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

**1 TIMOTHY-003**. **THE GOSPEL IN SMALL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."*

*1 Timothy 1:15*

Condensation is a difficult art. There are few things drier and more unsatisfactory than small books on great subjects, abbreviated statements of large systems. Error lurks in summaries, and yet here the whole fulness of God's communication to men is gathered into a sentence; tiny as a diamond, and flashing like it. My text is the one precious drop of essence, distilled from gardens full of fragrant flowers. There is an old legend of a magic tent, which could be expanded to shelter an army, and contracted to cover a single man. That great Gospel which fills the Bible and overflows on the shelves of crowded libraries is here, without harm to its power, folded up into one saying, which the simplest can understand sufficiently to partake of the salvation which it offers.

There are five of these faithful sayings in the letters of Paul, usually called the pastoral epistles. It seems to have been a manner with him, at that time of his life, to underscore anything which he felt to be especially important by attaching to it this label. They are all, with one exception, references to the largest truths of the Gospel. I turn to this one, the first of them now, for the sake of gathering some lessons from it.

**I. Note, then, first, here the Gospel in a nutshell.**

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Now, every word there is weighty, and might be, not beaten out, but opened out into volumes. Mark who it is that comes--the solemn double name of that great Lord, Christ Jesus. The former tells of His divine appointment and preparation, inasmuch as the Spirit of the Lord God is upon Him, anointing Him to proclaim good tidings to the poor, and to open the prison doors to all the captives, and asserts that it is He to whom prophets and ritual witnessed, and for whose coming prophets and kings looked wearily through the ages, and died rejoicing even to see afar off the glimmer of His day. The name of Jesus tells of the child born in Bethlehem, who knows the experience of our lives by His own, and not only bends over our griefs with the pity and omniscience of a God, but with the experience and sympathy of a man.

Christ Jesus came. Then He was before He came. His own will impelled His feet, and brought Him to earth.

Christ Jesus came to save. Then there is disease, for saving is healing; and there is danger, for saving is making secure.

Christ Jesus came to save sinners--the universal condition, co-extensive with the world into which, and for which, He came. And so the essence of the Gospel, as it lay in Paul's mind, and had been verified in his experience, was this--that a divine person had left a life of glory, and in wonderful fashion had taken upon Himself manhood in order to deliver men from the universal danger and disease. That is the Gospel which Paul believed, and which he commends to us as a faithful saying.

Well, then, if that be so, there are two or three things very important for us to lay to heart. The first is the universality of sin. That is the thing in which we are all alike, dear friends. That is the one thing about which any man is safe in his estimate of another. We differ profoundly. The members of this congregation, gathered accidentally together, and perhaps never to be all together again, may be at the antipodes of culture, of condition, of circumstances, of modes of life; but, just as really below all the diversities there lies the common possession of the one human heart, so really and universally below all diversities there lies the black drop in the heart, and we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It is that truth which I want to lay on your hearts as the first condition to understanding anything about the power, the meaning, the blessedness of the Gospel which we say we believe.

And what does Paul mean by this universal indictment? If you take the vivid autobiographical sketch in the midst of which it is embedded, you will understand. He goes on to say, of whom I am chief. It was the same man that said, without supposing that he was contradicting this utterance at all, touching the righteousness which is in the law I was blameless. And yet, I am chief. So all true men who have ever shown us their heart, in telling their Christian faith, have repeated Paul's statement; from Augustine in his wonderful Confessions, to John Bunyan in his Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners. And then prosaic men have said, What profligates they must have been, or what exaggerators they are now! No. Sewer gas of the worst sort has no smell; and the most poisonous exhalations are only perceptible by their effects. What made Paul think himself the chief of sinners was not that he had broken the commandments, for he might have said, and in effect did say, All these have I kept from my youth up, but that, through all the respectability and morality of his early life there ran this streak--an alienation of heart, in the pride of self-confidence, from God, and an ignorance of his own wretchedness and need. Ah! brethren, I do not need to exaggerate, nor to talk about splendid vices, in the untrue language of one of the old saints, but this I seek to press on you: that the deep, universal sin does not lie in the indulgence of passions, or the breach of moralities, but it lies here--thou hast left Me, the fountain of living water. That is what I charge on myself, and on every one of you, and I beseech you to recognise the existence of this sinfulness beneath all the surface of reputable and pure lives. Beautiful they may be; God forbid that I should deny it: beautiful with many a strenuous effort after goodness, and charming in many respects, but yet vitiated by this, The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified. That is enough to make a man brush away all the respectabilities and proprieties and graces, and look at the black reality beneath, and wail out of whom I am chief.

