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

**COLOSSIANS-001**. **THE WRITER AND THE READERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father."*

*Colossians 1:1-2 (R.V.)*

We may say that each of Paul's greater epistles has in it one salient thought. In that to the Romans, it is Justification by faith; in Ephesians, it is the mystical union of Christ and His Church; in Philippians, it is the joy of Christian progress; in this epistle, it is the dignity and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the Mediator and Head of all creation and of the Church.

Such a thought is emphatically a lesson for the day.

The Christ whom the world needs to have proclaimed in every deaf ear and lifted up before blind and reluctant eyes, is not merely the perfect man, nor only the meek sufferer, but the Source of creation and its Lord, Who from the beginning has been the life of all that has lived, and before the beginning was in the bosom of the Father. The shallow and starved religion which contents itself with mere humanitarian conceptions of Jesus of Nazareth needs to be deepened and filled out by these lofty truths before it can acquire solidity and steadfastness sufficient to be the unmoved foundation of sinful and mortal lives. The evangelistic teaching which concentrates exclusive attention on the cross as "the work of Christ," needs to be led to the contemplation of them, in order to understand the cross, and to have its mystery as well as its meaning declared. This letter itself dwells upon two applications of its principles to two classes of error which, in somewhat changed forms, exist now as then--the error of the ceremonialist, to whom religion was mainly a matter of ritual, and the error of the speculative thinker, to whom the universe was filled with forces which left no room for the working of a personal Will. The vision of the living Christ Who fills all things, is held up before each of these two, as the antidote to his poison; and that same vision must be made clear to-day to the modern representatives of these ancient errors. If we are able to grasp with heart and mind the principles of this epistle for ourselves, we shall stand at the centre of things, seeing order where from any other position confusion only is apparent, and being at the point of rest instead of being hurried along by the wild whirl of conflicting opinions.

I desire, therefore, to present the teachings of this great epistle in a series of expositions.

Before advancing to the consideration of these verses, we must deal with one or two introductory matters, so as to get the frame and the background for the picture.

**I. First, as to the Church of Colossae to which the letter is addressed.**

Perhaps too much has been made of late years of geographical and topographical elucidations of Paul's epistles. A knowledge of the place to which a letter was sent cannot do much to help in understanding the letter, for local circumstances leave very faint traces, if any, on the Apostle's writings. Here and there an allusion may be detected, or a metaphor may gain in point by such knowledge; but, for the most part, local colouring is entirely absent. Some slight indication, however, of the situation and circumstances of the Colossian Church may help to give vividness to our conceptions of the little community to whom this rich treasure of truth was first entrusted.

Colossae was a town in the heart of the modern Asia Minor, much decayed in Paul's time from its earlier importance. It lay in a valley of Phrygia, on the banks of a small stream, the Lycus, down the course of which, at a distance of some ten miles or so, two very much more important cities fronted each other, Hierapolis on the north, and Laodicea on the south bank of the river. In all three cities were Christian Churches, as we know from this letter, one of which has attained the bad eminence of having become the type of tepid religion for all the world. How strange to think of the tiny community in a remote valley of Asia Minor, eighteen centuries since, thus gibbeted for ever! These stray beams of light which fall upon the people in the New Testament, showing them fixed for ever in one attitude, like a lightning flash in the darkness, are solemn precursors of the last Apocalypse, when all men shall be revealed in "the brightness of His coming."

Paul does not seem to have been the founder of these Churches, or ever to have visited them at the date of this letter. That opinion is based on several of its characteristics, such, for instance, as the absence of any of those kindly greetings to individuals which in the Apostle's other letters are so abundant, and reveal at once the warmth and the delicacy of his affection: and the allusions which occur more than once to his having only "heard" of their faith and love, and is strongly supported by the expression in the second chapter where he speaks of the conflict in spirit which he had for "you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." Probably the teacher who planted the gospel in Colossae was that Epaphras, whose visit to Rome occasioned the letter, and who is referred to in verse 7 of this chapter in terms which seem to suggest that he had first made known to them the fruit-producing "word of the truth of the gospel."

