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

**ACTS-052. JOHN MARK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem."*

*Acts 13:13*

The few brief notices of John Mark in Scripture are sufficient to give us an outline of his life, and some inkling of his character. He was the son of a well-to-do Christian woman in Jerusalem, whose house appears to have been the resort of the brethren as early as the period of Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison. As the cousin of Barnabas he was naturally selected to be the attendant and secular factotum of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. For some reason, faint-heartedness, lack of interest, levity of disposition, or whatever it may have been, he very quickly abandoned that office and returned to his home. His kindly-natured and indulgent relative sought to reinstate him in his former position on the second journey of Paul and himself. Paul's kinder severity refused to comply with the wish of his colleague Barnabas, and so they part, and Barnabas and Mark sail away to Cyprus, and drop out of the Acts of the Apostles. We hear no more about him until near the end of the Apostle Paul's life, when the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon show him as again the companion of Paul in his captivity. He seems to have left him in Rome, to have gone to Asia Minor for a space, to have returned to the Apostle during his last imprisonment and immediately prior to his death, and then to have attached himself to the Apostle Peter, and under his direction and instruction to have written his Gospel.

Now these are the bones of his story; can we put flesh and blood upon them: and can we get any lessons out of them? I think we may; at any rate I am going to try.

**I. Consider then, first, his--what shall I call it? well, if I may use the word which Paul himself designates it by, in its correct signification, we may call it his--apostasy.**

It was not a departure from Christ, but it was a departure from very plain duty. And if you will notice the point of time at which Mark threw up the work that was laid upon him, you will see the reason for his doing so. The first place to which the bold evangelists went was Cyprus. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, which was perhaps the reason for selecting it as the place in which to begin the mission. For the same reason, because it was the native place of his relative, it would be very easy work for John Mark as long as they stopped in Cyprus, among his friends, with people that knew him, and with whom no doubt he was familiar. But as soon as they crossed the strait that separated the island from the mainland, and set foot upon the soil of Asia Minor, so soon he turned tail; like some recruit that goes into battle, full of fervour, but as soon as the bullets begin to ping makes the best of his way to the rear. He was quite ready for missionary work as long as it was easy work; quite ready to do it as long as he was moving upon known ground and there was no great call upon his heroism, or his self-sacrifice; he does not wait to test the difficulties, but is frightened by the imagination of them, does not throw himself into the work and see how he gets on with it, but before he has gone a mile into the land, or made any real experience of the perils and hardships, has had quite enough of it, and goes away back to his mother in Jerusalem.

Yes, and we find exactly the same thing in all kinds of strenuous life. Many begin to run, but one after another, as lap after lap of the racecourse is got over, has had enough of it, and drops on one side; a hundred started, and at the end the field is reduced to three or four. All you men that have grey hairs on your heads can remember many of your companions that set out in the course with you, did run well for a little while: what has become of them? This thing hindered one, the other thing hindered another; the swiftly formed resolution died down as fast as it blazed up; and there are perhaps some three or four that, by patient continuance in well-doing, have been tolerably faithful to their juvenile ideal; and to use the homely word of the homely Abraham Lincoln, kept pegging away at what they knew to be the task that was laid upon them.

This is very threadbare morality, very very familiar and old-fashioned teaching; but I am accustomed to believe that no teaching is threadbare until it is practised; and that however well-worn the platitudes may be, you and I want them once again unless we have obeyed them, and done all which they enjoin. And so in regard to every career which has in it anything of honour and of effort, let John Mark teach us the lesson not swiftly to begin and inconsiderately to venture upon a course, but once begun to let nothing discourage, nor bate one jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward.

And still further and more solemnly still, how like this story is to the experience of hundreds and thousands of young Christians! Any man who has held such an office as I hold, for as many years as I have filled it, will have his memory full--and, may I say, his eyes not empty--of men and women who began like this man, earnest, fervid, full of zeal, and who, like him, have slackened in their work; who were Sunday-school teachers, workers amongst the poor, I know not what, when they were young men and women, and who now are idle and unprofitable servants.

Some of you, dear brethren, need the word of exhortation and earnest beseeching to contrast the sluggishness, the indolence of your present, with the brightness and the fervour of your past. And I beseech you, do not let your Christian life be like that snow that is on the ground about us to-day--when it first lights upon the earth, radiant and white, but day by day gets more covered with a veil of sooty blackness until it becomes dark and foul.

