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

**2 CORINTHIANS-003**. **SEAL AND EARNEST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts."*

*2 Corinthians 1:23*

There are three strong metaphors in this and the preceding verse--anointing, sealing, and giving the earnest--all of which find their reality in the same divine act. These three metaphors all refer to the same subject, and what that subject is is sufficiently explained in the last of them. The earnest consists of the Spirit in our hearts, and the same explanation might have been appended to both the preceding clauses, for the anointing is the anointing of the Spirit, and the seal is the seal of the Spirit. Further, these three metaphors all refer to one and the same act. They are not three things, but three aspects of one thing, just as a sunbeam might be regarded either as the source of warmth, or of light, or of chemical action. So the one gift of the one Spirit, anoints, seals, and is the earnest. Further, these three metaphors all declare a universal prerogative of Christians. Every man that loves Jesus Christ has the Spirit in the measure of his faith, and if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His.

**I. Note the first metaphor in the text--the seal of the Spirit.**

A seal is impressed upon a recipient material made soft by warmth, in order to leave there a copy of itself. Now it is not fanciful, nor riding a metaphor to death, when I dwell upon these features of the emblem in order to suggest their analogies in Christian life. The Spirit of God comes into our spirits, and by gentle contact impresses upon the material, which was intractable until it was melted by the genial warmth of faith and love, the likeness of Himself, but yet so as that prominences correspond to the hollows, and what is in relief in the one is sunk in the other. Expand that general statement for a moment or two.

The effect of all the divine indwelling, which is the characteristic gift of Christ to every Christian soul, is to mould the recipient into the image of the divine inhabitant. There is in the human spirit--such are its dignity amidst its ruins, and its nobility shining through its degradation--a capacity of receiving that image of God which consists not only in voluntary and intelligent action and the consciousness of personal being, but in the love of the things that are fair, and in righteousness, and true holiness. His Spirit, entering into a heart, will make that heart wise with its own wisdom, strong with some infusion of its own strength, gracious with some drops of its own grace, gentle with some softening from its own gentleness, holy with some purity reflected from its own transcendent whiteness. The Spirit, which is life, moulds the heart into which it enters to a kindred, and, therefore, similar life.

There are, however, characteristics in this seal of the Spirit which are not so much copies as correspondences. That is to say, just as what is convex in the seal is concave in the impression, and vice versa, so, when that Divine Spirit comes into our spirits, its promises will excite faith, its gifts will breed desire; to every bestowment there will answer an opening receptivity. Recipient love will correspond to the love that longs to dispense, the sense of need to the divine fulness and sufficiency, emptiness to abundance, prayers to promises; the cry Abba! Father ! the yearning consciousness of sonship, to the word Thou art My Son; and the upward eye of aspiration and petition, and necessity, and waiting, to the downward glance of love bestowing itself. The open heart answers to the extended hand, and the seal which God's Spirit impresses upon the heart that is submitted to it, has the two-fold character of resemblance in moral nature and righteousness, and of correspondence as regards the mysteries of the converse between the recipient man and the giving God.

Then, mark that the material is made capable of receiving the stamp, because it is warmed and softened. That is to say, faith must prepare the heart for the sanctifying indwelling of that Divine Spirit. The hard wax may be struck with the seal, but it leaves no trace. God does not do with man as the coiner does with his blanks, put them cold into a press, and by violence from without stamp an image upon them, but He does as men do with a seal, warms the wax first, and then, with a gentle, firm touch, leaves the likeness there. So, brother! learn this lesson: if you wish to be good, lie under the contact of the Spirit of righteousness, and see that your heart is warm.