**II. Note the occasion and subject of the letter.**

Paul is a prisoner, in a certain sense, in Rome; but the word prisoner conveys a false impression of the amount of restriction of personal liberty to which he was subjected. We know from the last words of the Acts of the Apostles, and from the Epistle to the Philippians, that his "imprisonment" did not in the least interfere with his liberty of preaching, nor with his intercourse with friends. Rather, in the view of the facilities it gave that by him "the preaching might be fully known," it may be regarded, as indeed the writer of the Acts seems to regard it, as the very climax and topstone of Paul's work, wherewith his history may fitly end, leaving the champion of the gospel at the very heart of the world, with unhindered liberty to proclaim his message by the very throne of Caesar. He was sheltered rather than confined beneath the wing of the imperial eagle. His imprisonment, as we call it, was, at all events at first, detention in Rome under military supervision rather than incarceration. So to his lodgings in Rome there comes a brother from this decaying little town in the far-off valley of the Lycus, Epaphras by name. Whether his errand was exclusively to consult Paul about the state of the Colossian Church, or whether some other business also had brought him to Rome, we do not know; at all events, he comes and brings with him bad news, which burdens Paul's heart with solicitude for the little community, which had no remembrances of his own authoritative teaching to fall back upon. Many a night would he and Epaphras spend in deep converse on the matter, with the stolid Roman legionary, to whom Paul was chained, sitting wearily by, while they two eagerly talked.

The tidings were that a strange disease, hatched in that hotbed of religious fancies, the dreamy East, was threatening the faith of the Colossian Christians. A peculiar form of heresy, singularly compounded of Jewish ritualism and Oriental mysticism--two elements as hard to blend in the foundation of a system as the heterogeneous iron and clay on which the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream stood unstably--had appeared among them, and though at present confined to a few, was being vigorously preached. The characteristic Eastern dogma, that matter is evil and the source of evil, which underlies so much Oriental religion, and crept in so early to corrupt Christianity, and crops up to-day in so many strange places and unexpected ways, had begun to infect them. The conclusion was quickly drawn: "Well, then, if matter be the source of all evil, then, of course, God and matter must be antagonistic," and so the creation and government of this material universe could not be supposed to have come directly from Him. The endeavour to keep the pure Divinity and the gross world as far apart as possible, while yet an intellectual necessity forbad the entire breaking of the bond between them, led to the busy working of the imagination, which spanned the void gulf between God Who is good, and matter which is evil, with a bridge of cobwebs--a chain of intermediate beings, emanations, abstractions, each approaching more nearly to the material than his precursor, till at last the intangible and infinite was confined and curdled into actual earthly matter, and the pure was darkened thereby into evil.

Such notions, fantastic and remote from daily life as they look, really led by a very short cut to making wild work with the plainest moral teachings both of the natural conscience and of Christianity. For if matter be the source of all evil, then the fountain of each man's sin is to be found, not in his own perverted will, but in his body, and the cure of it is to be reached, not by faith which plants a new life in a sinful spirit, but simply by ascetic mortification of the flesh.

Strangely united with these mystical Eastern teachings, which might so easily be perverted to the coarsest sensuality, and had their heads in the clouds and their feet in the mud, were the narrowest doctrines of Jewish ritualism, insisting on circumcision, laws regulating food, the observance of feast days, and the whole cumbrous apparatus of a ceremonial religion. It is a monstrous combination, a cross between a Talmudical rabbi and a Buddhist priest, and yet it is not unnatural that, after soaring in these lofty regions of speculation where the air is too thin to support life, men should be glad to get hold of the externals of an elaborate ritual. It is not the first nor the last time that a misplaced philosophical religion has got close to a religion of outward observances, to keep it from shivering itself to death. Extremes meet. If you go far enough east, you are west.

Such, generally speaking, was the error that was beginning to lift its head in Colossae. Religious fanaticism was at home in that country, from which, both in heathen and in Christian times, wild rites and notions emanated, and the Apostle might well dread the effect of this new teaching, as of a spark on hay, on the excitable natures of the Colossian converts.

