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

**ACTS-092. CHRIST'S REMONSTRANCES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me! it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."*

*Acts 26:14*

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? No. But God can change the skin, because He can change the nature. In this story of the conversion of the Apostle Paul--the most important thing that happened that day--we have an instance how brambles may become vines; tares may become wheat; and a hater of Jesus Christ may be changed in a moment into His lover and servant, and, if need be, His martyr.

Now the very same motives and powers which were brought to bear upon the Apostle Paul by miracle are being brought to bear upon every one of us; and my object now is just to trace the stages of the process set forth here, and to ask some of you, if you, like Paul, have been obedient to the heavenly vision. Stages, I call them, though they were all crowded into a moment, for even the lightning has to pass through the intervening space when it flashes from one side of the heavens to another, and we may divide its path into periods. Time is very elastic, as any of us whose lives have held great sorrows or great joys or great resolutions well know.

**I. The first of these all but simultaneous and yet separable stages was the revelation of Jesus Christ.**

Of course to the Apostle it was mediated by miracle; but real as he believed that appearance of the risen Lord in the heavens to be, and valid as he maintained that it was as the ground of his Apostleship, he himself, in one of his letters, speaks of the whole incident as being the revelation of God's Son in him. The revelation in heart and mind was the main thing, of which the revelation to eye and ear were but means. The means, in his case, are different from those in ours; the end is the same. To Paul it came like the rush of a cataract that the Christ whom he had thought of as lying in an unknown grave was living in the heavens and ruling there. You and I, I suppose, do not need to be convinced by miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; but the bare fact that Jesus was living in the heavens would have had little effect upon Saul, unless it had been accompanied with the revelation of the startling fact that between him and Jesus Christ there were close personal relations, so that he had to do with Jesus, and Jesus with him.

Saul, Saul! why persecutest thou Me? They used to think that they could wake sleep-walkers by addressing them by name. Jesus Christ, by speaking His name to the Apostle, wakes him out of his diseased slumber, and brings him to wholesome consciousness. There are stringency and solemnity of address in that double use of the name Saul, Saul!

What does such an address teach you and me? That Jesus Christ, the living, reigning Lord of the universe, has perfect knowledge of each of us, and that we each stand isolated before Him, as if all the light of omniscience were focussed upon us. He knows our characters; He knows all about us, and more than that, He directly addresses Himself to each man and woman among us.

We are far too apt to hide ourselves in the crowd, and let all the messages of God's love, the warnings of His providences, as well as the teachings and invitations and pleadings of His gospel, fly over our heads as if they were meant vaguely for anybody. But they are all intended for thee, as directly as if thou, and thou only, wert in the world. I beseech you, lay this to heart, that although no audible sounds may rend the silent heavens, nor any blaze may blind thine eye, yet that as really, though not in the same outward fashion as Saul, when they were all fallen to the earth, felt himself to be singled out, and heard a voice speaking to him in the Hebrew tongue, saying, Saul, Saul! thou mayest hear a voice speaking to thee in the English tongue, by thy name, and directly addressing its gracious remonstrances and its loving offers to thy listening ear. I want to sharpen the blunt whosoever into the pointed thou. And I would fain plead with each of my friends hearing me now to believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for thee, and that Christ speaks to thee. I have a message from God unto thee, just as Nathan said unto David. Thou art the man!

Do not lose yourselves in the crowd or hide yourselves from the personal incidence of Christ's offer, but feel that you stand, as you do indeed, alone the hearer of His voice, the possible recipient of His saving mercy.

**II. Secondly, notice, as another stage in this process the discovery of the true character of the past.**

Why persecutest thou Me? Now I am not going to be tempted from my more direct purpose in this sermon to dwell even for a moment on the beautiful, affecting, strengthening thought here, of the unity of Jesus Christ with all the humble souls that love Him, so as that, whatsoever any member suffers, the Head suffers with it. I must leave that truth untouched.

Saul was brought to look at all his past life as standing in immediate connection with Jesus Christ. Of course he knew before the vision that he had no love to Him whom he thought to be a Galilean impostor, and that the madness with which he hated the servants was only the glancing off of the arrow that he would fain have aimed at the Master. But he did not know that Jesus Christ counted every blow struck at one of His servants as being struck at Him. Above all he did not know that the Christ whom he was persecuting was reigning in the heavens. And so his whole past life stood before him in a new aspect when it was brought into close connection with Christ, and looked at as in relation to Him.

