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

**1 THESSALONIANS-010**. **PAUL'S EARLIEST TEACHING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I charge you, by the Lord, that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."*

*1 Thessalonians 5:27*

If the books of the New Testament were arranged according to the dates of their composition, this epistle would stand first. It was written somewhere about twenty years after the Crucifixion, and long before any of the existing Gospels. It is, therefore, of peculiar interest, as being the most venerable extant Christian document, and as being a witness to Christian truth quite independent of the Gospel narratives.

The little community at Thessalonica had been gathered together as the result of a very brief period of ministration by Paul. He had spoken for three successive Sabbaths in the synagogue, and had drawn together a Christian society, mostly consisting of heathens, though with a sprinkling of Jews amongst them. Driven from the city by a riot, he had left it for Athens, with many anxious thoughts, of course, as to whether the infant community would be able to stand alone after so few weeks of his presence and instruction. Therefore he sent back one of his travelling companions, Timothy by name, to watch over the young plant for a little while. When Timothy returned with the intelligence of their steadfastness, it was good news indeed, and with a sense of relieved anxiety, he sits down to write this letter, which, all through, throbs with thankfulness, and reveals the strain which the news had taken off his spirit.

There are no such definite doctrinal statements in it as in the most of Paul's longer letters; it is simply an outburst of confidence and love and tenderness, and a series of practical instructions. It has been called the least doctrinal of the Pauline Epistles. And in one sense, and under certain limitations, that is perfectly true. But the very fact that it is so makes its indications and hints and allusions the more significant; and if this letter, not written for the purpose of enforcing any special doctrinal truth, be so saturated as it is with the facts and principles of the Gospel, the stronger is the attestation which it gives to the importance of these. I have, therefore, thought it might be worth our while now, and might, perhaps, set threadbare truth in something of a new light, if we put this--the most ancient Christian writing extant, which is quite independent of the four Gospels--into the witness-box, and see what it has to say about the great truths and principles which we call the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is my simple design, and I gather the phenomena into three or four divisions for the sake of accuracy and order.

**I. First of all, then, let us hear its witness to the divine Christ.**

Look how the letter begins. Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ. What is the meaning of that collocation, putting these two names side by side, unless it means that the Lord Jesus Christ sits on the Father's throne, and is divine?

Then there is another fact that I would have you notice, and that is that more than twenty times in this short letter that great name is applied to Jesus, the Lord. Now mark that that is something more than a mere title of human authority. It is in reality the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Jehovah, and is the transference to Him of that incommunicable name.

And then there is another fact which I would have you weigh, viz., that in this letter direct prayer is offered to our Lord Himself. In one place we read the petition, May our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way unto you, where the petition is presented to both, and where both are supposed to be operative in the answer. And more than that, the word direct, following upon this plural subject, is itself a singular verb. Could language more completely express than that grammatical solecism does, the deep truth of the true and proper divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? There is nothing in any part of Scripture more emphatic and more lofty in its unfaltering proclamation of that fundamental truth of the Gospel than this altogether undoctrinal Epistle.

The Apostle does not conceive himself to be telling these men, though they were such raw and recent Christians, anything new when he presupposes the truth that to Him desires and prayers may go. Thus the very loftiest apex of revealed religion had been imparted to that handful of heathens in the few weeks of the Apostle's stay amongst them. And nowhere upon the inspired pages of the fourth Evangelist, nor in that great Epistle to the Colossians, which is the very citadel and central fort of that doctrine in Scripture, is there more emphatically stated this truth than here, in these incidental allusions.

This witness, at any rate, declares, apart altogether from any other part of Scripture, that so early in the development of the Church's history, and to people so recently dragged from idolatry, and having received but such necessarily partial instruction in revealed truth, this had not been omitted, that the Christ in whom they trusted was the Everlasting Son of the Father. And it takes it for granted that, so deeply was that truth embedded in their new consciousness that an allusion to it was all that was needed for their understanding and their faith. That is the first part of the testimony.

**II. Now, secondly, let us ask what this witness has to say about the dying Christ.**

There is no doctrinal theology in the Epistle to the Thessalonians, they tell us. Granted that there is no articulate argumentative setting forth of great doctrinal truths. But these are implied and involved in almost every word of it; and are definitely stated thus incidentally in more places than one. Let us hear the witness about the dying Christ.

