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

**ACTS-095. THE HEAVENLY VISION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.."*

*Acts 26:19*

This is Paul's account of the decisive moment in his life on which all his own future, and a great deal of the future of Christianity and of the world, hung. The gracious voice had spoken from heaven, and now everything depended on the answer made in the heart of the man lying there blind and amazed. Will he rise melted by love, and softened into submission, or hardened by resistance to the call of the exalted Lord? The somewhat singular expression which he employs in the text, makes us spectators of the very process of his yielding. For it might be rendered, with perhaps an advantage, I became not disobedient; as if the disobedience was the prior condition, from which we see him in the very act of passing, by the melting of his nature and the yielding of his will. Surely there have been few decisions in the world's history big with larger destinies than that which the captive described to Agrippa in the simple words: I became not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.

**I. Note, then, first, that this heavenly vision shines for us too.**

Paul throughout his whole career looked back to the miraculous appearance of Jesus Christ in the heavens, as being equally availably as valid ground for his Christian convictions as were the appearances of the Lord in bodily form to the Eleven after His resurrection. And I may venture to work the parallel in the inverse direction, and to say to you that what we see and know of Jesus Christ is as valid a ground for our convictions, and as true and powerful a call for our obedience, as when the heaven was rent, and the glory above the midday sun bathed the persecutor and his followers on the stony road to Damascus. For the revelation that is made to the understanding and the heart, to the spirit and the will, is the same whether it be made, as it was to Paul, through a heavenly vision, or, as it was to the other Apostles, through the facts of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, which their senses certified to them, or, as it is to us, by the record of the same facts, permanently enshrined in Scripture. Paul's sight of Christ was for a moment; we can see Him as often and as long as we will, by turning to the pages of this Book. Paul's sight of Christ was accompanied with but a partial apprehension of the great and far-reaching truths which he was to learn and to teach, as embodied in the Lord whom he saw. To see Him was the work of a moment, to know Him was the effort of a lifetime. We have the abiding results of the lifelong process lying ready to our hands in Paul's own letters, and we have not only the permanent record of Christ in the Gospels instead of the transient vision in the heavens, and the unfolding of the meaning and bearings of the historical facts, in the authoritative teaching of the Epistles, but we have also, in the history of the Church founded on these, in the manifest workings of a divine power for and through the company of believers, as well as in the correspondence between the facts and doctrines of Christianity and the wants of humanity, a vision disclosed and authenticated as heavenly, more developed, fuller of meaning and more blessed to the eyes which see it, than that which was revealed to the persecutor as he reeled from his horse on the way to the great city.

Dear brethren, they who see Christ in the word, In the history of the world, in the pleading of the preacher, in the course of the ages, and who sometimes hear His voice in the warnings which He breathes into their consciences, and in the illuminations which He flashes on their understanding, need ask for no loftier, no more valid and irrefragable manifestation of His gracious self. To each of us this vision is granted. May I say, without seeming egotism to you it is granted even through the dark and cloudy envelope of my poor words?

**II. The vision of Christ, howsoever perceived, comes demanding obedience.**

The purpose for which Jesus Christ made Himself known to Paul was to give him a charge which should influence his whole life. And the manner in which the Lord, when He had appeared, prepared the way for the charge was twofold. He revealed Himself in His radiant glory, in His exalted being, in His sympathetic and mysterious unity with them that loved Him and trusted Him, in His knowledge of the doings of the persecutor; and He disclosed to Saul the inmost evil that lurked in his own heart, and showed him to his bewilderment and confusion, how the course that he thought to be righteousness and service was blasphemy and sin. So, by the manifestation of Himself enthroned omniscient, bound by the closest ties of identity and of sympathy with all that love Him, and by the disclosure of the amazed gazer's evil and sin, Jesus Christ opened the way for the charge which bore in its very heart an assurance of pardon, and was itself a manifestation of His love.

