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

**2 CORINTHIANS-020**. **A MILITANT MESSAGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ; and being in readiness to avenge all disobedience, when your obedience shall be fulfilled."*

*2 Corinthians 10:5-6 (R.V.)*

None of Paul's letters are so full of personal feeling as this one is. It is written, for the most part, at a white heat; he had heard from his trusted Titus tidings which on one hand filled him with a thankfulness of which the first half of the letter is the expression; but there had also been tidings of a very different kind, and from this point onwards the letter is seething with the feelings which these had produced. There was in the Corinthian Church a party, probably Judaisers, which denied his authority and said bitter things about his character. They apparently had contrasted the force of his letters and the feebleness of his bodily presence and speech. They insinuated that his bark was worse than his bite. Their language put into plain English would be something like this, Ah! He is very bold at a distance, let him come and face us and we shall see a difference. Vapouring in his letters, he will be meek enough when he is here.

These slanderers seem to have thought of Paul as if he warred according to flesh, and it is this charge, that he was actuated in his opposition to the evils in Corinth by selfish considerations and worldly interests, which seems to have set the Apostle on fire. In answer he pours out quick, indignant questionings, sharp irony, vehement self-vindication, passionate remonstrances, flashes of wrath, sudden jets of tenderness. What a position for him to have to say, I am not a low schemer; I am not working for myself. Yet it is the common lot of all such men to be misread by little, crawling creatures who cannot believe in heroic self-forgetfulness. He answers the taunt that he walked according to the flesh in the context by saying, Yes, I live in the flesh, my outward life is like that of other men, but I do not go a-soldiering according to the flesh. It is not for my own sinful self that I get the rules of my life's battle, neither do I get my weapons from the flesh. They could not do what they do if that were their origin: they are of God and therefore mighty. Then the metaphor as it were catches fire, and in our text he expands the figure of a warfare and sets before us the destruction of fortresses, the capture of their garrisons, and the leading of them away into another land, the stern punishment of the rebels who still hold out, and the merciful delay in administering it. It has been suggested that there is an allusion in our text to the extermination of the pirates in Paul's native Cilicia which happened some fifty or sixty years before his birth and ended in destroying their robber-holds and taking some thousands of prisoners. Whether that be so or no, the Apostle's kindled imagination sets forth here great truths as to the effects which his message is meant to produce and, thank God, has produced.

**I. The opposing fortresses.**

The Apostle conceives of himself and of his brother preachers of Christ as going forth on a merciful warfare. He thinks of strong rock fortresses, with lofty walls set on high, and frowning down on any assailants. No doubt he is thinking first of the opposition which he had to front in Corinth from the Judaisers to whom we have referred, but the application of the metaphor goes far beyond the petty strife in Corinth and carries for us the wholesome lesson that one main cause which keeps men back from Christ is a too high estimate of themselves. Some of us are enclosed in the fortress of self-sufficiency: we will not humbly acknowledge our dependence on God, and have turned self-reliance into the law of our lives. There are many voices, some of them sweet and powerful, which to-day are preaching that gospel. It finds eager response in many hearts, and there is something in us all to which it appeals. We are often tempted to say defiantly, Who is Lord over us? And the teaching that bids us rely on ourselves is so wholly in accord with the highest wisdom and the noblest life that what is good and what is evil in each of us contribute to reinforce it. Self-dependence is a great virtue, and the mother of much energy and nobleness, but it is also a great error and a great sin. To be so self-sufficing as not to need externals is good; to be so self-sufficing as not to need or to see God is ruin and death. The title which, as one of our great thinkers tells us, a humourist put on the back of a volume of heterodox tracts, Every man his own redeemer, makes a claim for self-sufficiency which more or less unconsciously shuts out many men from the salvation of Christ.

There is the fortress of culture and the pride of it in which many of us are to-day entrenched against the Gospel. The attitude of mind into which persons of culture tend to fall is distinctly adverse to their reception of the Gospel, and that is not because the Gospel is adverse to culture, but because cultured people do not care to be put on the same level with publicans and harlots. They would be less disinclined to go into the feast if there were in it reserved seats for superior people and a private entrance to them. If the wise and prudent were more of both, they would be liker the babes to whom these things are revealed, and they would be revealed to them too. Not knowledge but the superciliousness which is the result of the conceit of knowledge hinders from God, and is one of the strongest fortresses against which the weapons of our warfare have to be employed.

There is the fortress of ignorance. Most men who are kept from Christ are so because they know neither themselves nor God. The most widely prevailing characteristic of the superficial life of most men is their absolute unconsciousness of the fact of sin; they neither know it as universal nor as personal. They have never gone deeply enough down into the depths of their own hearts to have come up scared at the ugly things that lie sleeping there, nor have they ever reflected on their own conduct with sufficient gravity to discern its aberrations from the law of right, hence the average man is quite unconscious of sin, and is a complete stranger to himself. The cup has been drunk by and intoxicated the world, and the masses of men are quite unaware that it has intoxicated them.

They are ignorant of God as they are of themselves, and if at any time, by some flash of light, they see themselves as they are, they think of God as if He were altogether such an one as themselves, and fall back on a vague trust in the vaguer mercy of their half-believed-in God as their hope for a vague salvation. Men who thus walk in a vain show will never feel their need of Jesus, and the lazy ignorance of themselves and the as lazy trust in what they call their God, are a fortress against which it will task the power of God to make any weapons of warfare mighty to its pulling down.