First, as to the fact, The Jews killed the Lord Jesus. The historical fact is here set forth distinctly. And then, beyond the fact, there is as distinctly, though in the same incidental fashion, set forth the meaning of that fact--God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us.

Here are at least two things--one, the allusion, as to a well-known and received truth, proclaimed before now to them, that Jesus Christ in His death had died for them; and the other, that Jesus Christ was the medium through whom the Father had appointed that men should obtain all the blessings which are wrapped up in that sovereign word salvation. I need but mention in this connection another verse, from another part of the letter, which speaks of Jesus as He that delivereth us from the wrath to come. Remark that there our Authorised Version fails to give the whole significance of the words, because it translates delivered, instead of, as the Revised Version correctly does, delivereth. It is a continuous deliverance, running all through the life of the Christian man, and not merely to be realised away yonder at the far end; because by the mighty providence of God, and by the automatic working of the consequences of every transgression and disobedience, that wrath is ever coming, coming, coming towards men, and lighting on them, and a continual Deliverer, who delivers us by His death, is what the human heart needs. This witness is distinct that the death of Christ is a sacrifice, that the death of Christ is man's deliverance from wrath, that the death of Christ is a present deliverance from the consequences of transgression.

And was that Paul's peculiar doctrine? Is it conceivable that, in a letter in which he refers--once, at all events--to the churches in Judea as their brethren, he was proclaiming any individual or schismatic reading of the facts of the life of Jesus Christ? I believe that there has been a great deal too much made of the supposed divergencies of types of doctrine in the New Testament. There are such types, within certain limits. Nobody would mistake a word of John's calm, mystical, contemplative spirit for a word of Paul's fiery, dialectic spirit. And nobody would mistake either the one or the other for Peter's impulsive, warm-hearted exhortations. But whilst there are diversities in the way of apprehending, there are no diversities in the declaration of what is the central truth to be apprehended. These varyings of the types of doctrine in the New Testament are one in this, that all point to the Cross as the world's salvation, and declare that the death there was the death for all mankind.

Paul comes to it with his reasoning; John comes to it with his adoring contemplation; Peter comes to it with his mind saturated with Old Testament allusions. Paul declares that the Christ died for us; John declares that He is the Lamb of God; Peter declares that Christ bare our sins in His own body on the tree. But all make one unbroken phalanx of witness in their proclamation, that the Cross, because it is a cross of sacrifice, is a cross of reconciliation and peace and hope. And this is the Gospel that they all proclaim, how that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and Paul could venture to say, Whether it were they or I, so we preach, and so ye believed.

That was the Gospel that took these heathens, wallowing in the mire of sensuous idolatry, and lifted them up to the elevation and the blessedness of children of God.

And if you will read this letter, and think that there had been only a few weeks of acquaintance with the Gospel on the part of its readers, and then mark how the early and imperfect glimpse of it had transformed them, you will see where the power lies in the proclamation of the Gospel. A short time before they had been heathens; and now says Paul, From you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything. We do not need to talk to you about love of the brethren, for yourselves are taught of God to love one another, and my heart is full of thankfulness when I think of your work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope. The men had been transformed. What transformed them? The message of a divine and dying Christ, who had offered up Himself without spot unto God, and who was their peace and their righteousness and their power.

**III. Thirdly, notice what this witness has to say about the risen and ascended Christ.**

Here is what it has to say: Ye turned unto God ... to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead. And again: The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. The risen Christ, then, is in the heavens, and Paul assumes that these people, just brought out of heathenism, have received that truth into their hearts in the love of it, and know it so thoroughly that he can take for granted their entire acquiescence in and acceptance of it.

Remember, we have nothing to do with the four Gospels here. Remember, not a line of them had yet been written. Remember, that we are dealing here with an entirely independent witness. And then tell us what importance is to be attached to this evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Twenty years after His death here is this man speaking about that Resurrection as being not only something that he had to proclaim, and believed, but as being the recognised and notorious fact which all the churches accepted, and which underlay all their faith.