But, further, Paul's condensed summary of the Gospel implies the fatal character of this universal sin. He comes to save, says he. Now what answers to save is either disease or danger. The word is employed in the original in antithesis to both conditions. To save is to heal and to make safe. And I need not remind you, I suppose, of how truly the alienation from God, and the substitution for Him of self or of creature, is the sickness of the whole man. But the end of sickness uncured is death. We have no healing medicine, and the wound is incurable by the skill of any earthly chirurgeon. The notion of sickness passes, therefore, at once into that of danger: for unhealed sickness can only end in death. Oh! that my words could have the waking power that would startle some of my complacent hearers into the recognition of the bare facts of their lives and character, and of the position in which they stand on a slippery inclined plane that goes straight down into darkness!

You do not hear much about the danger of sin from some modern pulpits. God forbid that it should be the staple of any; but God forbid that it should be excluded from any! Whilst fear is a low motive, self-preservation is not a low one; and it is to that that I now appeal. Brethren, the danger of every sin is, first, its rapid growth; second, its power of separating from God; third, the certainty of a future--ay! and present--retribution.

To me, the proof of the fatal effect of sin is what God had to do in order to stop it. Do you think that it would be a small, superficial cut which could be stanched by nothing else but the pierced hand of Jesus Christ? Measure the intensity of danger by the cost of deliverance, and judge how grave are the wounds for the healing of which stripes had to be laid on Him. Ah! if you and I had not been in danger of death, Jesus Christ would not have died. And if it be true that the Son of God laid aside His glory, and came into the world and died on the Cross for men, out of the very greatness of the gift, and the marvellousness of the mercy, there comes solemn teaching as to the intensity of the misery and the reality and awfulness of the retribution from which we were delivered by such a death. Sin, the universal condition, brings with it no slight disease and no small danger.

Further, we may gather from this condensed summary where the true heart and essence of the Christian revelation is. You will never understand it until you are contented to take the point of view which the New Testament takes, and give all weight and gravity to the fact of man's transgression and the consequences thereof. We shall never know what the power and the glory of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is until we recognise that, first and foremost, it is the mighty means by which man's ruin is repaired, man's downrush is stopped, sin is forgiven and capable of being cleansed. Only when we think of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as being, first and foremost, the redemption of the world by the great act of incarnation and sacrifice, do we come to be in a position in any measure to estimate its superlative worth.

And, for my part, I believe that almost all the mistakes and errors and evaporations of Christianity into a mere dead nothing which have characterised the various ages of the Church come mainly from this, that men fail to see how deep and how fatal are the wounds of sin, and so fail to apprehend the Gospel as being mainly and primarily a system of redemption. There are many other most beautiful aspects about it, much else in it, that is lovely and of good report, and fitted to draw men's hearts and admiration; but all is rooted in this, the life and death of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice by whom we are forgiven, and in whom we are healed. And if you strike that out, you have a dead nothing left--an eviscerated Gospel.

I believe that we all need to be reminded of that to-day, as we always do, but mainly to-day, when we hear from so many lips estimates, favourable or unfavourable to Christianity and its mission in the world, which leave out of sight, or minimise into undue insignificance, or shove into a backward place, its essential characteristic, that it is the power of God through Christ, His Son Incarnate, dying and rising again for the salvation of individual souls from the penalty, the guilt, the habit, and the love of their sins, and only secondarily is it a morality, a philosophy, a social lever. I take for mine the quaint saying of one of the old Puritans, When so many brethren are preaching to the times, it may be allowed one poor brother to preach for eternity.

This is a faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

**II. Now, secondly, note the reliableness of this condensed Gospel.**

When a man in the middle of some slight plank, thrown across a stream, tests it with a stamp of his foot, and calls to his comrades, It is quite firm, there is reason for their venturing upon it too. That is exactly what Paul is doing here. How does he know that it is a faithful saying? Because he has proved it in his own experience, and found that in his case the salvation which Jesus Christ was said to effect has been effected. Now there are many other grounds of certitude besides this, but, after all, it is worth men's while to consider how many millions there have been from the beginning who would be ready to join chorus with the Apostle here, and to say, One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. My experience cannot be your certitude; but if you and I are suffering from precisely the same disease, and I have tested a cure, my experiences should have some weight with you. And so, brethren, I point you to all the thousands who are ready to say, This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him. Are there any who give counter-evidence; that say, We have tried it. It is all a sham and imagination. We have asked this Christ of yours to forgive us, and He has not. We have asked Him to cleanse us, and He has not. We have tried Him, and He is an impostor, and we will have no more to do with Him. There are people, alas! who have gone back to their wallowing in the mire, but it was not because Christ had failed in His promises, but because they did not care to have them fulfilled any more. Jesus Christ does not promise that His salvation shall work against the will of men who submit themselves to it.

