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

**2 THESSALONIANS-003**. **EVERLASTING CONSOLATION AND GOOD HOPE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"16. Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace. 17. Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."*

*2 Thessalonians 2:16-17*

This is the second of the four brief prayers which, as I pointed out in my last sermon, break the current of Paul's teaching in this letter, and witness to the depth of his affection to his Thessalonian converts. We do not know the special circumstances under which these then were, but there are many allusions, both in the first and second epistles, which seem to indicate that they specially needed the gift of consolation.

They were a young Church, just delivered from paganism. Like lambs in the midst of wolves, they stood amongst bitter enemies, their teacher had left them alone, and their raw convictions needed to be consolidated and matured in the face of much opposition. No wonder then that over and over again, in both letters, we have references to the persecutions and tribulations which they endured, and to the consolations which would much more abound.

But whatever may have been their specific circumstances, the prayer which puts special emphasis on comfort is as much needed by each of us as it could ever have been by any of them. For there are no eyes that have not wept, or will not weep; no breath that has not been, or will not be, drawn in sighs; and no hearts that have not bled, or will not bleed. So, dear friends, the prayer that went up for these long since comforted brothers, in their forgotten obscure sorrows, is as needful for each of us--that the God who has given everlasting consolation may apply the consolations which He has supplied, and comfort our hearts and stablish them in every good word and work.

The prayer naturally falls, as all true prayer will, into three sections--the contemplation of Him to whom it is addressed, the grasping of the great act on which it is based, and the specification of the desires which it includes. These three thoughts may guide us for a few moments now.

**I. First of all, then, note the divine hearers of the prayer.**

The first striking thing about this prayer is its emphatic recognition of the divinity of Jesus Christ as a truth familiar to these Thessalonian converts. Note the solemn accumulation of His august titles, Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Note, further, that extraordinary association of His name with the Father's. Note, still further, the most remarkable order in which these two names occur--Jesus first, God second. If we were not so familiar with the words, and with their order, which reappears in Paul's well-known and frequently-used Benediction, we should be startled to find that Jesus Christ was put before God in such a solemn address. The association and the order of mention of the names are equally outrageous, profane, and inexplicable, except upon one hypothesis, and that is that Jesus Christ is divine.

The reason for the order may be found partly in the context, which has just been naming Christ, but still more in the fact that whilst he writes, the Apostle is realising the mediation of Christ, and that the order of mention is the order of our approach. The Father comes to us in the Son; we come to the Father by the Son; and, therefore, it is no intercepting of our reverence, nor blasphemously lifting the creature to undue elevation, when in one act the Apostle appeals to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father.

Note, still further, the distinct address to Christ as the Hearer of Prayer. And, note, last of all, about this matter, the singular grammatical irregularity in my text, which is something much more than a mere blunder or slip of the pen. The words which follow, viz., comfort and stablish, are in the singular, whilst these two mighty and august names are their nominatives, and would therefore, by all regularity, require a plural to follow them. That this peculiarity is no mere accident, but intentional and deliberate, is made probable by the two instances in our text, and is made certain, as it seems to me, by the fact that the same anomalous and eloquent construction occurs in the previous epistle to the same church, where we have in exact parallelism with our text, God Himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, with the singular verb, direct our way unto you. The phraseology is the expression, in grammatical form, of the great truth, Whatsoever things the Father doeth, these also doth the Son likewise. And from it there gleam out unmistakably the great principles of the unity of action and the distinction of person between Father and Son, in the depths of that infinite and mysterious Godhead.

Now all this, which seems to me to be irrefragable, is made the more remarkable and the stronger as a witness of the truth, from the fact that it occurs in this perfectly incidental fashion, and without a word of explanation or apology, as taking for granted that there was a background of teaching in the Thessalonian Church which had prepared the way for it, and rendered it intelligible, as well as a background of conviction which had previously accepted it.

And, remember, these two letters, thus full-toned in their declaration, and taking for granted the previous acceptance of the great doctrine of the divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, are the earliest portions of the New Testament, and are often spoken about as being singularly undogmatic. So they are, and therefore all the more eloquent and all the more conclusive is such a testimony as this to the sort of teaching which from the beginning the Apostle addressed to his converts.