The same process would yield very remarkable results if applied to our lives. If I could only get you for one quiet ten minutes, to lay all your past, as far as memory brought it to your minds, right before that pure and loving Face, I should have done much. One infallible way of judging of the rottenness or goodness of our actions is that we should bring them where they will all be brought one day, into the brightness of Christ's countenance. If you want to find out the flaws in some thin, badly-woven piece of cloth, you hold it up against the light, do you not? and then you see all the specks and holes, and the irregular threads. Hold up your lives in like fashion against the light, and I shall be surprised if you do not find enough there to make you very much ashamed of yourselves. Were you ever on the stage of a theatre in the daytime? Did you ever see what miserable daubs the scenes look, and how seamy it all is when the pitiless sunshine comes in? Let that great light pour on your life, and be thankful if you find out what a daub it has been, whilst yet colours and brushes and time are at your disposal, and you may paint the future fairer than the past.

Again, this revelation of Saul's past life disclosed its utter unreasonableness. That one question, Why persecutest thou Me? pulverised the whole thing. It was like the wondering question so unanswerable in the Psalm, Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? If you take into account what you are, and where you stand, you can find no reason, except utterly unreasonable ones, for the lives that I fear some of us are living--lives of godlessness and Christlessness. There is nothing in all the world a tithe so stupid as sin. There is nothing so unreasonable, if there be a God at all, and if we depend upon Him, and have duties to Him, as the lives that some of you are living. You admit, most of you, that there is such a God; you admit, most of you, that you do hang upon Him; you admit, in theory, that you ought to love and serve Him. The bulk of you call yourselves Christians. That is to say, you believe, as a piece of historical fact, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into this world and died for men. And, believing that, you turn your back on Him, and neither love nor serve nor trust Him nor turn away from your iniquity. Is there anything outside a lunatic asylum more madlike than that? Why persecutest thou? And he was speechless, for no answer was possible. Why neglectest thou? Why forgettest thou? Why, admitting what thou dost, art thou not an out-and-out Christian? If we think of all our obligations and relations, and the facts of the universe, we come back to the old saying, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and any man who, like many of my hearers, fails to give his heart and life to Jesus Christ will one day have to say, Behold, I have played the fool, and erred exceedingly. Wake up, my brother, to apply calm reason to your lives while yet there is time, and face the question, Why dost thou stand as thou dost to Jesus Christ? There is nothing sadder than the small share that deliberate reason and intelligent choice have in the ordering of most men's lives. You live by impulse, by habit, by example, by constraint of the outward necessities of your position. But I am sure that there are many amongst us now who have very seldom, if ever, sat down and said, Now let me think, until I get to the ultimate grounds of the course of life that I am pursuing. You can carry on the questions very gaily for a step or two, but then you come to a dead pause. What do I do so-and-so for? Because I like it. Why do I like it? Because it meets my needs, or my desires, or my tastes, or my intellect. Why do you make the meeting of your needs, or your desires, or your tastes, or your intellect your sole object? Is there any answer to that? The Hindoos say that the world rests upon an elephant, and the elephant rests upon a tortoise. What does the tortoise rest on? Nothing! Then that is what the world and the elephant rest on. And so, though you may go bravely through the first stages of the examination, when you come to the last question of all, you will find out that your whole scheme of life is built upon a blunder; and the blunder is this, that anybody can be blessed without God.

Further, this disclosure of the true character of his life revealed to Saul, as in a lightning flash, the ingratitude of it.

Why persecutest thou Me? That was as much as to say, What have I done to merit thy hate? What have I not done to merit rather thy love? Paul did not know all that Jesus Christ had done for him. It took him a lifetime to learn a little of it, and to tell his brethren something of what he had learned. And he has been learning it ever since that day when, outside the walls of Rome, they hacked off his head. He has been learning more and more of what Jesus Christ has done for him, and why he should not persecute Him but love Him.

But the same appeal comes to each of us. What has Jesus Christ done for thee, my friend, for me, for every soul of man? He has loved me better than His own life. He has given Himself for me. He has lingered beside me, seeking to draw me to Himself, and He still lingers. And this, at the best, tremulous faith, this, at the warmest, tepid love, this, at the completest, imperfect devotion and service, are all that we bring to Him; and some of us do not bring even these. Some of us have never known what it was to sacrifice one inclination for the sake of Christ, nor to do one act for His dear love's sake, nor to lean our weakness upon Him, nor to turn to Him and say, I give Thee myself, that I may possess Thee. Do ye thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise? I have heard of wounded soldiers striking with their bayonets at the ambulance men who came to help them. That is like what some of you do to the Lord who died for your healing, and comes as the Physician, with bandages and with balm, to bind up the brokenhearted. Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?