**II. The casting down of fortresses.**

The first effect of any real contact with Christ and His Gospel is to reveal a man to himself, to shatter his delusive estimates of what he is, and to pull down about his ears the lofty fortress in which he has ensconced himself. It seems strange work for what calls itself a Gospel to begin by forcing a man to cry out with sobs and tears, Oh, wretched man that I am! But no man will ever reach the heights to which Christ can lift him, who does not begin his upward course by descending to the depths into which Christ's Gospel begins its work by plunging him. Unconsciousness of sin is sure to lead to indifference to a Saviour, and unless we know ourselves to be miserable and poor and blind and naked, the offer of gold refined by fire and white garments that we may clothe ourselves will make no appeal to us. The fact of sin makes the need for a Saviour; our individual sense of sin makes us sensible of our need of a Saviour.

Paul believed that the weapons of his warfare were mighty enough to cast down the strongest of all strongholds in which men shut themselves up against the humbling Gospel of salvation by the mercy of God. The weapons to which he thus trusted were the same to which Jesus pointed His disciples when, about to leave them, He said, When the Comforter is come He will convict the world of sin because they believe not in Me. Jesus brought to the world the perfect revelation of the holiness of God, and set before us all a divine pattern of manhood to rebuke and condemn our stained and rebellious lives, and He turned us away from the superficial estimate of actions to the careful scrutiny of motives. By all these and many other ways He presented Himself to the world a perfect man, the incarnation of a holy God and the revelation and condemnation of sinful humanity. Yet, all that miracle of loveliness, gentleness, and dignity is beheld by men without a thrill, and they see in Him no beauty that they should desire Him, and no healing to which they will trust. Paul's way of kindling penitence in impenitent spirits was not to brandish over them the whips of law or to seek to shake souls with terror of any hell, still less was it to discourse with philosophic calm on the obligations of duty and the wisdom of virtuous living; his appeal to conscience was primarily the pressing on the heart of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. When the heart is melted, the conscience will not long continue indurated. We cannot look lovingly and believingly at Jesus and then turn to look complacently on ourselves. Not to believe on Him is the sin of sins, and to be taught that it is so is the first step in the work of Him who never merits the name of the Comforter more truly than when He convicts the world of sin.

For a Christianity that does not begin with the deep consciousness of sin has neither depth nor warmth and has scarcely vitality. The Gospel is no Gospel, and we had almost said, The Christ is no Christ to one who does not feel himself, if parted from Christ, dead in trespasses and sins. Our religion depends for all its force, our gratitude and love for all their devotion, upon our sense that the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and that by His stripes we are healed. Since He gave Himself for us, it is meet that we give ourselves to Him, but there will be little fervour of devotion or self-surrender, unless there has been first the consciousness of the death of sin and then the joyous consciousness of newness of life in Christ Jesus.

**III. The captives led away to another land.**

The Apostle carries on his metaphor one step further when he goes on to describe what followed the casting down of the fortresses. The enemy, driven from their strongholds, have nothing for it but to surrender and are led away in captivity to another land. The long strings of prisoners on Assyrian and Egyptian monuments show how familiar an experience this was. It may be noted that perhaps our text regards the obedience of Christ as being the far country into which every thought was to be brought. At all events Paul's idea here is that the end of the whole struggle between the flesh and the weapons of God is to make men willing captives of Jesus Christ. We are Christians in the measure in which we surrender our wills to Christ. That surrender rests upon, and is our only adequate answer to, His surrender for us. The obedience of Christ is perfect freedom; His captives wear no chains and know nothing of forced service; His yoke is easy, not because it does not press hard upon the neck but because it is lined with love, and His burden is light not because of its own weight but because it is laid on us by love and is carried by kindred love. He only commands himself who gladly lets Christ command him. Many a hard task becomes easy; crooked things are straightened out and rough places often made surprisingly plain for the captives of Christ, whom He leads into the liberty of obedience to Him.

**IV. Fate of the disobedient.**

Paul thinks that in Corinth there will be found some stiff-necked opponents of whom he cannot hope that their obedience shall be fulfilled, and he sees in the double issue of the small struggle that was being waged in Corinth a parable of the wider results of the warfare in the world. Some believed and some believed not; that has been the brief summary of the experience of all God's messengers everywhere, and it is their experience to-day. No doubt when Paul speaks of being in readiness to avenge all disobedience, he is alluding to the exercise of his apostolic authority against the obdurate antagonists whom he contemplates as still remaining obdurate, and it is beautiful to note the long-suffering patience with which he will hold his hand until all that can be won has been won. But we must not forget that Paul's demeanour is but a faint shadow of his Lord's, and that the weapons which were ready to avenge all disobedience were the weapons of God. If a man steels himself against the efforts of divine love, builds up round himself a fortress of self-righteousness and locks its gates against the merciful entrance of convictions of sin and the knowledge of a Saviour, and if he therefore lives, year in, year out, in disobedience, the weapons which he thinks himself to have resisted will one day make him feel their edge. We cannot set ourselves against the salvation of Jesus without bringing upon ourselves consequences which are wholly evil and harmful. Torpid consciences, hungry hearts, stormy wills, tyrannous desires, vain hopes and not vain fears come to be, by slow degrees, the tortures of the man who drops the portcullis and lifts the bridge against the entrance of Jesus. There are hells enough on earth if men's hearts were displayed.

But the love which is obliged to smite gives warning that it is ready to avenge, long before it lets the blow fall, and does so in order that it may never need to fall. As long as it is possible that the disobedient shall become obedient to Christ, He holds back the vengeance that is ready to fall and will one day fall on all disobedience. Not till all other means have been patiently tried will He let that terrible ending crash down. It hangs over the heads of many of us who are all unaware that we walk beneath the shadow of a rock that at any moment may be set in motion and bury us beneath its weight. It is in readiness, but it is still at rest. Let us be wise in time and yield to the merciful weapons with which Jesus would make His way into our hearts. Or if the metaphor of our text presents Him in too warlike a guise, let us listen to His own gentle pleading, Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.