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

**1 THESSALONIANS-007**. **WAKING AND SLEEPING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him."*

*1 Thessalonians 5:10*

In these words the Apostle concludes a section of this, his earliest letter, in which he has been dealing with the aspect of death in reference to the Christian. There are two very significant usages of language in the context which serve to elucidate the meaning of the words of our text, and to which I refer for a moment by way of introduction.

The one is that throughout this portion of his letter the Apostle emphatically reserves the word died for Jesus Christ, and applies to Christ's followers only the word sleep. Christ's death makes the deaths of those who trust Him a quiet slumber. The other is that the antithesis of waking and sleep is employed in two different directions in this section, being first used to express, by the one term, simply physical life, and by the other, physical death; and secondly, to designate respectively the moral attitude of Christian watchfulness and that of worldly apathy to things unseen and drowsy engrossment with the present.

So in the words immediately preceding my text, we read, let us not sleep, as do others, but let us watch and be sober. The use of the antithesis in our text is chiefly the former, but there cannot be discharged from one of the expressions, wake, the ideas which have just been associated with it, especially as the word which is translated wake is the same as that just translated in the sixth verse, let us watch. So that here there is meant by it, not merely the condition of life but that of Christian life--sober-minded vigilance and wide-awakeness to the realities of being. With this explanation of the meanings of the words before us, we may now proceed to consider them a little more minutely.

**I. Note the death which is the foundation of life.**

Recalling what I have said as to the precision and carefulness with which the Apostle varies his expressions in this context; speaking of Christ's death only by that grim name, and of the death of His servants as being merely a slumber, we have for the first thought suggested in reference to Christ's death, that it exhausted all the bitterness of death. Physically, the sufferings of our Lord were not greater, they were even less, than that of many a man. His voluntary acceptance of them was peculiar to Himself. But His death stands alone in this, that on His head was concentrated the whole awfulness of the thing. So far as the mere external facts go, there is nothing special about it. But I know not how the shrinking of Jesus Christ from the Cross can be explained without impugning His character, unless we see in His death something far more terrible than is the common lot of men. To me Gethsemane is altogether mysterious, and that scene beneath the olives shatters to pieces the perfectness of His character, unless we recognise that there it was the burden of the world's sin, beneath which, though His will never faltered, His human power tottered. Except we understand that, it seems to me that many who derived from Jesus Christ all their courage, bore their martyrdom better than He did; and that the servant has many a time been greater than his Lord. But if we take the Scripture point of view, and say, The Lord has made to meet upon Him the iniquity of us all, then we can understand the agony beneath the olives, and the cry from the Cross, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

Further, I would notice that this death is by the Apostle set forth as being the main factor in man's redemption. This is the first of Paul's letters, dating long before the others with which we are familiar. Whatever may have been the spiritual development of St. Paul in certain directions after his conversion--and I do not for a moment deny that there was such--it is very important to notice that the fundamentals of his Christology and doctrine of salvation were the same from the beginning to the end, and that in this, his first utterance, he lays down, as emphatically and clearly as ever afterwards he did, the great truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the Cross, thereby secured man's redemption. Here he isolates the death from the rest of the history of Christ, and concentrates the whole light of his thought upon the Cross, and says, There! that is the power by which men have been redeemed. I beseech you to ask yourselves whether these representations of Christian truth adhere to the perspective of Scripture, which do not in like manner set forth in the foreground of the whole the atoning death of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then note, further, that this death, the fountain of life, is a death for us. Now I know, of course, that the language here does not necessarily involve the idea of one dying instead of, but only of one dying on behalf of, another. But then I come to this question, In what conceivable sense, except the sense of bearing the world's sins, and, therefore, mine, is the death of Jesus Christ of advantage to me? Take the Scripture narratives. He died by the condemnation of the Jewish courts as a blasphemer; by the condemnation of the supercilious Roman court--cowardly in the midst of its superciliousness--as a possible rebel, though the sentencer did not believe in the reality of the charges. I want to know what good that is to me? He died, say some people, as the victim of a clearer insight and a more loving heart than the men around Him could understand. What advantage is that to me?

Oh, brethren! there is no meaning in the words He died for us unless we understand that the benefit of His death lies in the fact that it was the sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; and that, therefore, He died for us.

