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

**ECCLESIASTES-005. ETERNITY IN THE HEART by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also He hath set the world in their heart."*

*Ecclesiastes 3:11*

There is considerable difficulty in understanding what precise meaning is to be attached to these words, and what precise bearing they have on the general course of the writer's thoughts; but one or two things are, at any rate, quite clear.

The Preacher has been enumerating all the various vicissitudes of prosperity and adversity, of construction and destruction, of society and solitude, of love and hate, for which there is scope and verge enough in one short human life; and his conclusion is, as it always is in the earlier part of this book, that because there is such an endless diversity of possible occupation, and each of them lasts but for a little time, and its opposite has as good a right of existence as itself; therefore, perhaps, it might be as well that a man should do nothing as do all these opposite things which neutralise each other, and the net result of which is nothing. If there be a time to be born and a time to die, nonentity would be the same when all is over. If there be a time to plant and a time to pluck, what is the good of planting? If there be a time for love and a time for hate, why cherish affections which are transient and may be succeeded by their opposites?

And then another current of thought passes through his mind, and he gets another glimpse somewhat different, and says in effect, No! that is not all true--God has made all these different changes, and although each of them seems contradictory of the other, in its own place and at its own time each is beautiful and has a right to exist. The contexture of life, and even the perplexities and darknesses of human society, and the varieties of earthly condition--if they be confined within their own proper limits, and regarded as parts of a whole--they are all co-operant to an end. As from wheels turning different ways in some great complicated machine, and yet fitting by their cogs into one another, there may be a resultant direct motion produced even by these apparently antagonistic forces.

But the second clause of our text adds a thought which is in some sense contrasted with this.

The word rendered world is a very frequent one in the Old Testament, and has never but one meaning, and that meaning is eternity. He hath set eternity in their heart.

Here, then, are two antagonistic facts. They are transient things, a vicissitude which moves within natural limits, temporary events which are beautiful in their season. But there is also the contrasted fact, that the man who is thus tossed about, as by some great battledore wielded by giant powers in mockery, from one changing thing to another, has relations to something more lasting than the transient. He lives in a world of fleeting change, but he has eternity in his heart. So between him and his dwelling-place, between him and his occupations, there is a gulf of disproportion. He is subjected to these alternations, and yet bears within him a repressed but immortal consciousness that he belongs to another order of things, which knows no vicissitude and fears no decay. He possesses stifled and misinterpreted longings which, however starved, do yet survive, after unchanging Being and eternal Rest, And thus endowed, and by contrast thus situated, his soul is full of the blank misgiving of a creature moving about in worlds not realised. Out of these two facts--says our text--man's where and man's what, his nature and his position, there rises a mist of perplexity and darkness that wraps the whole course of the divine actions--unless, indeed, we have reached that central height of vision above the mists, which this Book of Ecclesiastes puts forth at last as the conclusion of the whole matter--Fear God, and keep His commandments. If transitory things with their multitudinous and successive waves toss us to solid safety on the Rock of Ages, then all is well, and many mysteries will be clear. But if not, if we have not found, or rather followed, the one God-given way of harmonising these two sets of experiences--life in the transient, and longings for the eternal--then their antagonism darkens our thoughts of a wise and loving Providence, and we have lost the key to the confused riddle which the world then presents. He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also He hath set Eternity in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

Such, then, being a partial but, perhaps, not entirely inadequate view of the course of thought in the words before us, I may now proceed to expand the considerations thus brought under our notice in them. These may be gathered up in three principal ones: the consciousness of Eternity in every heart; the disproportion thence resulting between this nature of ours and the order of things in which we dwell; and finally, the possible satisfying of that longing in men's hearts--a possibility not indeed referred to in our text, but unveiled as the final word of this Book of Ecclesiastes, and made clear to us in Jesus Christ.

