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

**ECCLESIASTES-001. WHAT PASSES AND WHAT ABIDES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever."*

*Ecclesiastes 1:4*

*"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever."*

*1 John 2:17*

A great river may run through more than one kingdom, and bear more than one name, but its flow is unbroken. The river of time runs continuously, taking no heed of dates and calendars. The importance that we attach to the beginnings or endings of years and centuries is a sentimental illusion, but even an illusion that rouses us to a consciousness of the stealthy gliding of the river may do us good, and we need all the helps we can find to wise retrospect and sober anticipation. So we must let the season colour our thoughts, even whilst we feel that in yielding to that impulse we are imagining what has no reality in the passing from the last day of one century to the first day of another.

I do not mean to discuss in this sermon either the old century or the new in their wider social and other aspects. That has been done abundantly. We shall best do our parts in making the days, and the years, and the century what they should be, if we let the truths that come from these combined texts sink into and influence our individual lives. I have put them together, because they are so strikingly antithetical, both true, and yet looking at the same facts from opposite points of view, But the antithesis is not really so complete as it sounds at first hearing, because what the Preacher means by the earth that abideth for ever is not quite the same as what the Apostle means by the world that passes and the generations that come and go are not exactly the same as the men that abide for ever. But still the antithesis is real and impressive. The bitter melancholy of the Preacher saw but the surface; the joyous faith of the Apostle went a great deal deeper, and putting the two sets of thoughts and ways of looking at man and his dwelling-place together, we get lessons that may well shape our individual lives.

So let me ask you to look, in the first place, at--

**I. The sad and superficial teaching of the Preacher.**

Now in reading this Book of Ecclesiastes--which I am afraid a great many people do not read at all--we have always to remember that the wild things and the bitter things which the Preacher is saying so abundantly through its course do not represent his ultimate convictions, but thoughts that he took up in his progress from error to truth. His first word is: All is vanity! That conviction had been set vibrating in his heart, as it is set vibrating in the heart of every man who does as he did, viz., seeks for solid good away from God. That is his starting-point. It is not true. All is not vanity, except to some blase cynic, made cynical by the failure of his voluptuousness, and to whom all things here are out of joint, and everything looks yellow because his own biliary system is out of order. That is the beginning of the book, and there are hosts of other things in the course of it as one-sided, as cynically bitter, and therefore superficial. But the end of it is: Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. In his journey from the one point to the other my text is the first step, One generation goeth, and another cometh: the earth abideth for ever.

He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs, and therefore ringing hollow to their tread. All depends on the point of view. The strange history of humanity is like a piece of shot silk; hold it at one angle, and you see dark purple, hold at another, and you see bright golden tints. Look from one point of view, and it seems a long history of vanishing generations. Look to the rear of the procession, and it seems a buoyant spectacle of eager, young faces pressing forwards on the march, and of strong feet treading the new road. But yet the total effect of that endless procession is to impress on the observer the transiency of humanity. And that wholesome thought is made more poignant still by the comparison which the writer here draws between the fleeting generations and the abiding earth. Man is the lord of earth, and can mould it to his purpose, but it remains and he passes. He is but a lodger in an old house that has had generations of tenants, each of whom has said for a while, It is mine; and they all have drifted away, and the house stands. The Alps, over which Hannibal stormed, over which the Goths poured down on the fertile plains of Lombardy, through whose passes mediaeval emperors led their forces, over whose summits Napoleon brought his men, through whose bowels this generation has burrowed its tunnels, stand the same, and smile the same amid their snows, at the transient creatures that have crawled across them. The primrose on the rock blooms in the same place year after year, and nature and it are faithful to their covenant, but the poet's eyes that fell upon them are sealed with dust. Generations have gone, the transient flower remains. One generation cometh and another goeth, and the tragedy is made more tragical because the stage stands unaltered, and the earth abides for ever. That is what sense has to say--the foolish senses--and that is all that sense has to say. Is it all that can be said? If it is, then the Preacher's bitter conclusion is true, and all is vanity and chasing after wind.