But it is not only because of that consentient chorus of many voices--the testimony of which wise men will not reject--that the word is a faithful saying. This is no place or time to enter upon anything like a condensation of the Christian evidence; but, in lieu of everything else, I point to one proof. There is no fact in the history of the world better attested, and the unbelief of which is more unreasonable, than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Christ rose from the dead--and you cannot understand the history of the world unless He did, nor the existence of the Church either--if Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it seems to me that almost all the rest follows of necessity: the influx of the supernatural, the unique character of His career, the correspondence of the end with the beginning, the broad seal of the divine confirmation stamped upon His claims to be the Son of God and the Redeemer of the world. All these things seem to me to come necessarily from that fact. And I say, given the consentient witness of nineteen centuries, given the existence of the Church, given the effects of Christianity in the world, given that upon which they repose--the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead--the conclusion is sound, This is a faithful saying ... that He came into the world to save sinners.

Men talk, nowadays, very often as if the progress of science and new views as to the evolution of creatures or of mankind had effected the certitude of the Gospel. It does not seem to me that they have in the smallest degree. The foundation of God standeth sure, whatever may become of some of the superstructures which men have built upon it. They may very probably be blown away. So much the better if we get the rock to build upon once more. A great deal is going, but not the Gospel. Do not let us be afraid, or suppose that it will suffer. Do not let us dread every new speculation as if it was going to finish Christianity, but recognise this--that the fact of man's sin and, blessed be God! the fact of man's redemption stands untouched by them all; and to-day, as of old, Jesus Christ is, and is firmly manifested to be, the world's Saviour. Whatsoever refuge may be swept away by any storms, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tried corner-stone, a sure foundation: He that believeth shall not be confounded.

**III. Lastly, notice the consequent wisdom and duty of acceptance.**

Worthy of all acceptation, says Paul. Yes, of course, if it is reliable. That word of the Lord which is sure, making wise the simple, deserves to be received. Now this phrase, all acceptation, may mean either of two things: it may either mean worthy of being welcomed by all men, or by the whole of each man.

This Gospel deserves to be welcomed by every man, for it is fitted for every man, since it deals with the primary human characteristic of transgression. Brethren! we need different kinds of intellectual nutriment, according to education and culture. We need different kinds of treatment, according to condition and circumstance. The morality of one age is not the morality of another. Much, even of right and wrong, is local and temporary; but black man and white, savage and civilised, philosopher and fool, king and clown, all need the same air to breathe, the same water to drink, the same sun for light and warmth, and all need the same Christ for redemption from the same sin, for safety from the same danger, for snatching from the same death. This Gospel is a Gospel for the world, and for every man in it. Have you taken it for yours? If it is worthy of all acceptation, it is worthy of your acceptation. If you have not, you are treating Him and it with indignity, as if it was a worthless letter left in the post-office for you, which you knew was there, but which you did not think valuable enough to take the trouble to go for. The gift lies at your side. It is less than truth to say that it is worthy of being accepted. Oh! it is infinitely more than that.

It is, also, worthy of all acceptation in the sense of worthy of being accepted into all a man's nature, because it will fit it all and bless it all. Some of us give it a half welcome. We take it into our heads, and then we put a partition between them and our hearts, and keep our religion on the other side, so that it does not influence us at all. It is worthy of being received by the understanding, to which it will bring truth absolute; of being received by the will, to which it will bring the freedom of submission; of being received by the conscience, to which it will bring quickening; of being received by the affections, to which it will bring pure and perfect love. For hope, it will bring a certainty to gaze upon; for passions, a curb; for effort, a spur and a power; for desires, satisfaction; for the whole man, healing and light.

Brother! take it. And, if you do, begin where it begins, with your sins; and be contented to be saved as a sinner in danger and sickness, who can neither defend nor heal yourself. And thus coming, you will test the rope and find it hold; you will take the medicine and know that it cures; and, by your own experience, you will be able to say, This is a faithful saying, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.