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

**2 CORINTHIANS-008**. **THE PATIENT WORKMAN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Now He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God."*

*2 Corinthians 5:5*

These words penetrate deep into the secrets of God. They assume to have read the riddle of life. To Paul everything which we experience, outwardly or inwardly, is from the divine working. Life is to him no mere blind whirl, or unintelligent play of accidental forces, nor is it the unguided result of our own or of others wills, but is the slow operation of the great Workman. Paul assumes to know the meaning of this protracted process, that it all has one design which we may know and grasp and further. And he believes that the clear perception of the divine purpose, and the habit of looking at everything as contributing thereto, will be a magic charm against all sorrow, doubt, despondency, or fear, for he adds, Therefore we are always confident. So let us try to follow the course of thought which issues in such a blessed gift as that of a continual, courageous outlook, and buoyant though grave lightheartedness, because we discern what He means Who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will.

**I. The first thought here is, God's purpose in all His working; He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.**

What is that self-same thing? To understand it we must look back for a moment to the previous context. The Apostle has been speaking about the instinctive reluctance which even good men feel at prospect of dying and putting off the earthly house of this tabernacle. He distinguishes between three different conditions in which the human spirit may be--dwelling in the earthly body, stripped of that, and clothed with the house which is from Heaven, and to this last and highest state he sees that for him and for his brethren there were two possible roads. They might reach it either through losing the present body, in the act of death, and passing through a period of what he calls nakedness; or they might attain it by being superinvested, as it were, with the glorious body which was to come to saints with Christ when He came; and so slip on, as it were, the wedding garment over their old clothes, without having to denude themselves of these. And he says that deep in the Christian heart there lay reluctance to take the former road and the preference for the latter. His longing was that that which is mortal might be swallowed up of life, as some sand-bank in the tide-way may be gradually covered and absorbed by the rejoicing waters. And then he says, Now He that hath wrought us for this very thing, is God.

Of course it is impossible that he can mean by this very thing the second of the roads by which it was possible to reach the ultimate issue, because he did not know whether his brethren and he were to die or to be changed. He speaks in the context about death as a possible contingency for himself and for them,--If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, and so on. Therefore we must suppose that the self-same thing of which he is thinking as the divine purpose in all His dealings with us, is not the manner in which we may attain that ultimate condition, but the condition itself which, by one road or another, God's children shall attain. Or, in other words, the highest aim of the divine love in all its dealings with us Christian men, is not merely a blessed spiritual life, but the completion of our humanity in a perfect spirit dwelling in a glorified body. Corporeity--the dwelling in a body by which the pure spirit moves amidst pure universes--is the highest end of God's will concerning us.

That glorified body is described in our context in wonderful words, which it would take me far too long to do more than just touch upon. Here we dwell in a tent, there we shall dwell in a building. Here in a house made with hands, a corporeal frame derived from parents by material transmission and intervention; there we shall dwell in a building of which God is the maker. Here we dwell in a crumbling clay tenement, which rains dissolve, which lightning strikes, and winds overthrow, and which finally lies on the ground a heap of tumbled ruin. There we dwell in a building, God's direct work, eternal, and knowing no corruption nor change. Here we dwell in a body congruous with, and part of, the perishable earthly world in which it abides, and with which it stands in relation; there we dwell in a house partaking of the nature of the heavens in which it moves, a body that is the fit organ of a perfect spirit.

And so, says Paul, the end of what God means with us is not stated in all its wonderfulness, when we speak of spirits imbued with His wisdom and surcharged with His light and perfectness, but when we add to that the thought of a fitting organ in which these spirits dwell, whereby they can come into contact with an external universe, incorruptible, and so reach the summit of their destined completeness. The house not made with hands, eternal, the building of God in the Heavens, is the end that God has in view for all His children.

**II. So, then, secondly, note the slow process of the Divine Workman.**

The Apostle employs here a very emphatic compound term for hath wrought. It conveys not only the idea of operation, but the idea of continuous and somewhat toilsome and effortful work, as if against the resistance of something that did not yield itself naturally to the impulse that He would bestow. Like some sculptor with a hard bit of marble, or some metallurgist who has to work the rough ore till it becomes tractable, so the loving, patient, Divine Artificer is here represented as labouring long and earnestly with a somewhat obstinate material which can and does resist His loving touch, and yet going on with imperturbable and patient hope, by manifold touches, here a little and there a little, all through life preparing a man for His purpose. The great Artificer toils at His task, rising early and working long, and not discouraged when He comes upon a black vein in the white marble, nor when the hard stone turns the edge of His chisels.