Many of us have to acknowledge that the fervour of early days has died down into coldness. The river that leapt from its source rejoicing, and bickered amongst the hills in such swift and musical descent, creeps sluggish and almost stagnant amongst the flats of later life, or has been lost and swallowed up altogether in the thirsty and encroaching sands of a barren worldliness. Oh! my friends, let us all ponder this lesson, and see to it that no repetition of the apostasy of this man darken our Christian lives and sadden our Christian conscience.

**II. And now let me ask you to look next, in the development of this little piece of biography, to Mark's eclipse.**

Paul and Barnabas differed about how to treat the renegade. Which of them was right? Would it have been better to have put him back in his old post, and given him another chance, and said nothing about the failure; or was it better to do what the sterner wisdom of Paul did, and declare that a man who had once so forgotten himself and abandoned his work was not the man to put in the same place again? Barnabas highest quality, as far as we know, was a certain kind of broad generosity and rejoicing to discern good in all men. He was a son of consolation; the gentle kindness of his natural disposition, added to the ties of relationship, influenced him in his wish regarding his cousin Mark. He made a mistake. It would have been the cruellest thing that could have been done to his relative to have put him back again without acknowledgment, without repentance, without his riding quarantine for a bit, and holding his tongue for a while. He would not then have known his fault as he ought to have known it, and so there would never have been the chance of his conquering it.

The Church manifestly sympathised with Paul, and thought that he took the right view; for the contrast is very significant between the unsympathising silence which the narrative records as attending the departure of Barnabas and Mark--Barnabas took Mark, and sailed away to Cyprus--and the emphasis with which it tells us that the other partner in the dispute, Paul, took Silas and departed, being recommended by the brethren to the grace of God.

The people at Antioch had no doubt who was right, and I think they were right in so deciding. So let us learn that God treats His renegades as Paul treated Mark, and not as Barnabas would have treated him, He is ready, even infinitely ready, to forgive and to restore, but desires to see the consciousness of the sin first, and desires, before large tasks are re-committed to hands that once have dropped them, to have some kind of evidence that the hands have grown stronger and the heart purified from its cowardice and its selfishness. Forgiveness does not mean impunity. The infinite mercy of God is not mere weak indulgence which so deals with a man's failures and sins as to convey the impression that these are of no moment whatsoever. And Paul's severity which said: No, such work is not fit for such hands until the heart has been "broken and healed," is of a piece with God's severity which is love. Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. Let us learn the difference between a weak charity which loves too foolishly, and therefore too selfishly, to let a man inherit the fruit of his doings, and the large mercy which knows how to take the bitterness out of the chastisement, and yet knows how to chastise.

And still further, this which I have called Mark's eclipse may teach us another lesson, viz., that the punishment for shirking work is to be denied work, just as the converse is true, that in God's administration of the world and of His Church, the reward for faithful work is to get more to do, and the filling a narrower sphere is the sure way to have a wider sphere to fill. So if a man abandons plain duties, then he will get no work to do. And that is why so many Christian men and women are idle in this world; and stand in the market-place, saying, with a certain degree of truth, No man hath hired us. No; because so often in the past tasks have been presented to you, forced upon you, almost pressed into your unwilling hands, that you have refused to take; and you are not going to get any more. You have been asked to work,--I speak now to professing Christians-- duties have been pressed upon you, fields of service have opened plainly before you, and you have not had the heart to go into them. And so you stand idle all the day now, and the work goes to other people that will do it. Thus God honours them, and passes you by.

Mark sails away to Cyprus, he does not go back to Jerusalem; he and Barnabas try to get up some little schismatic sort of mission of their own. Nothing comes of it; nothing ought to have come of it. He drops out of the story; he has no share in the joyful conflicts and sacrifices and successes of the Apostle. When he heard how Paul, by God's help, was flaming like a meteor from East to West, do you not think he wished that he had not been such a coward? When the Lord was opening doors, and he saw how the work was prospering in the hands of ancient companions, and Silas filled the place that he might have filled, if he had been faithful to God, do you not think the bitter thought occupied his mind, of how he had flung away what never could come back to him now? The punishment of indolence is absolute idleness.