Now we may say, "What does all this matter to us? We are in no danger of being haunted by the ghosts of these dead heresies." But the truth which Paul opposed to them is all important for every age. It was simply the Person of Christ as the only manifestation of the Divine, the link between God and the universe, its Creator and Preserver, the Light and Life of men, the Lord and Inspirer of the Church, Christ has come, laying His hand upon both God and man, therefore there is no need nor place for a misty crowd of angelic beings or shadowy abstractions to bridge the gulf across which His incarnation flings its single solid arch. Christ has been bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, therefore that cannot be the source of evil in which the fulness of the Godhead has dwelt as in a shrine. Christ has come, the fountain of life and holiness, therefore there is no more place for ascetic mortifications on the one hand, nor for Jewish scrupulosities on the other. These things might detract from the completeness of faith in the complete redemption which Christ has wrought, and must becloud the truth that simple faith in it is all which a man needs.

To urge these and the like truths this letter is written. Its central principle is the sovereign and exclusive mediation of Jesus Christ, the God-man, the victorious antagonist of these dead speculations, and the destined conqueror of all the doubts and confusions of this day. If we grasp with mind and heart that truth, we can possess our souls in patience, and in its light see light where else is darkness and uncertainty.

So much then for introduction, and now a few words of comment on the superscription of the letter contained in these verses.

**III. Notice the blending of lowliness and authority in Paul's designation of himself. "An Apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God."**

He does not always bring his apostolic authority to mind at the beginning of his letters. In his earliest epistles, those to the Thessalonians, he has not yet adopted the practice. In the loving and joyous letter to the Philippians, he has no need to urge his authority, for no man among them ever gainsaid it. In that to Philemon, friendship is uppermost, and though, as he says, he might be much bold to enjoin, yet he prefers to beseech, and will not command as "Apostle," but pleads as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus." In his other letters he put his authority in the foreground as here, and it may be noticed that it and its basis in the will of God are asserted with greatest emphasis in the Epistle to the Galatians, where he has to deal with more defiant opposition than elsewhere encountered him.

Here he puts forth his claim to the apostolate, in the highest sense of the word. He asserts his equality with the original Apostles, the chosen witnesses for the reality of Christ's resurrection. He, too, had seen the risen Lord, and heard the words of His mouth. He shared with them the prerogative of certifying from personal experience that Jesus is risen and lives to bless and rule. Paul's whole Christianity was built on the belief that Jesus Christ had actually appeared to him. That vision on the road to Damascus revolutionised his life. Because he had seen his Lord and heard his duty from His lips, he had become what he was.

"Through the will of God" is at once an assertion of Divine authority, a declaration of independence of all human teaching or appointment, and a most lowly disclaimer of individual merit, or personal power. Few religious teachers have had so strongly marked a character as Paul, or have so constantly brought their own experience into prominence; but the weight which he expected to be attached to his words was to be due entirely to their being the words which God spoke through him. If this opening clause were to be paraphrased it would be: I speak to you because God has sent me. I am not an Apostle by my own will, nor by my own merit. I am not worthy to be called an Apostle. I am a poor sinner like yourselves, and it is a miracle of love and mercy that God should put His words into such lips. But He does speak through me; my words are neither mine nor learned from any other man, but His. Never mind the cracked pipe through which the Divine breath makes music, but listen to the music.

So Paul thought of his message; so the uncompromising assertion of authority was united with deep humility. Do we come to his words, believing that we hear God speaking through Paul? Here is no formal doctrine of inspiration, but here is the claim to be the organ of the Divine will and mind, to which we ought to listen as indeed the voice of God.

The gracious humility of the man is further seen in his association with himself, as joint senders of the letter, of his young brother Timothy, who has no apostolic authority, but whose concurrence in its teaching might give it some additional weight. For the first few verses he remembers to speak in the plural, as in the name of both--"we give thanks," "Epaphras declared to us your love," and so on; but in the fiery sweep of his thoughts Timothy is soon left out of sight, and Paul alone pours out the wealth of his Divine wisdom and the warmth of his fervid heart.