I would have you remember that if, twenty years after this event, this witness was borne, that necessarily carries us back a great deal nearer to the event than the hour of its utterance, for there is no mark of its being new testimony at that instant, but every mark of its being the habitual and continuous witness that had been borne from the instant of the alleged Resurrection to the present time. It at least takes us back a good many years nearer the empty sepulchre than the twenty which mark its date. It at least takes us back to the conversion of the Apostle Paul; and that necessarily involves, as it seems to me, that if that man, believing in the Resurrection, went into the Church, there would have been an end of his association with them, unless he had found there the same faith. The fact of the matter is, there is not a place where you can stick a pin in, between the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the date of this letter, wide enough to admit of the rise of the faith in a Resurrection. We are necessarily forced by the very fact of the existence of the Church to the admission that the belief in the Resurrection was contemporaneous with the alleged Resurrection itself.

And so we are shut up--in spite of the wriggling of people that do not accept that great truth--we are shut up to the old alternative, as it seems to me, that either Jesus Christ rose from the dead, or the noblest lives that the world has ever seen, and the loftiest system of morality that has ever been proclaimed, were built upon a lie. And we are called to believe that at the bidding of a mere unsupported, bare, dogmatic assertion that miracles are impossible. Believe it who will, I decline to be coerced into believing a blank, staring psychological contradiction and impossibility, in order to be saved the necessity of admitting the existence of the supernatural. I would rather believe in the supernatural than the ridiculous. And to me it is unspeakably ridiculous to suppose that anything but the fact of the Resurrection accounts for the existence of the Church, and for the faith of this witness that we have before us.

And so, dear friends, we come back to this, the Christianity that flings away the risen Christ is a mere mass of tatters with nothing in it to cover a man's nakedness, an illusion with no vitality in it to quicken, to comfort, to ennoble, to raise, to teach aspiration or hope or effort. The human heart needs the Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. And this independent witness confirms the Gospel story: Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept.

**IV. Lastly, let us hear what this witness has to say about the returning Christ.**

That is the characteristic doctrinal subject of the letter. We all know that wonderful passage of unsurpassed tenderness and majesty, which has soothed so many hearts and been like a gentle hand laid upon so many aching spirits, about the returning Jesus coming in the clouds, with the dear ones that are asleep along with Him, and the reunion of them that sleep and them that are alive and remain, in one indissoluble concord and concourse, when we shall ever be with the Lord, and clasp inseparable hands with joy and bliss in over-measure for ever. The coming of the Master does not appear here with emphasis on its judicial aspect. It is rather intended to bring hope to the mourners, and the certainty that bands broken here may be re-knit in holier fashion hereafter. But the judicial aspect is not, as it could not be, left out, and the Apostle further tells us that that day cometh as a thief in the night. That is a quotation of the Master's own words, which we find in the Gospels; and so again a confirmation, so far as it goes, from an independent witness, of the Gospel story. And then he goes on, in terrible language, to speak of sudden destruction, as of travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

These, then, are the points of this witness's testimony as to the returning Lord--a personal coming, a reunion of all believers in Him, in order to eternal felicity and mutual gladness, and the destruction that shall fall by His coming upon those who turn away from Him.

What a revelation that would be to men who had known what it was to grope in the darkness of heathendom, and to have new light upon the future!

I remember once walking in the long galleries of the Vatican, on the one side of which there are Christian inscriptions from the catacombs, and on the other heathen inscriptions from the tombs. One side is all dreamy and hopeless; one long sigh echoing along the line of white marbles--Vale! vale! in aeternum vale! (Farewell, farewell, for ever farewell.) On the other side--In Christo, in pace, in spe. (In Christ, in peace, in hope.) That is the witness that we have to lay to our hearts. And so death becomes a passage, and we let go the dear hands, believing that we shall clasp them again.

My brother! this witness is to a gospel that is the gospel for Manchester as well as for Thessalonica. You and I want just the same as these old heathens there wanted. We, too, need the divine Christ, the dying Christ, the risen Christ, the ascended Christ, the returning Christ. And I beseech you to take Him for your Christ, in all the fulness of His offices, the manifoldness of His power, and the sweetness of His love, so that of you it may be said, as this Apostle says about these Thessalonians, Ye received it not as the word of man, but, as it is in truth, as the word of God.