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

**ACTS-067. THE GREAT QUESTION AND THE PLAIN ANSWER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"30.* *He brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? 31. And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved."*

*Acts 16:30-31*

The keeper of a Macedonian jail was not likely to be a very nervous or susceptible person. And so the extraordinary state of agitation and panic into which this rough jailer was cast needs some kind of explanation. There had been, as you will all remember, an earthquake of a strange kind, for it not only opened the prison doors, but shook the prisoner's chains off. The doors being opened, there was on the part of the jailer, who probably ought not to have been asleep, a very natural fear that his charge had escaped.

So he was ready, with that sad willingness for suicide which marked his age, to cast himself on his sword, when Paul encouraged him.

That fear then was past; what was he afraid of now? He knew the prisoners were all safe; why should he have come pale and trembling? Perhaps we shall find an answer to the question in another one. Why should he have gone to Paul and Silas, his two prisoners, for an anodyne to his fears?

The answer to that may possibly be found in remembering that for many days before this a singular thing had happened. Up and down the streets of Philippi a woman possessed with a spirit of divination had gone at the heels of these two men, proclaiming in such a way as to disturb them: These are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation. It was a new word and a new idea in Philippi or in Macedonia. This jailer had got it into his mind that these two men had in their hands a good which he only dimly understood. The panic caused by the earthquake deepened into a consciousness of some supernatural atmosphere about him, and stirred in his rude nature unwonted aspirations and terrors other than he had known, which cast him at Paul's feet with this strange question.

Now do you think that the jailer's question was a piece of foolish superstition? I daresay some of you do, or some of you may suppose too that it was one very unnecessary for him or anybody to ask. So I wish now, in a very few words, to deal with these three points--the question that we should all ask, the answer that we may all take, the blessing that we may all have.

**I. The question that we should all ask.**

I know that it is very unfashionable nowadays to talk about salvation as man's need. The word has come to be so worn and commonplace and technical that many men turn away from it; but for all that, let me try to stir up the consciousness of the deep necessity that it expresses.

What is it to be saved? Two things; to be healed and to be safe. In both aspects the expression is employed over and over again in Scripture. It means either restoration from sickness or deliverance from peril. I venture to press upon every one of my hearers these two considerations--we all need healing from sickness; we all need safety from peril.

Dear brethren, most of you are entire strangers to me; I daresay many of you never heard my voice before, and probably may never hear it again. But yet, because we have all of us one human heart, a brother-man comes to you as possessing with you one common experience, and ventures to say on the strength of his knowledge of himself, if on no other ground, We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Mind, I am not speaking about vices. I have no doubt you are a perfectly respectable man, in all the ordinary relations of life. I am not speaking about crimes. I daresay there may be a man or two here that has been in a dock in his day. Possibly. It does not matter whether there is or not. But I am not speaking about either vices or crimes; I am speaking about how we stand in reference to God. And I pray you to bring yourselves--for no one can do it for you, and no words of mine can do anything but stimulate you to the act--face to face with the absolute and dazzlingly pure righteousness of your Father in Heaven, and to feel the contrast between your life and what you know He desires you to be. Be honest with yourselves in asking and answering the question whether or not you have this sickness of sin, its paralysis in regard to good or its fevered inclination to evil. If salvation means being healed of a disease, we all have the disease; and whether we wish it or no, we want the healing.

And what of the other meaning of the word? Salvation means being safe. Are you safe? Am I safe? Is anybody safe standing in front of that awful law that rules the whole universe, Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap? I am not going to talk about any of the moot points which this generation has such a delight in discussing, as to the nature, the duration, the purpose, or the like, of future retribution. All that I am concerned in now is that all men, deep down in the bottom of their consciousness--and you and I amongst the rest--know that there is such a thing as retribution here; and if there be a life beyond the grave at all, necessarily in an infinitely intenser fashion there. Somewhere and somehow, men will have to lie on the beds that they have made; to drink as they have brewed. If sin means separation from God, and separation from God means, as it assuredly does, death, then I ask you--and there is no need for any exaggerated words about it--Are we not in danger? And if salvation be a state of deliverance from sickness, and a state of deliverance from peril, do we not need it?