So, my friends, let us learn this lesson, that the largest reward that God can give to him that has been faithful in a few things, is to give him many things to be faithful over. Beware, all of you professing Christians, lest to you should come the fate of the slothful servant with his one burled talent, to whom the punishment of burying it unused was to lose it altogether; according to that solemn word which was fulfilled in the temporal sphere in this story on which I am commenting: To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away.

**III. Again consider the process of recovery.**

Concerning it we read nothing indeed in Scripture; but concerning it we know enough to be able at least to determine what its outline must have been. The silent and obscure years of compulsory inactivity had their fruit, no doubt. There is only one road, with well-marked stages, by which a backsliding or apostate Christian can return to his Master. And that road has three halting-places upon it, through which the heart must pass if it have wandered from its early faith, and falsified its first professions. The first of them is the consciousness of the fall, the second is the resort to the Master for forgiveness; and the last is the deepened consecration to Him.

The patriarch Abraham, in a momentary lapse from faith to sense, thought himself compelled to leave the land to which God had sent him, because a famine threatened; and when he came back from Egypt, as the narrative tells us with deep significance, he went to the place where he had pitched his tent at the beginning; to the altar which lie had reared at the first. Yes, my friends, we must begin over again, tread all the old path, enter by the old wicket-gate, once more take the place of the penitent, once more make acquaintance with the pardoning Christ, once more devote ourselves in renewed consecration to His service. No man that wanders into the wilderness but comes back by the King's highway, if he comes back at all.

**IV. And so lastly, notice the reinstatement of the penitent renegade.**

If you turn at your leisure to the remaining notices of John Mark in Scripture, you will find, in two of Paul's Epistles of the captivity, viz., those to the Colossians and Philemon, references to him; and these references are of a very interesting and beautiful nature. Paul says that in Rome Mark was one of the four born Jews who had been a cordial and a comfort to him in his imprisonment. He commends him, in the view of a probable journey, to the loving reception of the church at Colossae, as if they knew something derogatory to his character, the impression of which the Apostle desired to remove. He sends to Philemon the greetings of the repentant renegade in strange juxtaposition with the greetings of two other men, one who was an apostate at the end of his career instead of at the beginning, and of whom we do not read that he ever came back, and one who all his life long is the type of a faithful friend and companion, Mark, Demas, Luke are bracketed as greeting Philemon; the first a runaway that came back, the second a fugitive who, so far as we know, never returned, and the last the faithful friend throughout.

And then in Paul's final Epistle, and in almost the last words of it, we read his request to Timothy. Take Mark, and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry. The first notice of him was: They had John to their minister; the last word about him is: he is profitable for the ministry. The Greek words in the original are not identical, but their meaning is substantially the same. So notwithstanding the failure, notwithstanding the wise refusal of Paul years before to have anything more to do with him, he is now reinstated in his old office, and the aged Apostle, before he dies, would like to have the comfort of his presence once more at his side. Is not the lesson out of that, this eternal Gospel that even early failures, recognised and repented of, may make a man better fitted for the tasks from which once he fled? Just as they tell us--I do not know whether it is true or not, it will do for an illustration--just as they tell us that a broken bone renewed is stronger at the point of fracture than it ever was before, so the very sin that we commit, when once we know it for a sin, and have brought it to Christ for forgiveness, may minister to our future efficiency and strength. The Israelites fought twice upon one battlefield. On the first occasion they were shamefully defeated; on the second, on the same ground, and against the same enemies, they victoriously emerged from the conflict, and reared the stone which said, Ebenezer! Hitherto the Lord hath helped us.

And so the temptations which have been sorest may be overcome, the sins into which we most naturally fall we may put our foot upon; the past is no specimen of what the future may be. The page that is yet to be written need have none of the blots of the page that we have turned over shining through it. Sin which we have learned to know for sin and to hate, teaches us humility, dependence, shows us where our weak places are. Sin which is forgiven knits us to Christ with deeper and more fervid love, and results in a larger consecration. Think of the two ends of this man's life--flying like a frightened hare from the very first suspicion of danger or of difficulty, sulking in his solitude, apart from all the joyful stir of consecration and of service; and at last made an evangelist to proclaim to the whole world the story of the Gospel of the Servant. God works with broken reeds, and through them breathes His sweetest music.

So, dear brethren, Take with you words, and return unto the Lord; say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously, and the answer will surely be:--I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely; I will be as the dew unto Israel.