Now I would have you notice that there lies in this conception a very important thought, viz. God cannot make you fit for heaven all at a jump, or by a simple act of will. That is not His way of working. He can make a world so, He cannot make a saint so. He can speak and it is done when it is only a universe that has to be brought into being; or He can say, Let there be light, and light springs at His word. But He cannot say, and He does not say, Let there be holiness, and it comes. Not so can God make man meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. And it takes Him all His energies, for all a lifetime, to prepare His child for what He wants to make of him.

There is another thought here, which I can only touch, and that is that God cannot give a man that glorified body of which I have been speaking, unless the man's spirit is Christlike. He cannot raise a bad man at the resurrection with the body of His glory. By the necessities of the case it is confined to the purified, because it corresponds to their inward spiritual being. It is only a perfect spirit that can dwell in a perfect body. You could not put a bad man, Godless and Christless, into the body which will be fit for them whom Christ has changed first of all in heart and spirit into His own likeness. He would be like those hermit crabs that you see on the beach who run into any kind of a shell, whether it fits them or not, in order to get a house.

There are two principles at work in the resurrection of the dead. The glorified body is not the physical outcome of the material body here, but is the issue and manifestation, in visible form, of the perfect and Christlike spirit. Some shall rise to glory and immortality, some to shame and everlasting contempt. If we are to stand at the last with the body of our humiliation changed into a body of glory, we must begin by being changed in the spirit of our mind. As the mind is, so will the body be one day. But, passing from such thoughts as these, and remembering that the Apostle here is speaking only about Christian people, and the divine operations upon them, we may still extend the meaning of this significant word wrought somewhat further, and ask you just to consider, and that very briefly, the three-fold processes which, in the divine working, terminate in, and contemplate, this great issue.

God has wrought us for it in the very act of making us what we are. Human nature is an insoluble enigma, if this world is its only field. Amidst all the waste, the mysterious waste, of creation, there is no more profligate expenditure of powers than that which is involved in giving a man such faculties and capacities, if this be the only field on which they are to be exercised. If you think of what most of us do in this world, and of what it is in us to be, and to do, it is almost ludicrous to consider the disproportion. All other creatures fit their circumstances; nothing in them is bigger than their environment. They find in life a field for every power. You and I do not. The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have roosting-places. They all correspond to their circumstances, but we have an infinitude of faculty lying half dormant in each of us, which finds no work at all in this present world. And so, looking at men as they are with eternity in their hearts, with natures that go reaching out towards infinity, the question comes up: Wherefore hast Thou made all men in vain? What is the use of us, and why should we be what we are, if there is nothing for us except this poor present? God, or whoever made us, has made a mistake; and strangely enough, if we were not made, but evolved, evolution has worked out faculties which have no correspondence with the things around them.

Life and man are an insoluble enigma except on one hypothesis, and that is that this is a nursery-ground, and that the plants will be pricked out some day, and planted where they are meant to grow. The hearts that feel after absolute and perfect love, the spirits that can conceive the idea of an infinite goodness, the dumb desires, the blank misgivings that wander homeless amidst the narrowness of this poor earth, all these things proclaim that there is a region where they will find their nutriment and expatiate, and when we look at a man we can only say, He that hath wrought him for an infinite world, and an endless communion with a perfect good, is God.

Still further, another field of the divine operation to this end is in what we roughly call providences. What is the meaning of all this discipline through which we are passed, if there is nothing to be disciplined for? What is the good of an apprenticeship if there is no journeyman's life to come after it, where the powers that have been slowly acquired shall be nobly exercised upon broader fields? Why should men be taken, as it were, and, like the rough iron from the ground,

Be heated hot with hopes and fears,

And plunged in baths of hissing tears,

And battered with the shocks of doom,

if, after all the process, the polished shaft is to be broken in two, and tossed away as rubbish? If death ends faculty, it is a pity that the faculty was so patiently developed. If God is educating us all in His school, and then means that, like some wastrel boys, we should lose all our education as soon as we leave its benches, there is little use in the rod, and little meaning in the training. Brethren! life is an insoluble riddle unless the purpose of it lie yonder, and unless all this patient training of our sorrows and our gladnesses, the warmth that expands and the cold that contracts the heart, the light that gladdens and the darkness that saddens the eye and the spirit, are equally meant for training us for the perfect life of a perfect soul moving a perfect body in a perfect universe. Here is a pillar in some ancient hall that has fallen into poor hands, and has had a low roof thrown across the centre of the chamber at half its height. In the lower half there is part of a pillar that means nothing; ugly, bare, evidently climbing, and passing through the aperture, and away above yonder is the carved capital and the great entablature that it carries. Who could understand the shaft unless he could look up through the aperture, and see the summit? And who can think of life as anything but a wretched fragment unless he knows that all which begins here runs upwards into the room above, and there finds its explanation and its completion?

