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

**2 CORINTHIANS-009**. **THE OLD HOUSE AND THE NEW by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."*

*2 Corinthians 5:8*

There lie in the words of my text simply these two things; the Christian view of what death is, and the Christian temper in which to anticipate it.

**I. First, the Christian view of what death is.**

Now it is to be observed that, properly speaking, the Apostle is not here referring to the state of the dead, but to the act of dying. The language would more literally and accurately be rendered willing to go from home, from the body, and to go home, to the Lord. The moment of transition of course leads to a permanent state, but it is the moment of transition which is in view in the words. I need not remind you, I suppose, that the metaphor of the home is one which has already been dwelt upon in the early part of the chapter, where the contrast is drawn between the transitory house of this tent, and the building of God, the body of incorruption and glory which the saints at the Resurrection day shall receive. So, then, the Christian view of the act of death is that it is simply a change of abode.

Very clearly and firmly does Paul draw the line between the man and his dwelling-place. Life is more than a result of organisation. Consciousness, thought, feeling, are more than functions of matter. No materialist philosopher has ever been, or ever will be, able to explain within the limits of his system the strange difference between the cause and the effect; how it comes to pass that at the one end of the chain there is an impression upon a nerve, and at the other there is pain; how at the one end there is the throb of an inch of matter in a man's skull, and at the other end there are thoughts that breathe and words that burn, and that live for ever. That brings us up to the edge of a gulf over which no materialist philosopher has ever been able to cast a bridge. The scalpel cannot cut deep enough to solve this mystery. Conscience as well as instinct cry out against the theory that the worker and the tools are inseparable. For such a theory reduces human actions to mechanical results, and shatters all responsibility. Man is more than his dwelling-place. You crush a shell on the beach with your heel, and you slay its tiny inhabitant. But you can pull down the tent, and pluck up its pegs, and roll up its canvas, and put it away in a dark corner, and the tenant is untouched. The foolish senses crown Death as last, and lord of all. But wisdom says, Life and thought have gone away side by side, leaving doors and windows wide, and that is all that has happened.

Still further, my text suggests that to the Christian soul the departure from the one house is the entrance into the other. The home has been the body; the home is now to be Jesus Christ. And very beautiful and significant with meanings, which only experience will fully unfold, is the representation that the Lord Christ Himself assumes the place which the bodily environment has hitherto held.

That teaches us, at all events, that there is a new depth and closeness of union with Jesus waiting the Christian soul, when it lays aside the separating film of flesh. Here the bodily organisation, with its limitations, necessarily shuts us off from the closeness of intercourse which is possible for a naked soul. We know not how much separation may depend upon the immersing of the spirit in the fleshly tabernacle, but this we know, that, though here and now, by faith which dominates sense, souls can live in Christ even whilst they live in the body; yet there shall come a form of union so much more close, intimate, all-pervading, and all-encircling, as that the present union with Him by faith, precious as it is, shall be, as the Apostle calls it in our context, absence from the Lord. We have to be discharged, says an old thinker, of a great deal of what we call body, and then we shall be more truly ourselves, and more truly united to Him who, if we are Christian people at all, is the self of ourselves and the life of our lives. No man knows how close he can nestle to the bosom of Christ when the film of flesh is rent away. Just as when in some crowded street of a great city some grimy building is pulled down, a sudden daylight fills the vacant space, and all the site that had been shut out from the sky for many years is drenched in sunshine, so when the earthly house of this tabernacle is ruinated and falls, the light will flood the place where it stood, and to be absent from the body shall be to be present with the Lord.

May we go a step further and suggest that, perhaps, in the bold metaphor of my text, there is an answer to the questions which so often rack loving and parted hearts? Do the dead know aught of what affects us here? and can they do aught but gaze on Him, and love, and rest? If it be that there is any such analogy as seems to be dimly shadowed in my text, between the relation of the body on earth to the spirit that inhabits it, and that of Jesus Christ to him who dwells in Him, and is clothed by Him, then it may be that, as the flesh, so the Christ transmits to the spirit that has Him for its home impressions from the outside world, and affords a means of action upon that world. Christ may be, if I might so say, the sensorium of the disembodied spirit; and Christ may be the hand of the man who hath no other instrument by which to express himself. But all that is fancy perhaps, speculation certainly; and yet there seems to be a shadow of a foundation for at least entertaining the possibility of such a thought as that Jesus is the means of knowing and the means of acting to those who rest from their labours in Him, and dwell in peace in His arms. But be that as it may, the reality of a close communion and encircling by the felt presence of Jesus Christ, which, in its blessed closeness, will make the closest communion here seem to be obscure, is certainly declared in the words before us.

Then this transition is regarded in my text as being the work of a moment. It is not a long journey of which the beginning is to go from home, from the body, and the end is to go home, to the Lord. But it is one and the same motion which, looked at from the one side, is departure, and looked at from the other is arrival. The old saying has it, there is but a step between me and death. The truth is, there is but a step between me and life. The mighty angel in the Apocalypse, that stood with one foot on the firm land and the other on the boundless ocean, is but the type of the spirit in the brief moment of transition, when the consciousness of two worlds blends, and it is clothed upon with the house which is from heaven, in the very act of stripping off the earthly house of this tabernacle.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, in more than a sentence, that this transition obviously leads into a state of conscious communion with Jesus Christ. The dreary figment of an unconscious interval for the disembodied spirit has no foundation, either in what we know of spirit, or in what is revealed to us in Scripture. For the one thing that seems to make it probable--the use of that metaphor of sleeping in Jesus--is quite sufficiently accounted for by the notions of repose, and cessation of outward activity, and withdrawal of capacity of being influenced by the so-called realities of this lower world, without dragging in the unfounded notion of unconsciousness. My text is incompatible with it, for it is absurd to say of an unconscious spirit, clear of a bodily environment, that it is anywhere; and there is no intelligible sense in which the condition of such a spirit can be called being with the Lord.