**IV. We may observe the noble ideal of the Christian character set forth in the designations of the Colossian Church, as "saints and faithful brethren in Christ."**

In his earlier letters Paul addresses himself to "the Church;" in his later, beginning with the Epistle to the Romans, and including the three great epistles from his captivity, namely, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, he drops the word Church, and uses expressions which regard the individuals composing the community rather than the community which they compose. The slight change thus indicated in the Apostle's point of view is interesting, however it may be accounted for. There is no reason to suppose it done of set purpose, and certainly it did not arise from any lowered estimate of the sacredness of "the Church," which is nowhere put on higher ground than in the letter to Ephesus, which belongs to the later period; but it may be that advancing years and familiarity with his work, with his position of authority, and with his auditors, all tended to draw him closer to them, and insensibly led to the disuse of the more formal and official address to "the Church" in favour of the simpler and more affectionate superscription, to "the brethren."

Be that as it may, the lessons to be drawn from the names here given to the members of the Church are the more important matter for us. It would be interesting and profitable to examine the meaning of all the New Testament names for believers, and to learn the lessons which they teach; but we must for the present confine ourselves to those which occur here.

"Saints"--a word that has been woefully misapplied both by the Church and the world. The former has given it as a special honour to a few, and "decorated" with it mainly the possessors of a false ideal of sanctity--that of the ascetic and monastic sort. The latter uses it with a sarcastic intonation, as if it implied much cry and little wool, loud professions and small performance, not without a touch of hypocrisy and crafty self-seeking.

Saints are not people living in cloisters after a fantastic ideal, but men and women immersed in the vulgar work of every-day life and worried by the small prosaic anxieties which fret us all, who amidst the whirr of the spindle in the mill, and the clink of the scales on the counter, and the hubbub of the market-place and the jangle of the courts, are yet living lives of conscious devotion to God. The root idea of the word, which is an Old Testament word, is not moral purity, but separation to God. The holy things of the old covenant were things set apart from ordinary use for His service. So, on the high priest's mitre was written Holiness to the Lord. So the Sabbath was kept "holy," because set apart from the week in obedience to Divine command.

Sanctity, and saint, are used now mainly with the idea of moral purity, but that is a secondary meaning. The real primary signification is separation to God. Consecration to Him is the root from which the white flower of purity springs most surely. There is a deep lesson in the word as to the true method of attaining cleanness of life and spirit. We cannot make ourselves pure, but we can yield ourselves to God and the purity will come.

But we have not only here the fundamental idea of holiness, and the connection of purity of character with self-consecration to God, but also the solemn obligation on all so-called Christians thus to separate and devote themselves to Him. We are Christians as far as we give ourselves up to God, in the surrender of our wills and the practical obedience of our lives--so far and not one inch further. We are not merely bound to this consecration if we are Christians, but we are not Christians unless we thus consecrate ourselves. Pleasing self, and making my own will my law, and living for my own ends, is destructive of all Christianity. Saints are not an eminent sort of Christians, but all Christians are saints, and he who is not a saint is not a Christian. The true consecration is the surrender of the will, which no man can do for us, which needs no outward ceremonial, and the one motive which will lead us selfish and stubborn men to bow our necks to that gentle yoke, and to come out of the misery of pleasing self into the peace of serving God, is drawn from the great love of Him Who devoted Himself to God and man, and bought us for His own by giving Himself utterly to be ours. All sanctity begins with consecration to God. All consecration rests upon the faith of Christ's sacrifice. And if, drawn by the great love of Christ to us unworthy, we give ourselves away to God in Him, then He gives Himself in deep sacred communion to us. "I am thine" has ever for its chord which completes the fulness of its music, "Thou art mine." And so "saint" is a name of dignity and honour, as well as a stringent requirement. There is implied in it, too, safety from all that would threaten life or union with Him. He will not hold His possessions with a slack hand that negligently lets them drop, or with a feeble hand that cannot keep them from a foe. "Thou wilt not suffer him who is consecrated to Thee to see corruption." If I belong to God, having given myself to Him, then I am safe from the touch of evil and the taint of decay. "The Lord's portion is His people," and He will not lose even so worthless a part of that portion as I am. The great name "saints" carries with it the prophecy of victory over all evil, and the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God, or pluck us from His hand.

