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

**1 THESSALONIANS-006**. **THE WORK AND ARMOUR OF THE CHILDREN OF THE DAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet the hope of salvation."*

*1 Thessalonians 5:8*

This letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest book of the New Testament. It was probably written within something like twenty years of the Crucifixion; long, therefore, before any of the Gospels were in existence. It is, therefore, exceedingly interesting and instructive to notice how this whole context is saturated with allusions to our Lord's teaching, as it is preserved in these Gospels; and how it takes for granted that the Thessalonian Christians were familiar with the very words.

For instance: Yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night (ver. 2). How did these people in Thessalonica know that? They had been Christians for a year or so only; they had been taught by Paul for a few weeks only, or a month or two at the most. How did they know it? Because they had been told what the Master had said: If the goodman of the house had known at what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

And there are other allusions in the context almost as obvious: The children of the light. Who said that? Christ, in His words: The children of this world are wiser than the children of light. They that sleep, sleep in the night, and if they be drunken, are drunken in the night. Where does that metaphor come from? Take heed lest at any time ye be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness, and the cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. Watch, lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping!

So you see all the context reposes upon, and presupposes the very words, which you find in our present existing Gospels, as the words of the Lord Jesus. And this is all but contemporaneous, and quite independent, evidence of the existence in the Church, from the beginning, of a traditional teaching which is now preserved for us in that fourfold record of His life.

Take that remark for what it is worth; and now turn to the text itself with which I have to deal in this sermon. The whole of the context may be said to be a little dissertation upon the moral and religious uses of the doctrine of our Lord's second coming. In my text these are summed up in one central injunction which has preceding it a motive that enforces it, and following it a method that ensures it. Let us be sober; that is the centre thought; and it is buttressed upon either side by a motive and a means. Let us who are of the day, or since we are of the day,--be sober. And let us be it by putting on the breastplate and helmet of faith, love, and hope. These, then, are the three points which we have to consider.

**I. First, this central injunction, into which all the moral teaching drawn from the second coming of Christ is gathered--Let us be sober.**

Now, I do not suppose we are altogether to omit any reference to the literal meaning of this word. The context seems to show that, by its reference to night as the season for drunken orgies. Temperance is moderation in regard not only to the evil and swinish sin of drunkenness, which is so manifestly contrary to all Christian integrity and nobility of character, but in regard to the far more subtle temptation of another form of sensual indulgence--gluttony. The Christian Church needed to be warned of that, and if these people in Thessalonica needed the warning I am quite sure that we need it. There is not a nation on earth which needs it more than Englishmen. I am no ascetic, I do not want to glorify any outward observance, but any doctor in England will tell you that the average Englishman eats and drinks a great deal more than is good for him. It is melancholy to think how many professing Christians have the edge and keenness of their intellectual and spiritual life blunted by the luxurious and senseless table-abundance in which they habitually indulge. I am quite sure that water from the spring and barley-bread would be a great deal better for their souls, and for their bodies too, in the case of many people who call themselves Christians. Suffer a word of exhortation, and do not let it be neglected because it is brief and general. Sparta, after all, is the best place for a man to live in, next to Jerusalem.

But, passing from that, let us turn to the higher subject with which the Apostle is here evidently mainly concerned. What is the meaning of the exhortation Be sober? Well, first let me tell you what I think is not the meaning of it. It does not mean an unemotional absence of fervour in your Christian character.

There is a kind of religious teachers who are always preaching down enthusiasm, and preaching up what they call a sober standard of feeling in matters of religion. By which, in nine cases out of ten, they mean precisely such a tepid condition as is described in much less polite language, when the voice from heaven says, Because thou art neither cold nor hot I will spue thee out of My mouth. That is the real meaning of the sobriety that some people are always desiring you to cultivate. I should have thought that the last piece of furniture which any Christian Church in the twentieth century needed was a refrigerator! A poker and a pair of bellows would be very much more needful for them. For, dear brethren, the truths that you and I profess to believe are of such a nature, so tremendous either in their joyfulness and beauty, or in their solemnity and awfulness, that one would think that if they once got into a man's head and heart, nothing but the most fervid and continuous glow of a radiant enthusiasm would correspond to their majesty and overwhelming importance. I venture to say that the only consistent Christian is the enthusiastic Christian; and that the only man who will ever do anything in this world for God or man worth doing is the man who is not sober, according to that cold-blooded definition which I have been speaking about, but who is all ablaze with an enkindled earnestness that knows no diminution and no cessation.

Paul, the very man that is exhorting here to sobriety, was the very type of an enthusiast all his life. So Festus thought him mad, and even in the Church at Corinth there were some to whom in his fervour, he seemed to be beside himself (2 Cor. 5:13).