But there is the third sphere of the divine operation. As in creation and in providence, so in all the work and mystery of our redemption, this is the goal that God has in view. It was not worth Christ's while to come and die, if nothing more was to come of it than the imperfect reception of His blessings and gifts which the noblest Christian life in this world presents. The meaning and purpose of the Cross, the meaning and purpose of all the patient dealings of His whispering Spirit, are that we shall be like our Divine Lord in spirit first, and in body afterwards.

And everything about the experiences of a true Christian spirit is charged with a prophecy of immortality. I have not time to dwell upon one point gathered from the context, that I intended to have insisted upon, viz. that the very desires which God's good Spirit works in a believing soul are themselves confirmations of their own fulfilment. But if you notice at your leisure the verses that precede my text, you will find that the Apostle adduces the groanings of earnest desire to be clothed with our house which is from Heaven, as a proof that we have a building of God, a house not made with hands. That is to say, every longing in a Christian heart when it is most filled with that Spirit, and most in contact with God, and which is the answer of that heart to a promise of Christ--every such longing carries with it the assurance of its own fulfilment. He that hath wrought it has wrought it in order that the desire may fit us for its answer, and that the open mouth may be ready for the abundant filling which His grace designs. He works upon us, therefore, by making us desire a gift, and then He gives that which He desires. So let us cherish these longings, not for the accident of escaping death, nor as choosing the path by which we shall reach the blessed issue, but longing for that great issue itself; and try to keep more distinct and clear before all our minds this thought, God means for me the participation in Christ's glorified Manhood, and my attaining of that Manhood is the end that He has in view in all that He does with me.

**III. So I must say one word about the last thought that is here, and that is the certainty and the confidence. Therefore we are always confident, says the Apostle.**

He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God. Then we may be sure that as far as He is concerned, the work will not be suspended nor vain. This man does not begin to build and is unable to finish. This workman has infinite resources, an unchanging purpose, and infinite long-suffering. He will complete His task.

In the quarries of Egypt you will find gigantic stones, half-dressed, and intended to have been transported to some great temple. But there they lie, the work incomplete, and they never carried to their place. There are no half-polished stones in God's quarries. They are all finished where they lie, and then borne across the sea, like Hiram's from Lebanon, to the Temple on the hill. It is a certainty that God will finish His work; and since He that hath wrought us is God, we may be sure that He will not stop till He has done.

But it is a certainty that you can thwart. It is an operation that you can counterwork. The potter in Jeremiah's parable was making a vessel upon his wheel, and the vessel was marred in his hand, and did not turn out what he wanted it. The meaning of the metaphor, which has often been twisted to express the very opposite, is that the potter's work may fail, that the artificer may be balked, that you can counterwork the divine dealing, and that all His purpose in your creation, in His providence and in His gift of His Son for your redemption, may come to nought as far as you are concerned. I beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. In vain have I smitten your children, wailed the Divine Love; they have received no correction. In vain God lavishes upon some of us His mercies, in vain for some of us has Christ toiled and suffered and died. Oh, brother! do not let all God's work on you come to nought, but yield yourselves to it. Rejoice in the confidence that He is moulding your character, cheerfully welcome and accept the providences, painful as they may be, by which He prepares you for heaven. The chisel is sharp that strikes off the superfluous pieces of marble, and when the chisel cuts, not into marble, but into a heart, there is a pang. Bear it, bear it! and understand the meaning of the blow of the sculptor's mallet, and see in all life the divine hand working towards the accomplishment of His own loving purpose. Then if we turn to Him, amid the pains of His discipline and the joys of His gifts of grace, with recognition and acceptance of His meaning in them all, and cry to Him, Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever, forsake not the work of Thine own hands, we may be always confident, as knowing that the Lord will perfect that which concerneth us.