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

**2 CORINTHIANS-006**. **LOOKING AT THE UNSEEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen."*

*2 Corinthians 4:18*

Men may be said to be divided into two classes, materialists and idealists, in the widest sense of those two words. The mass care for, and are occupied by, and regard as really solid good, those goods which can be touched and enjoyed by sense. The minority--students, thinkers, men of ideas, moralists, and the like--believe in, and care for, impalpable spiritual riches. Everybody admits that the latter class is distinctly the higher. Now it is from no disregard to the importance and reality of that broad distinction that I insist, to begin with, that it is not the antithesis which is in the Apostle's mind here. His notion of the things that are seen and the things that are not seen is a much grander and wider one than that. By the things that are seen he means the whole of this visible world, with all its circumstances and relations, and by the things that are not seen he means the realities beyond the stars.

He means the same thing that we mean when we talk in a much less true and impressive contrast about the present and the future. To him the things that are not seen are present instead of being, as we weakly and foolishly christen them, the future state. And it makes all the difference whether we think of that august realm as lying far away ahead of us, or whether we feel that it is, as it is, in very deed, all round about us, and pressing in upon us, only that the veil--that is to say, our flesh--has come between us and it. Do not habitually think of these two sets of objects according to that misleading distinction present and future, but think of them rather as the things that are seen, and the things that are not seen.

**I. Now, first, I wish to say a word or two about what such a look will do for us.**

Paul's notion is, as you will see if you look at the context, that if we want to understand the visible, or to get the highest good out of the things that are seen, we must bring into the field of vision the things that are not seen. The case with which he is dealing is that of a man in trouble. He talks about light affliction which is but for a moment, working out a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look at the things which are not seen. But the principle on which that statement is made, of course, has its widest application to all sorts and conditions of human life.

And the thought that emerges from it directly is that only when we take the things that are not seen into account, and make them the standard and the scale by which we judge all things, do we understand the things that are seen. That triumphant paradox of the Apostle's about the heavy burdens that pressed upon him and his brethren, lifelong as these burdens were, which yet he calls light and but for a moment is possible only when we open the shutter of the dungeon which we fancied was the whole universe, and look out on to the fair land that stretches beyond. A man who has seen the Himalayas will not be much overwhelmed by the height of Helvellyn. They who look out into the eternities have the true measuring rod and standard by which to estimate the duration and intensity of the things that are present. We are all tempted to do as villagers in some little hamlet do--think that their small local affairs are the world's affairs, and mighty, until they have been up to London and seen the scale of things there. If you and I would let the steady light of Eternity, and the sustaining pressure of the exceeding weight of glory pour into our minds, we should carry with us a standard which would bring down the greatness, dwindle the duration, lighten the pressure, of the most crushing sorrow, and would set in its true dimensions everything that is here. It is for want of that that we go on as we do, calculating wrongly what are the great things and what are the small things. When, like some of those prisoners in the Inquisition, the heavy iron weights are laid upon our half-crushed hearts, we are tempted to shriek, Oh, these will be my death! instead of taking in that great vision which, as it makes all earthly riches dross, so it makes all crushing burdens and blows of sorrow light as a feather.

But, on the other hand, do not let us forget that this same standard which thus dwindles, also magnifies the small, and in a very solemn sense, makes eternal the else fleeting things of this life. For there is nothing that makes this present existence of ours so utterly contemptible, insignificant, and transitory, as to block out of our sight its connection with Eternity. And there is nothing which so lifts the commonplace into the solemn, and invests with everlasting and tremendous importance everything that a man does here, as to feel that it all tells on his condition away beyond there. The shafting is on this side of the wall, but the work that it does is through the wall there, in the other chamber; and you do not understand the cranks and the wheels here unless you know that they go through the partition and are doing something there beyond. If you shut out Eternity from our life in time, then it is an inexplicable riddle; and I, for my part, would venture to say that in that case, the men who answer the question, Is life worth living? with a distinct negative, are wise. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, unless the light of the things not seen flashes and flares in upon it.

Further, this look of which my text speaks is the condition on which Time prepares for Eternity.

