfecting of the spirit mean the smiting of the spirit into unconsciousness? Surely not, and surely in view of such words as these, we must recognise the fact that, however limited and imperfect may be the present connection of the disembodied dead, who sleep in Christ, with external things, they know themselves, they know their home and their companion, and they know the blessedness in which they are lapped.

But another thought which is suggested by this emblem is, as I have already said, most certainly the idea of awaking. The pagans said, as indeed one of their poets has it, Suns can sink and return, but for us, when our brief light sinks, there is but one perpetual night of slumber. The Christian idea of death is, that it is transitory as a sleep in the morning, and sure to end. As St. Augustine says somewhere, Wherefore are they called sleepers, but because in the day of the Lord they will be reawakened?'

And so these are the thoughts, very imperfectly spoken, I know, which spring like flowers from this gracious metaphor them that sleep--rest and awaking; rest and consciousness.

**II. Note the ground of this softened aspect.**

They sleep through Him. It is by reason of Christ and His work, and by reason of that alone, that death's darkness is made beautiful, and death's grimness is softened down to this. Now, in order to grasp the full meaning of such words as these of the Apostle, we must draw a broad distinction between the physical fact of the ending of corporeal life and the mental condition which is associated with it by us. What we call death, if I may so say, is a complex thing--a bodily phenomenon plus conscience, the sense of sin, the certainty of retribution in the dim beyond. And you have to take these elements apart. The former remains, but if the others are removed, the whole has changed its character and is become another thing, and a very little thing.

The mere physical fact is a trifle. Look at it as you see it in the animals; look at it as you see it in men when they actually come to it. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is painless and easy, and men sink into slumber. Strange, is it not, that so small a reality should have power to cast over human life so immense and obscuring a shadow! Why? Because, as the Apostle says, the sting of death is sin, and if you can take the sting out of it, then there is very little to fear, and it comes down to be an insignificant and transient element in our experience.

Now, the death of Jesus Christ takes away, if I may so say, the nimbus of apprehension and dread arising from conscience and sin, and the forecast of retribution. There is nothing left for us to face except the physical fact, and any rough soldier, with a coarse, red coat upon him, will face that for eighteenpence a day, and think himself well paid. Jesus Christ has abolished death, leaving the mere shell, but taking all the substance out of it. It has become a different thing to men, because in that death of His He has exhausted the bitterness, and has made it possible that we should pass into the shadow, and not fear either conscience or sin or judgment.

In this connection I cannot but notice with what a profound meaning the Apostle, in this very verse, uses the bare, naked word in reference to Him, and the softened one in reference to us. If we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, even so them also which sleep. Ah! yes! He died indeed, bearing all that terror with which men's consciences have invested death. He died indeed, bearing on Himself the sins of the world. He died that no man henceforward need ever die in that same fashion. His death makes our deaths sleep, and His Resurrection makes our sleep calmly certain of a waking.

So, dear brethren, I would not have you ignorant concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope. And I would have you to remember that, whilst Christ by His work has made it possible that the terror may pass away, and death may be softened and minimised into slumber, it will not be so with you--unless you are joined to Him, and by trust in the power of His death and the overflowing might of His Resurrection, have made sure that what He has passed through, you will pass through, and where He is, and what He is, you will be also.

Two men die by one railway accident, sitting side by side upon one seat, smashed in one collision. But though the outward fact is the same about each, the reality of their deaths is infinitely different. The one falls asleep through Jesus, in Jesus; the other dies indeed, and the death of his body is only a feeble shadow of the death of his spirit. Do you knit yourself to the Life, which is Christ, and then he that believeth on Me shall never die.