Oh! for more of that insanity! You may make up your minds to this; that any men or women that are in thorough earnest, either about Christianity or about any other great, noble, lofty, self-forgetting purpose, will have to be content to have the old Pentecostal charge flung at them:--These men are full of new wine! Well for the Church, and well for the men who deserve the taunt; for it means that they have learned something of the emotion that corresponds to such magnificent and awful verities as Christian faith converses with.

I did not intend to say so much about that; I turn now for a moment to the consideration of what this exhortation really means. It means, as I take it, mainly this: the prime Christian duty of self-restraint in the use and the love of all earthly treasures and pleasures.

I need not do more than remind you how, in the very make of a man's soul, it is clear that unless there be exercised rigid self-control he will go all to pieces. The make of human nature, if I may say so, shows that it is not meant for a democracy but a monarchy.

Here are within us many passions, tastes, desires, most of them rooted in the flesh, which are as blind as hunger and thirst are. If a man is hungry, the bread will satisfy him all the same whether he steals it or not; and it will not necessarily be distasteful even if it be poisoned. And there are other blind impulses and appetites in our nature which ask nothing except this:--Give me my appropriate gratification, though all the laws of God and man be broken in order to get it!

And so there has to be something like an eye given to these blind beasts, and something like a directing hand laid upon these instinctive impulses. The true temple of the human spirit must be built in stages, the broad base laid in these animal instincts; above them, and controlling them, the directing and restraining will; above it the understanding which enlightens it and them; and supreme over all the conscience with nothing between it and heaven. Where that is not the order of the inner man you get wild work. You have set beggars on horseback, and we all know where they go! The man who lets passion and inclination guide is like a steam-boat with all the furnaces banked up, with the engines going full speed, and nobody at the wheel. It will drive on to the rocks, or wherever the bow happens to point, no matter though death and destruction lie beyond the next turn of the screw. That is what you will come to unless you live in the habitual exercise of rigid self-control.

And that self-control is to be exercised mainly, or at least as one very important form of it, in regard to our use and estimate of the pleasures of this present life. Yes! it is not only from the study of a man's make that the necessity for a very rigid self-government appears, but the observation of the conditions and circumstances in which he is placed points the same lesson. All round about him are hands reaching out to him drugged cups. The world with all its fading sweet comes tempting him, and the old fable fulfils itself--Whoever takes that Circe's cup and puts it to his lips and quaffs deep, turns into a swine, and sits there imprisoned at the feet of the sorceress for evermore!

There is only one thing that will deliver you from that fate, my brother. Be sober, and in regard to the world and all that it offers to us--all joy, possession, gratification--set a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite. There is no noble life possible on any other terms--not to say there is no Christian life possible on any other terms--but suppression and mortification of the desires of the flesh and of the spirit. You cannot look upwards and downwards at the same moment. Your heart is only a tiny room after all, and if you cram it full of the world, you relegate your Master to the stable outside. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon. Be sober, says Paul, then, and cultivate the habit of rigid self-control in regard to this present. Oh! what a melancholy, solemn thought it is that hundreds of professing Christians in England, like vultures after a full meal, have so gorged themselves with the garbage of this present life that they cannot fly, and have to be content with moving along the ground, heavy and languid. Christian men and women, are you keeping yourselves in spiritual health by a very sparing use of the dainties and delights of earth? Answer the question to your own souls and to your Judge.

**II. And now let me turn to the other thoughts that lie here.**

There is, secondly, a motive which backs up and buttresses this exhortation. Let us who are of the day--or as the Revised Version has it a little more emphatically and correctly, Let us, since we are of the day, be sober. The day; what day? The temptation is to answer the question by saying--of course the specific day which was spoken about in the beginning of the section, "the day of the Lord," that coming judgment by the coming Christ. But I think that although, perhaps, there may be some allusion here to that specific day, still, if you will look at the verses which immediately precede my text, you will see that in them the Apostle has passed from the thought of the day of the Lord to that of day in general. That is obvious, I think, from the contrast he draws between the day and the night, the darkness and the light. If so, then, when he says the children of the day he does not so much mean--though that is quite true--that we are, as it were, akin to that day of judgment, and may therefore look forward to it without fear, and in quiet confidence, lifting up our heads because our redemption draws nigh; but rather he means that Christians are the children of that which expresses knowledge, and joy, and activity. Of these things the day is the emblem, in every language and in every poetry. The day is the time when men see and hear, the symbol of gladness and cheer all the world over.

And so, says Paul, you Christian men and women belong to a joyous realm, a realm of light and knowledge, a realm of purity and righteousness. You are children of the light; a glad condition which involves many glad and noble issues. Children of the light should be brave, children of the light should not be afraid of the light, children of the light should be cheerful, children of the light should be buoyant, children of the light should be transparent, children of the light should be hopeful, children of the light should be pure, and children of the light should walk in this darkened world, bearing their radiance with them; and making things, else unseen, visible to many a dim eye.