He immediately proceeds to draw from this undeniable, but, as I maintain, partial fact, the broad conclusion which cannot be rebutted, if you accept what he has said in my text as being the sufficient and complete account of man and his dwelling-place. If, says he, it is true that one generation comes and another goes, and the earth abides for ever, and if that is all that has to be said, then all things are full of labour. There is immense activity, and there is no progress; it is all rotary motion round and round and round, and the same objects reappear duly and punctually as the wheel revolves, and life is futile. Yes; so it is unless there is something more to be said, and the life that is thus futile is also, as it seems to me, inexplicable if you believe in God at all. If man, being what he is, is wholly subject to that law of mutation and decay, then not only is he made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, but he is also inferior to that persistent, old mother-earth from whose bosom he has come. If all that you have to say of him is, Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return, then life is futile, and God is not vindicated for having produced it.

And there is another consequence that follows, if this is all that we have got to say. If the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes is the ultimate word, then I do not assert that morality is destroyed, because right and wrong are not dependent either upon the belief in a God, or on the belief in immortality. But I do say that to declare that the fleeting, transient life of earth is all does strike a staggering blow at all noble ethics and paralyses a great deal of the highest forms of human activity, and that, as has historically been the case, so on the large scale, and, speaking generally, it will be the case, that the man whose creed is only To-morrow we die will very speedily draw the conclusion, Let us eat and drink, and sensuous delights and the lower side of his nature will become dominant.

So, then, the Preacher had not got at the bottom of all things, either in his initial conviction that all was vanity, or in that which he laid down as the first step towards establishing that, that man passes and the earth abides. There is more to be said; the sad, superficial teaching of the Preacher needs to be supplemented.

Now turn for a moment to what does supplement it.

**II. The joyous and profounder teaching of the Apostle.**

The cynic never sees the depths; that is reserved for the mystical eye of the lover. So John says: No, no; that is not all. Here is the true state of affairs: "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." The doctrine of the passing generations and the abiding earth is fronted squarely in my second text by the not contradictory, but complementary doctrine of the passing world and the abiding men. I do not suppose that John had this verse of Ecclesiastes in his mind, for the word abide is one of his favourite expressions, and is always cropping up. But even though he had not, we find in his utterance the necessary correction to the first text. As I have said, and now need not do more than repeat in a sentence, the antithesis is not so complete as it seems. John's world is not the Preacher's earth, but he means thereby, as we all know, the aggregate of created things, including men, considered apart from God, and in so far as it includes voluntary agents set in opposition to God and the will of God. He means the earth rent away from God, and turned to be what it was not meant to be, a minister of evil, and he means men, in so far as they have parted themselves from God and make up an alien, if not a positively antagonistic company.

Perhaps he was referring, in the words of our text, to the break-up of the existing order of things which he discerned as impending and already begun to take effect in consequence of the coming of Jesus Christ, the shining of the true Light. For you may remember that in a previous part of the epistle he uses precisely the same expression, with a significant variation. Here, in our text, he says, The world passeth away; there he says, The darkness has passed and the true light now shineth. He sees a process installed and going on, in which the whole solid-seeming fabric of a godless society is being dissolved and melted away. And says he, in the midst of all this change there is one who stands unchanged, the man that does God's will.

But just for a moment we may take the lower point of view, and see here a flat contradiction of the Preacher. He said, Men go, and the world abides. No, says John; your own psalmists might have taught you better: "As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed." The world, the earth, which seems so solid and permanent, is all the while in perpetual flux, as our later science has taught us, in a sense of which neither Preacher nor Apostle could dream. For just as from the beginning forces were at work which out of the fire-mist shaped sun and planets, so the same forces, continuing in operation, are tending towards the end of the system which they began; and a contracting sun and a diminished light and a lowered temperature and the narrower orbits in which the planets shall revolve, prophesy that the elements shall melt with fervent heat, and that all things which have been made must one day cease to be. Nature is the true Penelope's web, ever being woven and ever being unravelled, and in the most purely physical and scientific sense the world is passing away. But then, because you and I belong, in a segment of our being, to that which thus is passing away, we come under the same laws, and all that has been born must die. So the generations come, and in their very coming bear the prophecy of their going. But, on the other hand, there is an inner nucleus of our being, of which the material is but the transient envelope and periphery, which holds nought of the material, but of the spiritual, and that abides for ever.