Now is that your notion of Jesus Christ? Do you regard Him as the sharer in the divine attributes and in the divine throne? It was a living Christ that Paul was thinking about when he wrote these words, who could hear him praying in Corinth, and could reach a helping hand down to these poor men in Thessalonica. It was a divine Christ that Paul was thinking about when he dared to say, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and God our Father. And I beseech you to ask yourself the question whether your faith accepts that great teaching, and whether to you He is far more than the Man Christ Jesus; and just because He is the man, is therefore the Son of God. Brethren! either Jesus lies in an unknown grave, ignorant of all that is going on here, and the notion that He can help is a delusion and a dream, or else He is the ever-living because He is the divine Christ, to whom we poor men can speak with the certainty that He hears us, and who wields the energies of Deity, and works the same works as the Father, for the help and blessing of the souls that trust Him.

**II. Secondly, note the great fact on which this prayer builds itself.**

The form of words in the original, loved and given, all but necessarily requires us to suppose that their reference is to some one definite historical act in which the love was manifested, and, as love always does, found voice in giving. Love is the infinite desire to bestow, and its language is always a gift. Then, according to the Apostle's thought, there is some one act in which all the fulness of the divine love manifests itself; some one act in which all the treasures which God can bestow upon men are conveyed and handed over to a world.

The statement that there is such renders almost unnecessary the question what such an act is. For there can be but one in all the sweep of the magnificent and beneficent divine deeds, so correspondent to His love, and so inclusive of all His giving, as that it shall be the ground of our confidence and the warrant for our prayers. The gift of Jesus Christ is that in which everlasting consolation and good hope are bestowed upon men. When our desires are widened out to the widest they must be based upon the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and when we would think most confidently and most desiringly of the benefits that we seek, for ourselves or for our fellows, we must turn to the Cross. My prayer is then acceptable and prevalent when it foots itself on the past divine act, and looking to the life and death of Jesus Christ, is widened out to long for, ask for, and in the very longing and asking for to begin to possess, the fulness of the gifts which then were brought to men in Him.

Everlasting consolation and good hope. I suppose the Apostle's emphasis is to be placed quite as much on the adjectives as on the nouns; for there are consolations enough in the world, only none of them are permanent; and there are hopes enough that amuse and draw men, but one of them only is good. The gift of Christ, thinks Paul, is the gift of a comfort which will never fail amidst all the vicissitudes and accumulated and repeated and prolonged sorrows to which flesh is heir, and is likewise the gift of a hope which, in its basis and in its objects, is equally noble and good.

Look at these two things briefly. Paul thinks that in Jesus Christ you and I, and all the world, if it will have it, has received the gift of an everlasting comfort. Ah! sorrow is more persistent than consolation. The bandaged wounds bleed again; the fire damped down for a moment smoulders, even when damped, and bursts out again. But there is one source of comfort which, because it comes from an unchangeable Christ, and because it communicates unfailing gifts of patience and insight, and because it leads forward to everlasting blessedness and recompenses, may well be called eternal consolation. Of course, consolation is not needed when sorrow has ceased; and when the wiping away of all tears from off all faces, and the plunging of grief into the nethermost fires, there to be consumed, have come about, there is no more need for comfort. Yet that which made the comfort while sorrow lasts, makes the triumph and the rapture when sorrow is dead, and is everlasting, though its office of consolation determines with earth.

Good hope through grace. This is the weakness of all the hopes which dance like fireflies in the dark before men, and are often like will-o-the-wisps in the night tempting men into deep mire, where there is no standing--that they are uncertain in their basis and inadequate in their range. The prostitution of the great faculty of hope is one of the saddest characteristics of our feeble and fallen manhood; for the bulk of our hopes are doubtful and akin to fears, and are mean and low, and disproportioned to the possibilities, and therefore the obligations, of our spirits. But in that Cross which teaches us the meaning of sorrows, and in that Christ whose presence is light in darkness, and the very embodied consolation of all hearts, there lie at once the foundation and the object of a hope which, in consideration both of object and foundation, stands unique in its excellence and sufficient in its firmness. A good hope; good because well founded; and good because grasping worthy objects; eternal consolation outlasting all sorrows--these things were given once for all, to the whole world when Jesus Christ came and lived and died. The materials for a comfort that shall never fail me, and for the foundation and the object of a hope that shall never be ashamed, are supplied in Jesus Christ our Lord. And so these gifts, already passed under the great seal of heaven, and confirmed to us all, if we choose to take them for ours, are the ground upon which the largest prayers may be rested, and the most ardent desires may be unblamably cherished, in the full confidence that no petitions of ours can reach to the greatness of the divine purpose, and that the widest and otherwise wildest of our hopes and wishes are sober under-estimates of what God has already given to us. For if He has given the material, He will apply what He has supplied. And if He has thus in the past bestowed the possibilities of comfort and hope upon the world, He will not slack His hand, if we desire the possibility to be in our hearts turned into the actuality.