But these Colossian Christians are "faithful" as well as saints. That may either mean trustworthy and true to their stewardship, or trusting. In the parallel verses in the Epistle to the Ephesians (which presents so many resemblances to this epistle) the latter meaning seems to be required, and here it is certainly the more natural, as pointing to the very foundation of all Christian consecration and brotherhood in the act of believing. We are united to Christ by our faith. The Church is a family of faithful, that is to say of believing, men. Faith underlies consecration and is the parent of holiness, for he only will yield himself to God who trustfully grasps the mercies of God and rests on Christ's great gift of Himself. Faith weaves the bond that unites men in the brotherhood of the Church, for it brings all who share it into a common relation to the Father. He who is faithful, that is, believing, will be faithful in the sense of being worthy of confidence and true to his duty, his profession, and his Lord.

They were brethren too. That strong new bond of union among men the most unlike, was a strange phenomenon in Paul's time, when the Roman world was falling to pieces, and rent by deep clefts of hatreds and jealousies such as modern society scarcely knows; and men might well wonder as they saw the slave and his master sitting at the same table, the Greek and the barbarian learning the same wisdom in the same tongue, the Jew and the Gentile bowing the knee in the same worship, and the hearts of all fused into one great glow of helpful sympathy and unselfish love.

But "brethren" means more than this. It points not merely to Christian love, but to the common possession of a new life. If we are brethren, it is because we have one Father, because in us all there is one life. The name is often regarded as sentimental and metaphorical. The obligation of mutual love is supposed to be the main idea in it, and there is a melancholy hollowness and unreality in the very sound of it as applied to the usual average Christians of to-day. But the name leads straight to the doctrine of regeneration, and proclaims that all Christians are born again through their faith in Jesus Christ, and thereby partake of a common new life, which makes all its possessors children of the Highest, and therefore brethren one of another. If regarded as an expression of the affection of Christians for one another, "brethren" is an exaggeration, ludicrous or tragic, as we view it; but if we regard it as the expression of the real bond which gathers all believers into one family, it declares the deepest mystery and mightiest privilege of the gospel that "to as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the Sons of God."

They are "in Christ." These two words may apply to all the designations or to the last only. They are saints in Him, believers in Him, brethren in Him. That mystical but most real union of Christians with their Lord is never far away from the Apostle's thoughts, and in the twin Epistle to the Ephesians is the very burden of the whole. A shallower Christianity tries to weaken that great phrase to something more intelligible to the unspiritual temper and the poverty-stricken experience proper to it; but no justice can be done to Paul's teaching unless it be taken in all its depth as expressive of that same mutual indwelling and interlacing of spirit with spirit which is so prominent in the writings of the Apostle John. There is one point of contact between the Pauline and the Johannean conceptions, on the differences between which so much exaggeration has been expended: to both the inmost essence of the Christian life is union to Christ, and abiding in Him. If we are Christians, we are in Him, in yet profounder sense than creation lives and moves and has its being in God. We are in Him as the earth with all its living things is in the atmosphere, as the branch is in the vine, as the members are in the body. We are in Him as inhabitants in a house, as hearts that love in hearts that love, as parts in the whole. If we are Christians, He is in us, as life in every vein, as the fruit-producing sap and energy of the vine is in every branch, as the air in every lung, as the sunlight in every planet.

This is the deepest mystery of the Christian life. To be "in Him" is to be complete. "In Him" we are "blessed with all spiritual blessings." "In Him", we are "chosen," "In Him," God "freely bestows His grace upon us." "In Him" we "have redemption through His blood." "In Him" "all things in heaven and earth are gathered." "In Him we have obtained an inheritance." In Him is the better life of all who live. In Him we have peace though the world be seething with change and storm. In Him we conquer though earth and our own evil be all in arms against us. If we live in Him, we live in purity and joy. If we die in Him, we die in tranquil trust. If our gravestones may truly carry the sweet old inscription carved on so many a nameless slab in the catacombs, "In Christo," they will also bear the other "In pace" (In peace). If we sleep in Him, our glory is assured, for them also that sleep in Jesus, will God bring with Him.