Ah, brethren, I venture to say that we need it more than anything else. You will not misunderstand me as expressing the slightest depreciation of other remedies that are being extensively offered now for the various evils under which society and individuals groan. I heartily sympathise with them all, and would do my part to help them forward; but I cannot but feel that whilst culture of the intellect, of the taste, of the sense of beauty, of the refining agencies generally, is very valuable; and whilst moral and social and economical and political changes will all do something, and some of them a great deal, to diminish the sum of human misery, you have to go deeper down than these reach. It is not culture that we want most; it is salvation. Brethren, you and I are wrong in our relation to God, and that means death and--if you do not shrink from the vulgar old word--damnation. We are wrong in our relation to God, and that has to be set right before we are fundamentally and thoroughly right. That is to say, salvation is our deepest need.

Then how does it come that men go on, as so many of my friends here now have gone on, all their days paying no attention to that need? Is there any folly, amidst all the irrationalities of that irrational creature man, to be matched with the folly of steadily refusing to look forward and settle for ourselves the prime element in our condition--viz., our relation to God? Strange is it not--that power that we have of refusing to look at the barometer when it is going down, of turning away from unwholesome subjects just because we know them to be so unwelcome and threatening, and of buying a moment's exemption from discomfort at the price of a life's ruin?

Do you remember that old story of the way in which the prisoners in the time of the French Revolution used to behave? The tumbrils came every morning and carried off a file of them to the guillotine, and the rest of them had a ghastly make-believe of carrying on the old frivolities of the life of the salons and of society. And it lasted for an hour or two, but the tumbril came next morning all the same, and the guillotine stood there gaping in the Place. And so it is useless, although it is so frequently done by so many of us, to try to shut out facts instead of facing them. A man is never so wise as when he says to himself, Let me fairly know the whole truth of my relation to the unseen world in so far as it can be known here, and if that is wrong, let me set about rectifying it if it be possible. What will ye do in the end? is the wisest question that a man can ask himself, when the end is as certain as it is with us, and as unsatisfactory as I am afraid it threatens to be with some of us if we continue as we are.

Have I not a right to appeal to the half-sleeping and half-waking consciousness that endorses my words in some hearts as I speak? O brethren, you would be far wiser men if you did like this jailer in the Macedonian prison, came and gave yourselves no rest till you have this question cleared up, What must I do to be saved?

There was an old Rabbi who used to preach to his disciples, Repent the day before you die. And when they said to him, Rabbi, we do not know what day we are going to die. Then, said he, repent to-day. And so I say to you, Settle about the end before the end comes, and as you do not know when it may come, settle about it now.

**II. That brings me to the next point here, viz., the blessed, clear answer that we may all take.**

Paul and Silas were not non-plussed by this question, nor did they reply to it in the fashion in which many men would have answered it. Take a specimen of other answers. If anybody were so far left to himself as to go with this question to some of our modern wise men and teachers, they would say, Saved? My good fellow, there is nothing to be saved from. Get rid of delusions, and clear your mind of cant and superstition. Or they would say, Saved? Well, if you have gone wrong, do the best you can in the time to come. Or if you went to some of our friends they would say, Come and be baptized, and receive the grace of regeneration in holy baptism; and then come to the sacraments, and be faithful and loyal members of the Church which has Apostolic succession in it. And some would say, Set yourselves to work and toil and labour. And some would say, Don't trouble yourselves about such whims. A short life and a merry one; make the best of it, and jump the life to come. Neither cold morality, nor godless philosophy, nor wild dissipation, nor narrow ecclesiasticism prompted Paul's answer. He said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

What did that poor heathen man know about the Lord Jesus Christ? Next to nothing. How could he believe upon Him if he knew so little about Him? Well, you hear in the context that this summary answer to the question was the beginning, and not the end, of a conversation, which conversation, no doubt, consisted largely in extending and explaining the brief formulary with which it had commenced. But it is a grand thing that we can put the all-essential truth into half a dozen simple words, and then expound and explain them as may be necessary. And I come to you now, dear brethren, with nothing newer or more wonderful, or more out of the ordinary way than the old threadbare message which men have been preaching for nineteen hundred years, and have not exhausted, and which some of you have heard for a lifetime, and have never practised, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I am not going to weary you with mere dissertations upon the significance of these words. But let me single out two points about them, which perhaps though they may be perfectly familiar to you, may come to you with fresh force from my lips now.