God has given, therefore God will give. That in heaven's logic, but it does not do for men. It presupposes inexhaustible resources, unchangeable purposes of kindness, patience that is not disgusted and cannot be turned away by our sin. These things being presupposed it is true; and the prayer of my text, that God would comfort, can have no firmer foundation than the confidence of my text, that God has given everlasting consolation and good hope through grace. Thou hast helped us; leave us not, neither forsake us, O God of our salvation.

**III. The last thing here is the petitions based upon the contemplation of the divine hearers of the prayer, and of the gift already bestowed by God.**

May He comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work. I have already said all that perhaps is necessary in regard to the connection between the past gift of everlasting consolation and the present and future comforting of hearts which is here desired. It seems to me that the Apostle has in his mind the distinction between the great work of Christ, in which are supplied for us the materials for comfort and hope, and the present and continuous work of that Divine Spirit, by which God dwelling in our hearts in Jesus Christ makes real for each of us the universal gift of consolation and of hope. God has bestowed the materials for comfort; God will give the comfort for which He has supplied the materials. It were a poor thing if all that we could expect from our loving Father in the heavens were that He should contribute to us what might make us peaceful and glad and calm in sorrow, if we chose to use it. Men comfort from without; God steals into the heart, and there diffuses the aroma of His presence. Christ comes into the ship before He says, Peace! be still! It is not enough for our poor troubled heart that there should be calmness and consolation twining round the Cross if we choose to pluck the fruit. We need, and therefore we have, an indwelling God who, by that Spirit which is the Comforter, will make for each of us the everlasting consolation which He has bestowed upon the world our individual possession. God's husbandry is not merely broadcast sowing of the seed, but the planting in each individual heart of the precious germ. And the God who has given everlasting consolation to a whole world will comfort thy heart.

Then, again, the comforted heart will be a stable heart. Our fixedness and stability are not natural immobility, but communicated steadfastness. There must be, first, the consolation of Christ before there can be the calmness of a settled heart. We all know how vacillating, how driven to and fro by gusts of passion and winds of doctrine and forces of earth our resolutions and spirits are. But thistledown glued to a firm surface will be firm, and any light thing lashed to a solid one will be solid; and reeds shaken with the wind may be turned into brazen pillars that cannot be moved. If we have Christ in our hearts, He will be our consolation first and our stability next. Why should it be that we are spasmodic and fluctuating, and the slaves of ups and downs, like some barometer in stormy weather; now at set fair, and then away down where much rain is written? There is no need for it. Get Christ into your heart, and your mercury will always stand at one height. Why should it be that at one hour the flashing waters fill the harbour, and that six hours afterwards there is a waste of ooze and filth? It need not be. Our hearts may be like some landlocked lake that knows no tide. His heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.

The comforted and stable heart will be a fruitful heart. In every good word and work. Ah! how fragmentary is our goodness, like the broken torsos of the statues of fair gods dug up in some classic land. There is no reason why each of us should not appropriate and make our own the forms of goodness to which we are least naturally inclined, and cultivate and possess a symmetrical, fully-developed, all-round goodness, in some humble measure after the pattern of Jesus Christ our Lord. Practical righteousness, in every good word and work, is the outcome of all the sacred and secret consolations and blessings that Jesus Christ imparts. There are many Christian people who are like those swallow-holes, as they call them, characteristic of limestone countries, where a great river plunges into a cave and is no more heard of. You do not get your comforts and your blessing for that, brother, but in order that all the joy and peace, all the calmness and the communion, which you realise in the secret place of the Most High, may be translated into goodness and manifest righteousness in the market-place and the street. We get our goodness where we get our consolation, from Jesus Christ and His Cross.

And so, dear friends, all your comforts will die, and your sorrows will live, unless you have Christ for your own. The former will be like some application that is put on a poisoned bite, which will soothe it for a moment, but as soon as the anodyne dries off the skin, the poison will tingle and burn again, and will be working in the blood, whilst the remedy only touched the surface of the flesh. All your hopes will be like a child's castles on the sand, which the next tide will smooth out and obliterate, unless your hope is fixed on Him. You may have everlasting consolation, you may have a hope which will enable you to look serenely on the ills of life, and on the darkness of death, and on what darkly looms beyond death. You may have a calmed and steadied heart; you may have an all-round, stable, comprehensive goodness. But there is only one way to get these blessings, and that is to grasp and make our own, by simple faith and constant clinging, that great gift, given once for all in Jesus Christ, the gift of comfort that never dies, and of hope that never deceives, and then to apply that gift day by day, through God's good Spirit, to sorrows and trials and duties as they emerge.