In like manner all heavenly visions are meant to secure human obedience. We have not done what God means us to do with any knowledge of Him which He grants, unless we utilise it to drive the wheels of life and carry it out into practice in our daily conduct. Revelation is not meant to satisfy mere curiosity or the idle desire to know. It shines above us like the stars, but, unlike them, it shines to be the guide of our lives. And whatsoever glimpse of the divine nature, or of Christ's love, nearness, and power, we have ever caught, was meant to bow our wills in glad submission, and to animate our hands for diligent service and to quicken our feet to run in the way of His commandments.

There is plenty of idle gazing, with more or less of belief, at the heavenly vision. I beseech you to lay to heart this truth, that Christ rends the heavens and shows us God, not that men may know, but that men may, knowing, do; and all His visions are the bases of commandments. So the question for us all is, What are we doing with what we know of Jesus Christ? Nothing? Have we translated our thoughts of Him into actions, and have we put all our actions under the control of our thoughts of Him? It is not enough that a man should say, Whereupon I saw the vision, or, Whereupon I was convinced of the vision, or, Whereupon I understood the vision. Sight, apprehension, theology, orthodoxy, they are all very well, but the right result is, Whereupon I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. And unless your knowledge of Christ makes you do, and keep from doing, a thousand things, it is only an idle vision, which adds to your guilt.

But notice, in this connection, the peculiarity of the obedience which the vision requires. There is not a word, in this story of Paul's conversion, about the thing which Paul himself always puts in the foreground as the very hinge upon which conversion turns--viz. faith. Not a word. The name is not here, but the thing is here, if people will look. For the obedience which Paul says that he rendered to the vision was not rendered with his hands. He got up to his feet on the road there, not disobedient, though he had not yet done anything. This is to say, the man's will had melted. It had all gone with a run, so to speak, and the inmost being of him was subdued. The obedience was the submission of self to God, and not the more or less diligent and continuous consequent external activity in the way of God's commandments.

Further, Paul's obedience is also an obedience based upon the vision of Jesus Christ enthroned, living, bound by ties that thrill at the slightest touch to all hearts that love Him, and making common cause with them.

And furthermore, it is an obedience based upon the shuddering recognition of Paul's own unsuspected evil and foulness, how all the life, that he had thought was being built up into a temple that God would inhabit, was rottenness and falsehood.

And it is an obedience, further, built upon the recognition of pity and pardon in Christ, who, after His sharp denunciation of the sin, looks down from Heaven with a smile of forgiveness upon His lips, and says: But rise and stand upon thy feet, for I will send thee to make known My name.

An obedience which is the inward yielding of the will, which is all built upon the revelation of the living Christ, who was dead and is alive for evermore, and close to all His followers; and is, further, the thankful tribute of a heart that knows itself to be sinful, and is certain that it is forgiven--what is that but the obedience which is of faith? And thus, when I say that the heavenly vision demands obedience, I do not mean that Christ shows Himself to you to set you to work, but I mean that Christ shows Himself to you that you may yield yourselves to Him, and in the act may receive power to do all His sweet and sacred will.

**III. Thirdly, this obedience is in our own power to give or to withhold.**

Paul, as I said in my introductory remarks, puts us here as spectators of the very act of submission. He shows it to us in its beginning--he shows us the state from which he came and that into which he passed, and he tells us, I became--not disobedient. In his case it was a complete, swift, and permanent revolution, as if some thick-ribbed ice should all at once melt into sweet water. But whether swift or slow it was his own act, and after the Voice had spoken it was possible that Paul should have resisted and risen from the ground, not a servant, but a persecutor still. For God's grace constrains no man, and there is always the possibility open that when He calls we refuse, and that when He beseeches we say, I will not.

There is the mystery on which the subtlest intellects have tasked their powers and blunted the edge of their keenness in all generations; and it is not likely to be settled in five minutes of a sermon of mine. But the practical point that I have to urge is simply this: there are two mysteries, the one that men can, and the other that men do, resist Christ's pleading voice. As to the former, we cannot fathom it. But do not let any difficulty deaden to you the clear voice of your own consciousness. If I cannot trust my sense that I can do this thing or not do it, as I choose, there is nothing that I can trust. Will is the power of determining which of two roads I shall go, and, strange as it is, incapable of statement in any more general terms than the reiteration of the fact; yet here stands the fact, that God, the infinite Will, has given to men, whom He made in His own image, this inexplicable and awful power of coinciding with or opposing His purposes and His voice.