The Apostle is speaking about the effect of affliction in making ready for us an eternal weight of glory, and he says that is done while, or on condition that during the suffering, we are looking steadfastly towards the things that are not seen. But no outward circumstances or events can prepare a weight of glory for us hereafter, unless they prepare us for the glory. Affliction works for us that blessed result, in the measure in which it fits us for that result. And so you will find that, only a verse or two after my text, Paul, using the same very significant and emphatic verb, writes inverting the order of things, and says He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God. So that working the thing for us, and working us for the thing, are one and the same process. Or, to put it into plain English, our various duties and circumstances here will prepare the glory of Eternity for us if they prepare us for the glory of Eternity. But only in the measure in which these outward things do thus shape and mould our characters do they work out for us an exceeding weight of glory.

It is often thought that a man has been so miserable here that God is sure to give him future blessedness to recompense him. Well! that depends. If he has used his miserableness as he will use it when he lets the light of the things not seen in upon it, then, certainly, it will work out for him the blessed results. But if he does not, then, as certainly, it will not. Whilst there are many ways by which character is hammered and moulded and shaped into that which is fit to be clothed upon with the glory that is yonder, one of the foremost of these is the passing through things temporal with a continual regard to the things that are eternal. If you want to understand to-day you must bring Eternity into the account, and if you want to use to-day you must use it with the light of the eternal world full upon it. The sum of it all is, brethren, that the things seen cannot be estimated in their true character, unless they are regarded in immediate connection with the things that are unseen; and that the things seen will only prepare an eternal weight of glory for us when they prepare us for an eternal weight of glory.

**II. And so, I note that this look at the things not seen is only possible through Jesus Christ.**

He is the only window which opens out and gives the vision of that far-off land. I, for my part, believe that, if I might use such a metaphor, He is the Columbus of the New World. Men believed, and argued, and doubted about the existence of it across the seas there, until a man went, and came back again, and then went to found a new city yonder. And men hoped for immortality, and believed after a fashion--some of them--in a future life, and dreaded that it might be true, and discussed and debated whether it was, but doubt clouded all minds, until One, our Brother, went away into the darkness, and came back again, in most respects as He had gone, and then departed once more to make ready a city in which all who love Him should finally dwell, and to which you and I may be sure that we shall emigrate. It is only in Jesus Christ that the look which my text enjoins is possible.

For not only has He given a certitude so that we need now not to say We think, we hope, we fear, we are pretty well sure, that there must be a life beyond, but we can say We know. Not only has He done this, but also in Him and His life of glory at God's right hand in heaven, is summed up all that we really can know about that future. We look into the darkness in vain; we look at Him, and, our knowledge, though limited, is blessed. All other adumbrations of a life beyond must necessarily be cast into the metaphorical forms or the negative symbols in which the New Testament abounds. We may speak of golden pavements, and thrones, and harps, and the like. We may say: No night there, no sighing, nor weeping, no burdened hearts, no toil, no pain, for the former things are passed away. But a future life which is all described in metaphors, and a future life of which we know only that it is the negation of the disagreeables and limitations of the present, is but a poor affair. Here is the positive truth, To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me on My throne. We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And beyond that nearness to Christ, blessed communion with Christ, likeness to Christ, royalty derived from Christ, I think we neither know nor need to know anything about that life.

Not only is He our sole medium of knowledge and Himself the revelation of our heaven, but it is only by Him that man's thoughts and desires are drawn to, and find themselves at home in, that tremendous thought of immortality. I know not how it may be with you, but I am not ashamed to confess that to me the idea of eternal continuance of my conscious being is an awful thought, rather depressing and bewildering than delighting and attractive. I, for my part, do not believe that men generally do grapple to their hearts, with any gratitude or joy, that solemn belief of immortal life unless they feel that it is life with, and in, and like, Jesus Christ. To depart is dreary, and it is only when we can say and to be with Christ that it becomes distinctly far better. He is, if I may so say, at once telescope and star. By Him we see Him; we see, seeing Him, that the things that are unseen all cluster round Himself and become blessed.