But let us lift the thought rather into the region of the true antithesis which John was contemplating, which is not so much the crumbling away of the material, and the endurance of the spiritual, as the essential transiency of everything that is antagonism to the will of God, and the essential eternity of everything which is in conformity with that will. And so, says he, The world is passing, and the lust thereof. The desires that grasp it perish with it, or perhaps, more truly still, the object of the desire perishes, and with it the possibility of their gratification ceases, but the desire itself remains. But what of the man whose life has been devoted to the things seen and temporal, when he finds himself in a condition of being where none of these have accompanied him? Nothing to slake his lusts, if he be a sensualist. No money-bags, ledgers, or cheque-books if he be a plutocrat or a capitalist or a miser. No books or dictionaries if he be a mere student. Nothing of his vocations if he lived for the world. But yet the appetite is abiding. Will that not be a thirst that cannot be slaked?

The world is passing and the lust thereof, and all that is antagonistic to God, or separated from Him, is essentially as a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away, whereas the man who does the will of God abideth for ever, in that he is steadfast in the midst of change.

His hand the good man fastens on the skies,

And lets earth roll, nor heeds its idle whirl.

He shall abide for ever, in the sense that his work is perpetual. In one very deep and solemn sense, nothing human ever dies, but in another all that is not running in the same direction as, and borne along by the impulse of, the will of God, is destined to be neutralised and brought to nothing at last. There may be a row of figures as long as to reach from here to the fixed stars, but if there is not in front of them the significant digit, which comes from obedience to the will of God, all is but a string of ciphers, and their net result is nothing. And he abideth for ever, in the most blessed and profound sense, in that through his faith, which has kindled his love, and his love which has set in motion his practical obedience, he becomes participant of the very eternity of the living God. This is eternal life, not merely to know, but to do the will of our Father. Nothing else will last, and nothing else will prosper, any more than a bit of driftwood can stem Niagara. Unite yourself with the will of God, and you abide.

And now let me, as briefly as I can, throw together--

**III. The plain, practical lessons that come from both these texts.**

May I say, without seeming to be morbid or unpractical, one lesson is that we should cultivate a sense of the transiency of this outward life? One of our old authors says somewhere, that it is wholesome to smell at a piece of turf from a churchyard. I know that much harm has been done by representing Christianity as mainly a scheme which is to secure man a peaceful death, and that many morbid forms of piety have given far too large a place to the contemplation of skulls and cross-bones. But for all that, the remembrance of death present in our lives will often lay a cool hand upon a throbbing brow; and, like a bit of ice used by a skilful physician, will bring down the temperature, and stay the too tumultuous beating of the heart. So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. It will minister energy, and lead us to say, like our Lord, We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.

Let me say again--a very plain, practical lesson is to dig deep down for our foundations below the rubbish that has accumulated. If a man wishes to build a house in Rome or in Jerusalem he has to go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles and triturated marbles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. We have to drive a shaft clear down through all the superficial strata, and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages. Do not build on that which quivers and shakes beneath you. Do not try to make your life's path across the weeds, or as they call it in Egypt, the sudd, that floats on the surface of the Nile, compacted for many a mile, and yet only a film on the surface of the river, to be swept away some day. Build on God.

And the last lesson is, let us see to it that our wills are in harmony with His, and the work of our hands His work. We can do that will in all the secularities of our daily life. The difference between the work that shrivels up and disappears and the work that abides is not so much in its external character, or in the materials on which it is expended, as in the motive from which it comes. So that, if I might so say, if two women are sitting at the same millstone face to face, and turning round the same handle, one of them for one half the circumference, and the other for the other, and grinding out the same corn, the one's work may be gold, silver, precious stones, which shall abide the trying fire; and the other's may be wood, hay, stubble, which shall be burnt up. He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

So let us set ourselves, dear friends! to our several tasks for this coming year. Never mind about the century, it will take care of itself. Do your little work in your little corner, and be sure of this, that amidst changes you will stand unchanged, amidst tumults you may stand calm, in death you will be entering on a fuller life, and that what to others is the end will be to you the beginning. If any man's work abide, he shall receive a reward, and he himself shall abide with the abiding God.

The bitter cynic said half the truth when he said, One generation goeth, and another cometh; but the earth abides. The mystic Apostle saw the truth steadily, and saw it whole when he said, Lo! the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.