**V. A word or two only can be devoted to the last clause of salutation, the apostolic wish, which sets forth the high ideal to be desired for Churches and individuals: "Grace be unto and peace from God our Father."**

The Authorized Version reads, "and the Lord Jesus Christ," but the Revised Version follows the majority of recent text-critics and their principal authorities in omitting these words, which are supposed to have been imported into our passage from the parallel place in Ephesians. The omission of these familiar words which occur so uniformly in the similar introductory salutations of Paul's other epistles, is especially singular here, where the main subject of the letter is the office of Christ as channel of all blessings. Perhaps the previous word, "brethren" was lingering in his mind, and so instinctively he stopped with the kindred word "Father."

"Grace and peace"--Paul's wishes for those whom he loves, and the blessings which he expects every Christian to possess, blend the Western and the Eastern forms of salutation, and surpass both. All that the Greek meant by his "Grace," all that the Hebrew meant by his "Peace," the ideally happy condition which differing nations have placed in different blessings, and which all loving words have vainly wished for dear ones, is secured and conveyed to every poor soul that trusts in Christ.

"Grace"--what is that? The word means first--love in exercise to those who are below the lover, or who deserve something else; stooping love that condescends, and patient love that forgives. Then it means the gifts which such love bestows, and then it means the effects of these gifts in the beauties of character and conduct developed in the receivers. So there are here invoked, or we may call it, proffered and promised, to every believing heart, the love and gentleness of that Father whose love to us sinful atoms is a miracle of lowliness and longsuffering; and, next, the outcome of that love which never visits the soul emptyhanded, in all varied spiritual gifts, to strengthen weakness, to enlighten ignorance, to fill the whole being; and as last result of all, every beauty of mind, heart, and temper which can adorn the character, and refine a man into the likeness of God. That great gift will come in continuous bestowment if we are "saints in Christ." Of His fulness we all receive and grace for grace, wave upon wave as the ripples press shoreward and each in turn pours its tribute on the beach, or as pulsation after pulsation makes one golden beam of unbroken light, strong winged enough to come all the way from the sun, gentle enough to fall on the sensitive eyeball without pain. That one beam will decompose into all colours and brightnesses. That one "grace" will part into sevenfold gifts and be the life in us of whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.

"Peace be unto you." That old greeting, the witness of a state of society when every stranger seen across the desert was probably an enemy, is also a witness to the deep unrest of the heart. It is well to learn the lesson that peace comes after grace, that for tranquillity of soul we must go to God, and that He gives it by giving us His love and its gifts, of which, and of which only, peace is the result. If we have that grace for ours, as we all may if we will, we shall be still, because our desires are satisfied and all our needs met. To seek is unnecessary when we are conscious of possessing. We may end our weary quest, like the dove when it had found the green leaf, though little dry land may be seen as yet, and fold our wings and rest by the cross. We may be lapped in calm repose, even in the midst of toil and strife, like John resting on the heart of his Lord. There must be first of all, peace with God, that there may be peace from God. Then, when we have been won from our alienation and enmity by the power of the cross, and have learned to know that God is our Lover, Friend and Father, we shall possess the peace of those whose hearts have found their home, the peace of spirits no longer at war within--conscience and choice tearing them asunder in their strife, the peace of obedience which banishes the disturbance of self-will, the peace of security shaken by no fears, the peace of a sure future across the brightness of which no shadows of sorrow nor mists of uncertainty can fall, the peace of a heart in amity with all mankind. So living in peace, we shall lay ourselves down and die in peace, and enter into "that country, afar beyond the stars," where "grows the flower of peace."

"The Rose that cannot wither,

Thy fortress and thy ease."

All this may be ours. Paul could only wish it for these Colossians. We can only long for it for our dearest. No man can fulfil his wishes or turn them into actual gifts. Many precious things we can give, but not peace. But our brother, Jesus Christ, can do more than wish it. He can bestow it, and when we need it most, He stands ever beside us, in our weakness and unrest, with His strong arm stretched out to help, and on His calm lips the old words--"My grace is sufficient for thee," "My peace I give unto you."

Let us keep ourselves in Him, believing in Him and yielding ourselves to God for His dear sake, and we shall find His grace ever flowing into our emptiness and His settled "peace keeping our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."