But while these emblems of cheerfulness, hope, purity, and illumination are gathered together in that grand name--Ye are the children of the day, there is one direction especially in which the Apostle thinks that that consideration ought to tell, and that is the direction of self-restraint. Noblesse oblige!--the aristocracy are bound to do nothing low or dishonourable. The children of the light are not to stain their hands with anything foul. Chambering and wantonness, slumber and drunkenness, the indulgence in the appetites of the flesh,--all that may be fitting for the night, it is clean incongruous with the day.

Well, if you want that turned into pedestrian prose--which is no more clear, but a little less emotional--it is just this: You Christian men and women belong--if you are Christians--to another state of things from that which is lying round about you; and, therefore, you ought to live in rigid abstinence from these things that are round about you.

That is plain enough surely, nor do I suppose that I need to dwell on that thought at any length. We belong to another order of things, says Paul; we carry a day with us in the midst of the night. What follows from that? Do not let us pursue the wandering lights and treacherous will-o-the-wisps that lure men into bottomless bogs where they are lost. If we have light in our dwellings whilst Egypt lies in darkness, let it teach us to eat our meat with our loins girded, and our staves in our hands, not without bitter herbs, and ready to go forth into the wilderness. You do not belong to the world in which you live, if you are Christian men and women; you are only camped here. Your purposes, thoughts, hopes, aspirations, treasures, desires, delights, go up higher. And so, if you are children of the day, be self-restrained in your dealings with the darkness.

**III. And, last of all, my text points out for us a method by which this great precept may be fulfilled:--Putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for an helmet the hope of salvation.**

That, of course, is the first rough draft occurring in Paul's earliest Epistle, of an image which recurs at intervals, and in more or less expanded form in other of his letters, and is so splendidly worked out in detail in the grand picture of the Christian armour in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

I need not do more than just remind you of the difference between that finished picture and this outline sketch. Here we have only defensive and not offensive armour, here the Christian graces are somewhat differently allocated to the different parts of the armour. Here we have only the great triad of Christian graces, so familiar on our lips--faith, hope, charity. Here we have faith and love in the closest possible juxtaposition, and hope somewhat more apart. The breastplate, like some of the ancient hauberks, made of steel and gold, is framed and forged out of faith and love blended together, and faith and love are more closely identified in fact than faith and hope, or than love and hope. For faith and love have the same object--and are all but contemporaneous. Wherever a man lays hold of Jesus Christ by faith, there cannot but spring up in his heart love to Christ; and there is no love without faith. So that we may almost say that faith and love are but the two throws of the shuttle, the one in the one direction and the other in the other; whereas hope comes somewhat later in a somewhat remoter connection with faith, and has a somewhat different object from these other two. Therefore it is here slightly separated from its sister graces. Faith, love, hope--these three form the defensive armour that guard the soul; and these three make self-control possible. Like a diver in his dress, who is let down to the bottom of the wild, far-weltering ocean, a man whose heart is girt by faith and charity, and whose head is covered with the helmet of hope, may be dropped down into the wildest sea of temptation and of worldliness, and yet will walk dry and unharmed through the midst of its depths, and breathe air that comes from a world above the restless surges.

And in like manner the cultivation of faith, charity, and hope is the best means for securing the exercise of sober self-control.

It is an easy thing to say to a man, Govern yourself! It is a very hard thing with the powers that any man has at his disposal to do it. As somebody said about an army joining the rebels, It's a bad job when the extinguisher catches fire! And that is exactly the condition of things in regard to our power of self-government. The powers that should control are largely gone over to the enemy, and become traitors.

Who shall keep the very keepers? is the old question, and here is the answer:--You cannot execute the gymnastic feat of erecting yourself above yourself any more than a man can take himself by his own coat collar and lift himself up from the ground with his own arms. But you can cultivate faith, hope, and charity, and these three, well cultivated and brought to bear upon your daily life, will do the governing for you. Faith will bring you into communication with all the power of God. Love will lead you into a region where all the temptations round you will be touched as by an Ithuriel spear, and will show their foulness. And hope will turn away your eyes from looking at the tempting splendours around, and fix them upon the glories that are above.

And so the reins will come into your hands in an altogether new manner, and you will be able to be king over your own nature in a fashion that you did not dream of before, if only you will trust in Christ, and love Him, and fix your desires on the things above.

Then you will be able to govern yourself when you let Christ govern you. The glories that are to be done away, that gleam round you like foul, flaring tallow-candles, will lose all their fascination and brightness, by reason of the glory that excelleth, the pure starlike splendour of the white inextinguishable lights of heaven.

And when by faith, charity, and hope you have drunk of the new wine of the kingdom, the drugged and opiate cup which a sorceress world presents, jewelled though it be, will lose its charms, and it will not be hard to turn from it and dash it to the ground.

God help you, brother, to be sober, for unless you are you cannot see the kingdom of God!