**III. And now, lastly, this look should be habitual with all Christian people.**

Paul takes it for granted that every Christian man is, as the habitual direction of his thoughts, looking towards those things that are not seen. The original shows that even more distinctly than our translation, but our translation shows it plainly enough. He does not say works for us an exceeding weight of glory for, but while we look, as if it were a matter of course. He took it for granted as to these Corinthians. I wonder if he would be warranted in taking it for granted about us?

Note what sort of a look it is which produces these blessed effects. The word which the Apostle employs here is a more pointed one than the ordinary one for seeing. It is translated in other places in the New Testament, Mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample, and the like. And it implies a concentrated, protracted effort and interested gaze. A man, standing on the deck of a ship, casts a languid eye for a moment out on to the horizon, and sees nothing. A keen-eyed sailor by his side shades his eyes with his hand, and shuts out cross-lights, and looks, and peers, and keeps his eyes steady, and he sees the filmy outline of the mountain land. If you look for a minute, not much caring whether you see anything or not, and then turn away, and get your eye dazzled with all those vulgar, crude, high colours round about you here on earth, it is very little that you will see of the things that are not seen. Concentrated attention, and a steadfast look, are wanted to make the invisible visible. You have to alter the focus of your eye if you are to see the thing that is afar off.

There has to be a positive shutting out of all other things, as is emphatically taught in the text by putting first the not looking at the things that are seen. Here they are pressing in upon our eyeballs, all round us, insisting on being looked at, and unless we resolutely avert our eyes, we shall not see anything else. They monopolise us unless we resist the intrusive appeals that they make to us. We are like men down in some fertile valley, surrounded by rich vegetation, but seeing nothing beyond the green sides of the glen. We have to go up to the hill-top if we are to look out over the flashing ocean, and behold afar off the towers of the mother city across the restless waves. Brethren, unless you shut out the world you will never see the things that are not seen.

Now, as I have said, the Apostle regards this conscious effort at bringing ourselves into touch, in mind and heart and faith, with the things that are not seen as being a habitual characteristic of Christian men. I am very much afraid that the present generation of Christian people do not, in anything like the degree in which they should, recreate and strengthen themselves with the contemplation which he here recommends. It seems to me, for instance, that we do not hear nearly as much in pulpits about the life beyond the grave as we used to do when I was a boy. And, though I confess I speak from limited knowledge, it seems to me that these great motives which lie in the thought of Eternity and our place there, are by no means as prominent in the minds of the Christian people of this generation as they used to be. Partly, I suppose, that arises from the wholesome emphasis which has been given of late years to the present day, and this-side-the grave effects of Christianity, upon character and life. Partly it arises, I think, from the half-consciousness of being surrounded by an atmosphere of scepticism and unbelief as to a future life, and from the most unwise, inexpedient, and cowardly yielding to the temptation to say very little about the distinctive features of Christianity, and to dwell rather upon those which are sure to be recognised by even unbelieving people. And it comes, too, from the lack of faith, which, again, it tends mightily to increase.

Oh, dear brethren! our consciences tell us what different people we should be if habitually there shone before us that great, solemn issue to which we are all tending. Variations in the atmosphere there will always be, and sometimes the distant outlines will be clearer and sharper than at others, and the colours will shine out more distinctly. But surely it should not be that our vision of the Eternal should be like the vision that dwellers amongst the mountains have of the summits. They say that some of the great peaks of the world are swathed in mist all day long, and that only for a few moments in the morning, or for a brief space in the evening, does the solemn summit gleam rosy in the light. And that, I am afraid, is very much like the degree in which most of us look at the things that are not seen and so we are feeble, and we do not understand the things that are not seen; and we do not get the good out of them.

Dear brethren, let us turn away our eyes from the gauds that we can see, and open the eyes of our spirits on the things that are, the things where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Surely, surely, it is madness that when two sets of objects are before us, the one lasting for a moment, and then dying down into black nothingness, and the other shining on for ever; and when our look settles whether we shall share the fate of the one or of the other, we should choose to gaze with all our eyes and hearts at the perishable and turn away from the permanent. Surely, if it is true that the things which are seen are temporal, common-sense, and a reasonable regard for our own well-being, bid us look at the eternal things which are not seen, since only so can the light and the momentary afflictions, joys, sorrows, or circumstances, work out for us, and work us for a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.