But then remember, too, that in this expression is set forth, not only the objective fact of Christ's death for us, but much in reference to the subjective emotions and purposes of Him who died. Paul was writing to these Thessalonians, of whom none, I suppose, except possibly a few Jews who might be amongst them, had ever seen Jesus Christ in the flesh, or known anything about Him. And yet he says to them, Away across the ocean there, Jesus Christ died for you men, not one of whom had ever appealed to His heart through His eyes.

The principle involved is capable of the widest possible expansion. When Christ went to the Cross there was in His heart, in His purposes, in His desires, a separate place for every soul of man whom He embraced, not with the dim vision of some philanthropist, who looks upon the masses of unborn generations as possibly beneficially affected by some of his far-reaching plans, but with the individualising and separating knowledge of a divine eye, and the love of a divine heart. Jesus Christ bore the sins of the world because He bore in His sympathies and His purposes the sins of each single soul. Yours and mine and all our fellows were there. Guilt and fear and loneliness, and all the other evils that beset men because they have departed from the living God, are floated away

By the water and the blood

From Thy wounded side which flowed;

and as the context teaches us, it is because He died for us that He is our Lord, and because He died for every man that He is every man's Master and King.

**II. Note, secondly, the transformation of our lives and deaths affected thereby.**

You may remember that, in my introductory remarks, I pointed out the double application of that antithesis of waking or sleeping in the context as referring in one case to the fact of physical life or death, and in the other to the fact of moral engrossment with the slumbering influences of the present, or of Christian vigilance. I carry some allusion to both of these ideas in the remarks that I have to make.

Through Jesus Christ life may be quickened into watchfulness. It is not enough to take waking as meaning living, for you may turn the metaphor round and say about a great many men that living means dreamy sleeping. Paul speaks in the preceding verses of others than Christians as being asleep, and their lives as one long debauch and slumber in the night. Whilst, in contrast with physical death, physical life may be called waking; the condition of thousands of men, in regard to all the higher faculties, activities, and realities of being, is that of somnambulists--they are walking indeed, but they are walking in their sleep. Just as a man fast asleep knows nothing of the realities round him; just as he is swallowed up in his own dreams, so many walk in a vain show. Their highest faculties are dormant; the only real things do not touch them, and their eyes are closed to these. They live in a region of illusions which will pass away at cock-crowing, and leave them desolate. For some of us here living is only a distempered sleep, troubled by dreams which, whether they be pleasant or bitter, equally lack roots in the permanent realities to which we shall wake some day. But if we hold by Jesus Christ, who died for us, and let His love constrain us, His Cross quicken us, and the might of His great sacrifice touch us, and the blood of sprinkling be applied to our eyeballs as an eye-salve, that we may see, we shall wake from our opiate sleep--though it may be as deep as if the sky rained soporifics upon us--and be conscious of the things that are, and have our dormant faculties roused, and be quickened into intense vigilance against our enemies, and brace ourselves for our tasks, and be ever looking forward to that joyful hope, to that coming which shall bring the fulness of waking and of life. So, you professing Christians, do you take the lessons of this text? A sleeping Christian is on the high road to cease to be a Christian at all. If there be one thing more comprehensively imperative upon us than another, it is this, that, belonging, as we do by our very profession, to the day, and being the children of the light, we shall neither sleep nor be drunken, but be sober, watching as they who expect their Lord. You walk amidst realities that will hide themselves unless you gaze for them; therefore, watch. You walk amidst enemies that will steal subtly upon you, like some gliding serpent through the grass, or some painted savage in the forest; therefore, watch. You expect a Lord to come from heaven with a relieving army that is to raise the siege and free the hard-beset garrison from its fears and its toilsome work; therefore, watch. They that sleep, sleep in the night. They who are Christ's should be like the living creatures in the Revelation, all eyes round about, and every eye gazing on things unseen and looking for the Master when He comes.

On the other hand, the death of Christ will soften our deaths into slumber. The Apostle will not call what the senses call death, by that dread name, which was warranted when applied to the facts of Christ's death. The physical fact remaining the same, all that is included under the complex whole called death which makes its terrors, goes, for a man who keeps fast hold of Christ who died and lives. For what makes the sting of death? Two or three things. It is like some poisonous insect's sting, it is a complex weapon. One side of it is the fear of retribution. Another side of it is the shrinking from loneliness. Another side of it is the dread of the dim darkness of an unknown future. And all these are taken clean away. Is it guilt, dread of retribution? Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me. Is it loneliness? In the valley of darkness I will be with thee. My rod and My staff will comfort thee. Is it a shrinking from the dim unknown and all the familiar habitudes and occupations of the warm corner where we have lived? Jesus Christ has brought immortality to light by the Gospel. We do not, according to the sad words of one of the victims of modern advanced thought, pass by the common road into the great darkness, but by the Christ-made living Way into the everlasting light. And so it is a misnomer to apply the same term to the physical fact plus the accompaniment of dread and shrinking and fear of retribution and solitude and darkness, and to the physical fact invested with the direct and bright opposites of all these.