Still further, note that this aggregate of Christian character, in likeness and correspondence, is the true sign that we belong to God. The seal is the mark of ownership, is it not? Where the broad arrow has been impressed, everybody knows that that is royal property. And so this seal of God's Divine Spirit, in its effects upon my character, is the one token to myself and to other people that I belong to God, and that He belongs to me. Or, to put it into plain English, the best reason for any man's being regarded as a Christian is his possession of the likeness and correspondence to God which that Divine Spirit gives. Likeness and correspondence, I say, for the one class of results is the more open for the observation of the world, and the other class is of the more value for ourselves. I believe that Christian people ought to have, and are meant by that Divine Spirit dwelling in them to have, a consciousness that they are Christians and God's children, for their own peace and rest and joy. But you cannot use that in demonstration to other people; you may be as sure of it as you will, in your inmost hearts, but it is no sign to anybody else. And, on the other hand, there may be much of outward virtue and beauty of character which may lead other people to say about a man: That is a good Christian man, at any rate, and yet there may be in the heart an all but absolute absence of any joyful assurance that we are Christ's, and that He belongs to us. So the two facts must go together. Correspondence, the spirit of sonship which meets His taking us as sons, the faith which clasps the promise, the reception which welcomes bestowment, must be stamped upon the inward life. For the outward life there must be the manifest impress of righteousness upon my actions, if there is to be any real seal and token that I belong to Him. God writes His own name upon the men that are His. All their goodness, their gentleness, patience, hatred of evil, energy and strenuousness in service, submission in suffering, with whatsoever other radiance of human virtue may belong to them, are really His mark!

There is no other worth talking about, and to you Christian men I come and say, Be very sure that your professions of inward communion and happy consciousness that you are Christ's are verified to yourself and to others by a plain outward life of righteousness like the Lord's. Have you got that seal stamped upon your lives, like the hall-mark that says, This is genuine silver, and no plated Brummagem stuff? Have you got that seal of a visible righteousness and every-day purity to confirm your assertion that you belong to Christ? Is it woven into the whole length of your being, like the scarlet thread that is spun into every Admiralty cable as a sign that it is Crown property? God's seal, visible to me and to nobody else, is my consciousness that I am His; but that consciousness is vindicated and delivered from the possibility of illusion or hypocrisy, only when it is checked and fortified by the outward evidence of the holy life which the Spirit of God has wrought.

Further, this sealing, which is thus the token of God's ownership, is also the pledge of security. A seal is stamped in order that there may be no tampering with what it seals; that it may be kept safe from all assaults, thieves, and violence. And in the metaphor of our text there is included this thought, too, which is also of an intensely practical nature. For it just comes to this--our true guarantee that we shall come at last into the sweet security and safety of the perfect state is present likeness to the indwelling Spirit and present reception of divine grace. The seal is the pledge of security, just because it is the mark of ownership. When, by God's Spirit dwelling in us, we are led to love the things that are fair, and to long after more possession of whatever things are of good report, that is like God's hoisting His flag upon a newly-annexed territory. And is He going to be so careless in the preservation of His property as that He will allow that which is thus acquired to slip away from Him? Does He account us as of so small value as to hold us with so slack a hand? But no man has a right to rest on the assurance of God's saving him into the heavenly kingdom, unless He is saving him at this moment from the devil and his own evil heart. And, therefore, I say the Christian character, in its outward manifestations and in its sweet inward secrets of communion, is the guarantee that we shall not fall. Rest upon Him, and He will hold you up. We are kept by the power of God unto salvation, and that power keeps us and that final salvation becomes ours, through faith.

**II. Now, secondly, turn to the other emblem, that earnest which consists in like manner of the Spirit.**

The earnest, of course, is a small portion of purchase-money, or wages, or contract-money, which is given at the making of a bargain, as an assurance that the whole amount will be paid in due time. And, says the Apostle, this seal is also an earnest. It not only makes certain God's ownership and guarantees the security of those on whom it is impressed, but it also points onwards to the future, and at once guarantees that, and to a large extent reveals the nature of it. So, then, we have here two thoughts on which I touch.

