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

**COLOSSIANS-004**. **THE GOSPEL-HOPE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The hope of the Gospel."*

*Colossians 1:5*

God never sends mouths but He sends meat to feed them, says the old proverb. And yet it seems as if that were scarcely true in regard to that strange faculty called Hope. It may well be a question whether on the whole it has given us more pleasure than pain. How seldom it has been a true prophet! How perpetually its pictures have been too highly coloured! It has cast illusions over the future, colouring the far-off hills with glorious purple which, reached, are barren rocks and cold snow. It has held out prizes never won. It has made us toil and struggle and aspire and fed us on empty husks. Either we have not got what we expected or have found it to be less good than it appeared from afar.

If we think of all the lies that hope has told us, of all the vain expenditure of effort to which it has tempted us, of the little that any of us have of what we began by thinking we should surely attain, hope seems a questionable good, and yet how obstinate it is, living on after all disappointments and drawing the oldest amongst us onwards. Surely somewhere there must be a reason for this great and in some respects awful faculty, a vindication of its existence in an adequate object for its grasp.

The New Testament has much to say about hope. Christianity lays hold of it and professes to supply it with its true nourishment and support. Let us look at the characteristics of Christian hope, or, as our text calls it, the hope of the Gospel, that is, the hope which the Gospel creates and feeds in our souls.

**I. What does it hope for?**

The weakness of our earthly hopes is that they are fixed on things which are contingent and are inadequate to make us blessed. Even when tinted with the rainbow hues, which it lends them, they are poor and small. How much more so when seen in the plain colourless light of common day. In contrast with these the objects of the Christian hope are certain and sufficient for all blessedness. In the most general terms they may be stated as That blessed hope, even the appearing of the Great God and our Saviour. That is the specific Christian hope, precise and definite, a real historical event, filling the future with a certain steadfast light. Much is lost in the daily experience of all believers by the failure to set that great and precise hope in its true place of prominence. It is often discredited by millenarian dreams, but altogether apart from these it has solidity and substance enough to bear the whole weight of a world rested upon it.

That appearance of God brings with it the fulfilment of our highest hopes in the grace that is to be brought to us at His appearing. All our blessedness of every kind is to be the result of the manifestation of God in His unobscured glory. The mirrors that are set round the fountain of light flash into hitherto undreamed-of brightness. It is but a variation in terms when we describe the blessedness which is to be the result of God's appearing as being the Hope of Salvation in its fullest sense, or, in still other words, as being the Hope of Eternal Life. Nothing short of the great word of the Apostle John, that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, exhausts the greatness of the hope which the humblest and weakest Christian is not only allowed but commanded to cherish. And that great future is certainly capable of, and in Scripture receives, a still more detailed specification. We hear, for example, of the hope of Resurrection, and it is most natural that the bodily redemption which Paul calls the adoption of the body should first emerge into distinct consciousness as the principal object of hope in the earliest Christian experience, and that the mighty working whereby Jesus is able to subdue all things unto Himself, should first of all be discerned to operate in changing the body of our humiliation into the body of His glory.

But equally natural was it that no merely corporeal transformation should suffice to meet the deep longings of Christian souls which had learned to entertain the wondrous thought of likeness to God as the certain result of the vision of Him, and so believers wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. The moral likeness to God, the perfecting of our nature into His image, will not always be the issue of struggle and restraint, but in its highest form will follow on sight, even as here and now it is to be won by faith, and is more surely attained by waiting than by effort.

The highest form which the object of our hope takes is, the Hope of the Glory of God. This goes furthest; there is nothing beyond this. The eyes that have been wearied by looking at many fading gleams and seen them die away, may look undazzled into the central brightness, and we may be sure that even we shall walk there like the men in the furnace, unconsumed, purging our sight at the fountain of radiance, and being ourselves glorious with the image of God. This is the crown of glory which He has promised to them that love Him. Nothing less than this is what our hope has to entertain, and that not as a possibility, but as a certainty. The language of Christian hope is not perhaps this may be, but verily it shall be. To embrace its transcendent certainties with a tremulous faith broken by much unbelief, is sin.

**II. The grounds on which the hope of the Gospel rests.**

The grounds of our earthly hopes are for the most part possibilities, or, at the best, probabilities turned by our wishes into certainties. We moor our ships to floating islands which we resolve to think continents. So our earthly hopes vary indefinitely in firmness and substance. They are sometimes but wishes turned confident, and can never rise higher than their source, or be more certain than it is. At the best they are building on sand. At the surest there is an element of risk in them. One singer indeed may take for his theme The pleasures of Hope, but another answers by singing of The fallacies of Hope. Earth-born hopes carry no anchor and have always a latent dread looking out of their blue eyes.