Sleep is rest; sleep is consciousness; sleep is the prophecy of waking. We know not what the condition of those who sleep in Jesus may be, but we know that the child on its mother's breast, and conscious somehow, in its slumber, of the warm place where its head rests, is full of repose. And they that sleep in Jesus will be so. Then, whether we wake or sleep does not seem to matter so very much.

**III. The united life of all who live with Christ.**

Christ's gift to men is the gift of life in all senses of that word, from the lowest to the highest. That life, as our text tells us, is altogether unaffected by death. We cannot see round the sharp angle where the valley turns, but we know that the path runs straight on through the gorge up to the throat of the pass--and so on to the shining table-lands whereof our God Himself is Sun and Moon. There are some rivers that run through stagnant lakes, keeping the tinge of their waters, and holding together the body of their stream undiverted from its course, and issuing undiminished and untarnished from the lower end of the lake. And so the stream of our lives may run through the Dead Sea, and come out below none the worse for the black waters through which it has forced its way. The life that Christ gives is unaffected by death. Our creed is a risen Saviour, and the corollary of that creed is, that death touches the circumference, but never gets near the man. It is hard to believe, in the face of the foolish senses; it is hard to believe, in the face of aching sorrow. It is hard to-day to believe, in the face of passionate and ingenious denial, but it is true all the same. Death is sleep, and sleep is life.

And so, further, my text tells us that this life is life with Christ. We know not details, we need not know them. Here we have the presence of Jesus Christ, if we love Him, as really as when He walked the earth. Ay! more really, for Jesus Christ is nearer to us who, having not seen Him, love Him, and somewhat know His divinity and His sacrifice, than He was to the men who companied with Him all the time that He went in and out amongst them, whilst they were ignorant of who dwelt with them, and entertained the Lord of angels and men unawares. He is with us, and it is the power and the privilege and the joy of our lives to realise His presence. That Lord who, whilst He was on earth, was the Son of Man which is in heaven, now that He is in heaven in His corporeal humanity is the Son of God who dwells with us. And as He dwells with us, if we love Him and trust Him, so, but in fashion incapable of being revealed to us, now does He dwell with those of whose condition this is the only and all-sufficing positive knowledge which we have, that they are absent from the body; present with the Lord.

Further, that united life is a social life. The whole force of my text is often missed by English readers, who run into one idea the two words together with. But if you would put a comma after together, you would understand better what Paul meant. He refers to two forms of union. Whether we wake or sleep we shall live all aggregated together, and all aggregated together because each is with Him. That is to say, union with Jesus Christ makes all who partake of that union, whether they belong to the one side of the river or the other, into a mighty whole. They are together because they are with the Lord.

Suppose a great city, and a stream flowing through its centre. The palace and all pertaining to the court are on one side of the water; there is an outlying suburb on the other, of meaner houses, inhabited by poor and humble people. But yet it is one city. Ye are come unto the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, and to the spirits of just men made perfect. We are knit together by one life, one love, one thought; and the more we fix our hearts on the things which those above live among and by, the more truly are we knit to them. As a quaint old English writer says, They are gone but into another pew in the same church.

We are one in Him, and so there will be a perfecting of union in reunion; and the inference so craved for by our hearts seems to be warranted to our understandings, that that society above, which is the perfection of society, shall not be lacking in the elements of mutual recognition and companionship, without which we cannot conceive of society at all. And so we shall ever be with the Lord.

Dear friends, I beseech you to trust your sinful souls to that dear Lord who bore you in His heart and mind when He bore His cross to Calvary and completed the work of your redemption. If you will accept Him as your sacrifice and Saviour, when He cried It is finished, united to Him your lives will be quickened into intense activity and joyful vigilance and expectation, and death will be smoothed into a quiet falling asleep. The shadow feared of man, that strikes threateningly across every path, will change as we approach it, if our hearts are anchored on Him who died for us, into the Angel of Light to whom God has given charge concerning us to bear up our feet upon His hands, and land us in the presence of the Lord and in the perfect society of those who love Him. And so shall we live together, and all together, with Him.