So, then, I think a momentary transition, with uninterrupted consciousness, which leads to a far deeper and more wonderful and blessed sense of unity with Jesus Christ than is possible here on earth, is the true shape in which the act of death presents itself to the Christian thinker.

And remember, dear brethren, that is all we know. Nothing else is certain--nothing but this, with the Lord, and the resulting certainty that therefore it is well with them. It is enough for our faith, for our comfort, for our patient waiting. They live in Christ, and there we find them worthier to be loved, and certainly lapped in a deeper rest. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.

**II. In the next place, note the Christian temper in which to anticipate the transition.**

We are always courageous, and willing rather to leave our home in the body, and to go home to the Lord. Now I must briefly remind you of how the Apostle comes to this state of feeling. He has been speaking about the natural shrinking, which belongs to all humanity, from the act of dissolution, considered as being the stripping off of the garment of the flesh. And he has declared, on behalf of himself and the early Christian Church, his own and their personal desire that they might escape from that trial by the path which seemed possible to the early Christians--viz. that of surviving until the return of Jesus Christ from Heaven, when they would be clothed upon with the house which is from Heaven, without the necessity of stripping off that with which at present they are invested. Then he says--and this is a very remarkable thought--that just because this instinctive shrinking from death and yearning for the glorified body is so strong in the Christian heart, that is a sign that there is such a glorified body waiting for us. He says, we know that if our house ... were dissolved, we have a building of God. And his reason for knowing it is this, for in this we groan. That is a bold position to say that a yearning in the Christian consciousness prophesies its own fulfilment. Our desires are the prophecies of His gifts. Then, on this certainty--which he deduces from the fact of the longing for it--on this certainty of the glorious, ultimate body of the Resurrection he bases his willingness expressed in the text, to go through the unwelcome process of leaving the old house, although he shrinks from it.

So, then, Christian faith does not destroy the natural reluctance to put aside the old companion of our lives. The old house, though it be smoky, dimly lighted, and, by our own careless keeping, sluttish and grimy in many a corner, yet is the only house we have ever known, and to be absent from it is untried and strange. There is nothing wrong in saying we would not be unclothed but clothed upon. Nature speaks there. We may reverently entertain the same feelings which our Pattern acknowledged, when He said, I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished. And there would be nothing sinful in repeating His prayer with His conditions, If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.

But then the text suggests to us the large Christian possessions and hope which counterwork this reluctance, in the measure in which we live lives of faith. There is the assurance of that ultimate home in which all the transiency of the present material organisation is exchanged for the enduring permanence which knows no corruption. The tent is swept away to make room for the building. The earthly house is dissolved in order that there may be reared round the homeless tenant the house eternal, not made with hands, God's own work, which is waiting in the heavens; because the power that shall frame it is there. Not only that great hope of the body of His glory, with which at the last all true souls shall be invested, but furthermore, the earnest of the spirit, and the blessed experiences therefrom, resulting even here, ought to make the unwelcome necessity less unwelcome. If the firstfruits be righteousness and peace and joy of the Holy Ghost, what shall the harvest be? If the earnest, the shilling given in advance, be so precious, what will the whole wealth of the inheritance which it heralds be when it is received?

For such reasons the transitory passage becomes less painful and unwelcome. Who is there that would hesitate to dip his foot into the ice-cold brook if he knew that it would not reach above his ankles, and that a step would land him in blessedness unimagined till experienced?

Therefore the Christian temper is that of quiet willingness and constant courage. There is nothing hysterical here, nothing morbid, nothing overstrained, nothing artificial. The Apostle says: I would rather not. I should like if I could escape it. It is an unwelcome necessity; but when I see what I do see beyond, I am ready. Since so it must be, I will go, not reluctantly, nor dragged away from life, nor clinging desperately to it as it slips from my hands, nor dreading anything that may happen beyond; but always courageous, and prepared to go whithersoever the path may take me, since I am sure that it ends in His bosom. He is willing to go from the home of the body, because to do that is to go home to Christ.

There are other references of our Apostle's, substantially of the same tone as that of my text, but with very beautiful and encouraging differences. When he was nearer his end, when it seemed to him as if the headsman's block was not very far off, his willingness had intensified into having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better. And when the end was all but reached, and he knew that death was waiting just round the next turn in the road, he said, with the confidence that in the midst of the struggle would have been vainglory, but at the end of it was a foretaste of the calm of Heaven, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness. That is our model, dear brethren,--always courageous, afraid of nothing in life, in death, or beyond, and therefore willing to go from home from the body and to go home to the Lord.

Think of this man thus fronting the inevitable, with no excitement and with no delusions. Remember what Paul believed about death, about sin, about his own sin, about judgment, about hell. And then think of how to him death had made its darkness beautiful with the light of Christ's face, and all the terror was gone out of it. Do you think so about death? Do you shrink from it? Why? Why do you not take Paul's cure for the shrinking? If you can say, To me to live is Christ, you will have no difficulty in saying, and to die is gain. That is the only way by which you can come to such a temper, and then you will be willing to move from the cottage to the palace, and to wait in peace till you are shifted again into the building of God, the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.