Mark, first, whom it is that we are to believe on. The Lord, that is the divine Name; Jesus, that is the name of a Man; Christ, that is the name of an office. And if you put them all together, they come to this, that He on whom we sinful men may put our sole trust and hope for our healing and our safety, is the Son of God, who came down upon earth to live our life and to die our death that He might bear on Himself our sins, and fulfil all which ancient prophecy and symbol had proclaimed as needful, and therefore certain to be done, for men. It is not a starved half-Saviour whose name is only Jesus, and neither Lord nor Christ, faith in whom will save you. You must grasp the whole revelation of His nature and His power if from Him there is to flow the life that you need.

And note what it is that we are to exercise towards Jesus Christ. To believe on Him is a very different thing from believing Him. You may accept all that I have been saying about who and what He is, and be as far away from the faith that saves a soul as if you had never heard His name. To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is to lean the whole weight of yourselves upon Him. What do you do when you trust a man who promises you any small gift or advantage? What do you do when dear ones say, Rest on my love? You simply trust them. And the very same exercise of heart and mind which is the blessed cement that holds human society together, and the power that sheds peace and grace over friendships and love, is the power which, directed to Jesus Christ, brings all His saving might into exercise in our lives. Brethren, trust Him, trust Him as Lord, trust Him as Jesus, trust Him as Christ. Learn your sickness, learn your danger; and be sure of your Healer and rejoice in your security. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

**III. Lastly, consider the blessing we may all receive.**

This jailer about whom we have been speaking was a heathen when the sun set and a Christian when it rose. On the one day he was groping in darkness, a worshipper of idols, without hope in the future, and ready in desperation to plunge himself into the darkness beyond, when he thought his prisoners had fled. In an hour or two he rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.

A sudden conversion, you say, and sudden conversions are always suspicious. I am not so sure about that; they may be, or they may not be, according to circumstances. I know very well that it is not fashionable now to preach the possibility or the probability of men turning all at once from darkness to light, and that people shrug their shoulders at the old theory of sudden conversions. I think, so much the worse. There are a great many things in this world that have to be done suddenly if they are ever to be done at all. And I, for my part, would have far more hope for a man who, in one leap, sprung from the depth of the degradation of that coarse jailer into the light and joy of the Christian life, than for a man who tried to get to it by slow steps. You have to do everything in this world worth doing by a sudden resolution, however long the preparation may have been which led up to the resolution. The act of resolving is always the act of an instant. And when men are plunged in darkness and profligacy, as are, perhaps, some of my hearers now, there is far more chance of their casting off their evil by a sudden jerk than of their unwinding the snake by slow degrees from their arms. There is no reason whatever why the soundest and solidest and most lasting transformation of character should not begin in a moment's resolve.

And there is an immense danger that with some of you, if that change does not begin in a moment's resolve now, you will be further away from it than ever you were. I have no doubt there are many of you who, at any time for years past, have known that you ought to be Christians, and who, at any time for years past, have been saying to yourselves: Well, I will think about it, and I am tending towards it, but I cannot quite make the plunge. Why not; and why not now? You can if you will; you ought; you will be a better and happier man if you do. You will be saved from your sickness and safe from your danger.

The outcast jailer changed nationalities in a moment. You who have dwelt in the suburbs of Christ's Kingdom all your lives--why cannot you go inside the gate as quickly? For many of us the gradual growing up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord has been the appointed way. For some of us I verily believe the sudden change is the best. Some of us have a sunrise as in the tropics, where the one moment is grey and cold, and next moment the seas are lit with the glory. Others of us have a sunrise as at the poles, where a long slowly-growing light precedes the rising, and the rising itself is scarce observable. But it matters little as to how we get to Christ, if we are there, and it matters little whether a man's faith grows up in a moment, or is the slow product of years. If only it be rooted in Christ it will bear fruit unto life eternal.

And so, dear brethren, I come to you with my last question, this man rejoiced, believing in the Lord; why should not you; and why should not you now? Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth. A look is a swift act, but if it be the beginning of a lifelong gaze, it will be the beginning of salvation and of a glory longer than life.