Our wills are ours, we know not how;

Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.

For the other mystery is, that men do consciously set themselves against the will of God, and refuse the gifts which they know all the while are for their good. It is of no use to say that sin is ignorance. No; that is only a surface explanation. You and I know too well that many a time when we have been as sure of what God wanted us to do as if we had seen it written in flaming letters on the sky there, we have gone and done the exact opposite. I know that there are men and women who are convinced in their inmost souls that they ought to be Christians, and that Jesus Christ is pleading with them at the present hour, and yet in whose hearts there is no yielding to what, they yet are certain, is the will and voice of Jesus Christ.

**IV. Lastly, this obedience may, in a moment, revolutionise a life.**

Paul rode from Jerusalem breathing out threatenings and slaughters. He fell from his warhorse, a persecutor of Christians, and a bitter enemy of Jesus. A few moments pass. There was one moment in which the crucial decision was made; and he staggered to his feet, loving all that he had hated, and abandoning all in which he had trusted. His own doctrine that if any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away and all things are become new, is but a generalisation of what befell himself on the Damascus road. It is of no use trying to say that there had been a warfare going on in this man's mind long before, of which his complete capitulation was only the final visible outcome. There is not a trace of anything of the kind in the story. It is a pure hypothesis pressed into the service of the anti-supernatural explanation of the fact.

There are plenty of analogies of such sudden and entire revolution. All reformation of a moral kind is best done quickly. It is a very hopeless task, as every one knows, to tell a drunkard to break off his habits gradually. There must be one moment in which he definitely turns himself round and sets his face in the other direction. Some things are best done with slow, continuous pressure; other things need to be done with a wrench if they are to be done at all.

There used to be far too much insistence upon one type of religious experience, and all men that were to be recognised as Christians were, by evangelical Nonconformists, required to be able to point to the moment when, by some sudden change, they passed from darkness to light. We have drifted away from that very far now, and there is need for insisting, not upon the necessity, but upon the possibility, of sudden conversions. However some may try to show that such experiences cannot be, the experience of every earnest Christian teacher can answer--well! whether they can be or not, they are. Jesus Christ cured two men gradually, and all the others instantaneously. No doubt, for young people who have been born amidst Christian influences, and have grown up in Christian households, the usual way of becoming Christians is that slowly and imperceptibly they shall pass into the consciousness of communion with Jesus Christ. But for people who have grown up irreligious and, perhaps, profligate and sinful, the most probable way is a sudden stride out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. So I come to you all with this message. No matter what your past, no matter how much of your life may have ebbed away, no matter how deeply rooted and obstinate may be your habits of evil, no matter how often you may have tried to mend yourself and have failed, it is possible by one swift act of surrender to break the chains and go free. In every man's life there have been moments into which years have been crowded, and which have put a wider gulf between his past and his present self than many slow, languid hours can dig. A great sorrow, a great joy, a great, newly discerned truth, a great resolve will make one day as a thousand years. Men live through such moments and feel that the past is swallowed up as by an earthquake. The highest instance of thus making time elastic and crowding it with meaning is when a man forms and keeps the swift resolve to yield himself to Christ. It may be the work of a moment, but it makes a gulf between past and future, like that which parted the time before and the time after that in which God said, Let there be light: and there was light. If you have never yet bowed before the heavenly vision and yielded yourself as conquered by the love which pardons, to be the glad servant of the Lord Jesus who takes all His servants into wondrous oneness with Himself, do it now. You can do it. Delay is disobedience, and may be death. Do it now, and your whole life will be changed. Peace and joy and power will come to you, and you, made a new man, will move in a new world of new relations, duties, energies, loves, gladnesses, helps, and hopes. If you take heed to prolong the point into a line, and hour by hour to renew the surrender and the cry, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? you will ever have the vision of the Christ enthroned, pardoning, sympathising, and commanding, which will fill your sky with glory, point the path of your feet, and satisfy your gaze with His beauty, and your heart with His all-sufficing and ever-present love.