But it is possible for us to dig down to and build on rock, to have a future as certain as our past, to escape in our anticipations from the region of the Contingent, and this we assuredly do when we take the hope of the Gospel for ours, and listen to Paul proclaiming to us Christ which is our Hope, or Christ in you the Hope of glory. If our faith grasps Jesus Christ risen from the dead and for us entered into the heavenly state as our forerunner, our hope will see in Him the pattern and the pledge of our manhood, and will begin to experience even here and now the first real though faint accomplishments of itself. The Gospel sets forth the facts concerning Christ which fully warrant and imperatively require our regarding Him as the perfect realised ideal of manhood as God meant it to be, and as bearing in Himself the power to make all men even as He is. He has entered into the fellowship of our humiliation and become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh that we might become life of His Life and spirit of His Spirit. As certain as it is that we have borne the image of the earthy, so certain is it that we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

What cruel waste of a divine faculty it is, then, of which we are all guilty when we allow our hopes to be frittered away and dissipated on uncertain and transient goods which they may never secure, and which, even if secured, would be ludicrously or rather tragically insufficient to make us blessed, instead of withdrawing them from all these and fixing them on Him who alone is able to satisfy our hungry souls in all their faculties for ever!

The hope of the Gospel is firm enough to rest our all upon because in it, by two immutable things in which it is impossible that God should lie, His counsel and His oath, He has given strong encouragement to them who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before them. Well may the hope for which God's own eternal character is the guarantee be called sure and steadfast. The hope of the Gospel rests at last on the Being and Heart of God. It is that which God who cannot lie hath promised before the world was is working towards whilst the world lasts, and will accomplish when the world is no more. He has made known His purpose and has pledged all the energies and tendernesses of His Being to its realisation. Surely on this rock-foundation we may rest secure. The hopes that grow on other soils creep along the surface. The hope of the Gospel strikes its roots deep into the heart of God.

**III. What the hope of the Gospel is and does for us.**

We cannot do better than to lay hold of some of the New Testament descriptions of it. We recall first that great designation A good hope through grace. This hope is no illusion; it does not come from fumes of fancy or the play of imagination. The wish is not father to the thought. We do not make bricks without straw nor spin ropes of sand on the shore of the great waste sea that waits to swallow us up. The cup of Tantalus has had its leaks stopped; the sieve carries the treasure unspilled. The rock can be rolled to the hill-top. All the disappointments, fallacies, and torments of hope pass away. It never makes ashamed. We have a solid certainty as solid as memory. The hope which is through grace is the full assurance of hope, and that full assurance is just what every other hope lacks. In that region and in that region only we can either say I hope or I know.

Another designation is A lively hope. It is no poor pale ghost brightening and fading, fading and brightening, through which one can see the stars shine, and of little power in practical life, but strong and vigorous and not the least active amongst the many forces that make up the sum of our lives.

It is most significantly designated as The blessed hope. All others quickly pass into sorrows. This alone gives lasting joys, for this alone is blessed whilst it is only anticipation, and still more blessed when its blossoms ripen into full fruition. In all earthly hopes there is an element of unrest, but the hope of the Gospel is so remote, so certain, and so satisfying, that it works stillness, and they who most firmly grasp it do with patience wait for it. Earthly hopes have little moral effect and often loosen the sinews of the soul, and are distinctly unfavourable to all strenuous effort. But every man that hath this hope in Jesus purifieth himself even as He is pure, and the Apostle, whose keen insight most surely discerns the character-building value of the fundamental facts of Christian experience, was not wrong when he bid us find in the hope of the Gospel deeply rooted within us the driving force of the most strenuous efforts after purity like His whom it is our deepest desire and humble hope to become like.

Let us remember the double account which Scripture gives of the discipline by which the hope of the Gospel is won for our very own. On the one hand, we have joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope. Our faith breeds hope because it grasps the divine facts concerning Jesus from which hope springs. And faith further breeds hope because it kindles joy and peace, which are the foretastes and earnests of the future blessedness. On the other hand, the very opposite experiences work to the same end, for tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope. Sorrow rightly borne tests for us the power of the Gospel and the reality of our faith, and so gives us a firmer grip of hope and of Him on whom in the last result it all depends. Out of this collision of flint and steel the spark springs. The water churned into foam and tortured in the cataract has the fair bow bending above it.

But this discipline will not achieve its result, therefore comes the exhortation to us all, Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end. The hope of the Gospel is the one thing that we need. Without it all else is futile and frail. God alone is worthy to have the whole weight and burden of a creature's hope fixed on Him, and it is an everlasting truth that they who are without God in the world also have no hope. Saints of old held fast by an assurance, which they must often have felt left many questions still to be asked, and because they were sure that they were continually with Him, were also sure of His guidance through life and of His afterwards receiving them to glory. But for us the twilight has broadened into day, and we shall be wise if, knowing our defencelessness, and forsaking all the lies and illusions of this vain present, we flee for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us in the Gospel.