**III. Lastly, we have here a warning against self-inflicted wounds.**

That second clause of the remonstrance on the lips of Christ in my text is, according to the true reading, not found in the account of Paul's conversion in the ninth chapter of this book. My text is from Paul's own story; and it is interesting to notice that he adds this eminently pathetic and forcible appeal to the shorter account given by the writer of the book. It had gone deep into his heart, and he could not forget.

The metaphor is a very plain one. The ox-goad was a formidable weapon, some seven or eight feet in length, shod with an iron point, and capable of being used as a spear, and of inflicting deadly wounds at a pinch. Held in the firm hand of the ploughman, it presented a sharp point to the rebellious animal under the yoke. If the ox had readily yielded to the gentle prick, given, not in anger, but for guidance, it had been well. But if it lashes out with its hoofs against the point, what does it get but bleeding flanks? Paul had been striking out instead of obeying, and he had won by it only bloody hocks.

There are two truths deducible from this saying, which may have been a proverb in common use. One is the utter futility of lives that are spent in opposing the divine will. There is a strong current running, and if you try to go against it you will only be swept away by it. Think of some little fishing coble coming across the bow of a great ocean-going steamer. What will be the end of that? Think of a pony-chaise jogging up the line, and an express train thundering down it. What will be the end of that? Think of a man lifting himself up and saying to God, I will not! when God says, Do thou this! or Be thou this! What will be the end of that? The world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks--hard in regard to breaches of common morality, as some of my friends sitting quietly in these pews very well know. It is hard to indulge in sensual sin. You cannot altogether dodge what people call the natural consequences; but it was God who made Nature; and so I call them God-inflicted penalties. It is hard to set yourselves against Christianity. I am not going to speak of that at all now, only when we think of the expectations of victory with which so many antagonists of the Cross have gaily leaped into the arena, and of how the foes have been forgotten and there stands the Cross still, we may say of the whole crowd, beginning with the earliest, and coming down to the latest brand-new theory that is going to explode Christianity --it is hard to kick against the pricks. Your own limbs you may wound; you will not do the goad much harm.

But there is another side to the proverb of my text, and that is the self-inflicted harm that comes from resisting the pricks of God's rebukes and remonstrances, whether inflicted by conscience or by any other means; including, I make bold to say, even such poor words as these of mine. For if the first little prick of conscience, a warning and a guide, be neglected, the next will go a great deal deeper. The voice which, before you do the wrong thing, says to you, Do not do it, in tones of entreaty and remonstrance, speaks, after you have done it, more severely and more bitterly. The Latin word remorse, and the old English name for conscience, again-bite--which latter is a translation of the other--teach us the same lesson, that the gnawing which comes after wrong done is far harder to bear than the touch that should have kept us from the evil. The stings of marine jelly-fish will burn for days after, if you wet them. And so all wrong-doing, and all neglect of right-doing of every sort, carries with it a subsequent pain, or else the wounded limb mortifies, and that is worse. There is no pain then; it would be better if there were. There is such a possibility as to have gone on so obstinately kicking against the pricks and leaving the wounds so unheeded, as that they mortify and feeling goes. A conscience seared with a hot iron is ten times more dreadful than a conscience that pains and stings.

So, dear brethren, let me beseech you to listen to the pitying Christ, who says to us each, more in sorrow than in anger, It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. It is no pleasure to Him to hold the goad, nor that we should wound ourselves upon it. He has another question to put to us, with another why, Why should ye be stricken any more? Turn ye, turn ye; why will ye die, O house of Israel?

There is another metaphor drawn from the employment of oxen which we may set side by side with this of my text: Take My yoke upon you, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. The yoke accepted, the goad is laid aside; and repose and healing from its wounds are granted to us. Dear brethren, if you will listen to the Christ revealed in the heavens, as knowing all about you, and remonstrating with you for your unreasonableness and ingratitude, and setting before you the miseries of rebellion and the suicide of sin, then you will have healing for all your wounds, and your lives will neither be self-tormenting, futile, nor unreasonable. The mercy of Jesus Christ lavished upon you makes your yielding yourselves to Him your only rational course. Anything else is folly beyond comparison and harm and loss beyond count.