The Christian character and experience are the earnest of the inheritance, in the sense of being its guarantee, inasmuch as the experiences of the Christian life here are plainly immortal. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the objective and external proof of a future life. The facts of the Christian life, its aspirations, its communion, its clasp of God as its very own, are the subjective and inward proofs of a future life. As a matter of fact, if you will take the Old Testament, you will see that the highest summits in it, to which the hope of immortality soared, spring directly from the experience of deep and blessed communion with the living God. When the Psalmist said Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol; neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption, he was speaking a conviction that had been floated into his mind on the crest of a great wave of religious enjoyment and communion. And, in like manner, when the other Psalmist said, Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever, he was speaking of the glimpse that he had got of the land that was very far off, from the height which he had climbed on the Mount of fellowship with God. And for us, I suppose that the same experience holds good. Howsoever much we may say that we believe in a future life and in a heaven, we really grasp them as facts that will be true about ourselves, in the proportion in which we are living here in direct contact and communion with God. The conviction of immortality is the distinct and direct result of the present enjoyment of communion with Him, and it is a reasonable result. No man who has known what it is to turn himself to God with a glow of humble love, and to feel that he is not turning his face to vacuity, but to a Face that looks on him with love, can believe that anything can ever come to destroy that communion. What have faith, love, aspiration, resignation, fellowship with God, to do with death? They cannot be cut through with the stroke that destroys physical life, any more than you can divide a sunbeam with a sword. It unites again, and the impotent edge passes through and has effected nothing. Death can shear asunder many bonds, but that invisible bond that unites the soul to God is of adamant, against which his scythe is in vain. Death is the grim porter that opens the door of a dark hole and herds us into it as sheep are driven into a slaughter-house. But to those who have learned what it is to lay a trusting hand in God's hand, the grim porter is turned into the gentle damsel, who keeps the door, and opens it for light and warmth and safety to the hunted prisoner that has escaped from the dungeon of life. Death cannot touch communion, and the consciousness of communion with God is the earnest of the inheritance.

It is so for another reason also. All the results of the Divine Spirit's sealing of the soul are manifestly incomplete, and as manifestly tend towards completeness. The engine is clearly working now at half-speed. It is obviously capable of much higher pressure than it is going at now. Those powers in the Christian man can plainly do a great deal more than they ever have done here, and are meant to do a great deal more. Is this imperfect Christianity of ours, our little faith so soon shattered, our little love so quickly disproved, our faltering resolutions, our lame performances, our earthward cleavings--are these things all that Jesus Christ's bitter agony was for, and all that a Divine Spirit is able to make of us? Manifestly, here is but a segment of the circle, in heaven is the perfect round; and the imperfections, so far as life is concerned, in the work of so obviously divine an Agent, cry aloud for a region where tendency shall become result, and all that it was possible for Him to make us we shall become. The road evidently leads upwards, and round that sharp corner where the black rocks come so near each other and our eyesight cannot travel, we may be sure it goes steadily up still to the top of the pass, until it reaches the shining table-lands whereof our God Himself is Sun and Moon, and brings us all to the city set on a hill.

And, further, that divine seal is the earnest, inasmuch as itself is part of the whole. The truest and the loftiest conception that we can form of heaven is as being the perfecting of the religious experience of earth. The shilling or two, given to the servant in old-fashioned days, when he was hired, is of the same currency as the balance that he is to get when the year's work is done. The small payment to-day comes out of the same purse, and is coined out of the same specie, and is part of the same currency of the same kingdom, as what we get when we go yonder and count the endless riches to which we have fallen heirs at last. You have but to take the faith, the love, the obedience, the communion of the highest moments of the Christian life on earth, and free them from all their limitations, subtract from them all their imperfections, multiply them to their superlative possibility, and endow them with a continual power of growth, and stretch them out to absolute eternity, and you get heaven. The earnest is of a piece with the inheritance.

So, dear brethren, here is a gift offered for us all, a gift which our feebleness sorely needs, a gift for every timid nature, for every weak will, for every man, woman, and child beset with snares and fighting with heavy tasks, the offer of a reinforcement as real and as sure to bring victory as when, on that day when the fate of Europe was determined, after long hours of conflict, the Prussian bugles blew, and the English commander knew that (with the fresh troops that came on the field) victory was made certain. So you and I may have in our hearts the Spirit of God, the spirit of strength, the spirit of love and of a sound mind, the spirit of adoption, the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, to enlighten our darkness, to bind our hearts to Him, to quicken and energise our souls, to make the weakest among us strong, and the strong as an angel of God. And the condition on which we may get it is this simple one which the Apostle lays down; After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance. The Christ, who is the Lord and Giver of the Spirit, has shown us how its blessed influences may be ours when, on the great day of the feast, He stood and cried with a voice that echoes across the centuries, and is meant for each of us, If any man thirsts, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth in Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. This spake He of the Spirit which they that believe or Him should receive.