**I. Consider that eternity is set in every human heart.**

The expression is, of course, somewhat difficult, even if we accept generally the explanation which I have given. It may be either a declaration of the actual immortality of the soul, or it may mean, as I rather suppose it to do, the consciousness of eternity which is part of human nature.

The former idea is no doubt closely connected with the latter, and would here yield an appropriate sense. We should then have the contrast between man's undying existence and the transient trifles on which he is tempted to fix his love and hopes. We belong to one set of existences by our bodies, and to another by our souls. Though we are parts of the passing material world, yet in that outward frame is lodged a personality that has nothing in common with decay and death. A spark of eternity dwells in these fleeting frames. The laws of physical growth and accretion and maturity and decay, which rule over all things material, do not apply to my true self. In our embers is something that doth live. Whatsoever befalls the hairs that get grey and thin, and the hands that become wrinkled and palsied, and the heart that is worn out by much beating, and the blood that clogs and clots at last, and the filmy eye, and all the corruptible frame; yet, as the heathen said, I shall not all die, but deep within this transient clay house, that must crack and fall and be resolved into the elements out of which it was built up, there dwells an immortal guest, an undying personal self. In the heart, the inmost spiritual being of every man, eternity, in this sense of the word, does dwell.

Commonplaces, you say. Yes; commonplaces, which word means two things--truths that affect us all, and also truths which, because they are so universal and so entirely believed, are all but powerless. Surely it is not time to stop preaching such truths as long as they are forgotten by the overwhelming majority of the people who acknowledge them. Thank God! the staple of the work of us preachers is the reiteration of commonplaces, which His goodness has made familiar, and our indolence and sin have made stale and powerless.

My brother! you would be a wiser man if, instead of turning the edge of statements which you know to be true, and which, if true, are infinitely solemn and important, by commonplace sarcasm about pulpit commonplaces, you would honestly try to drive the familiar neglected truth home to your mind and heart. Strip it of its generality and think, It is true about me. I live for ever. My outward life will cease, and my dust will return to dust--but I shall last undying. And ask yourselves--What then? Am I making "provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof," in more or less refined fashion, and forgetting to provide for that which lives for evermore? Eternity is in my heart. What a madness it is to go on, as if either I were to continue for ever among the shows of time, or when I leave them all, to die wholly and be done with altogether!

But, probably, the other interpretation of these words is the truer. The doctrine of immortality does not seem to be stated in this Book of Ecclesiastes, except in one or two very doubtful expressions. And it is more in accordance with its whole tone to suppose the Preacher here to be asserting, not that the heart or spirit is immortal, but that, whether it is or no, in the heart is planted the thought, the consciousness of eternity--and the longing after it.

Let me put that into other words. We, brethren, are the only beings on this earth who can think the thought and speak the word--Eternity. Other creatures are happy while immersed in time; we have another nature, and are disturbed by a thought which shines high above the roaring sea of circumstance in which we float.

I do not care at present about the metaphysical puzzles that have been gathered round that conception, nor care to ask whether it is positive or negative, adequate or inadequate. Enough that the word has a meaning, that it corresponds to a thought which dwells in men's minds. It is of no consequence at all for our purpose, whether it is a positive conception, or simply the thinking away of all limitations. I know what God is, when you do not ask me. I know what eternity is, though I cannot define the word to satisfy a metaphysician. The little child taught by some grandmother Lois, in a cottage, knows what she means when she tells him you will live for ever, though both scholar and teacher would be puzzled to put it into other words. When we say eternity flows round this bank and shoal of time, men know what we mean. Heart answers to heart; and in each heart lies that solemn thought--for ever!

Like all other of the primal thoughts of men's souls, it may be increased in force and clearness, or it may be neglected and opposed, and all but crushed. The thought of God is natural to man, the thought of right and wrong is natural to man--and yet there may be atheists who have blinded their eyes, and there may be degraded and almost animal natures who have seared their consciences and called sweet bitter and evil good. Thus men may so plunge themselves into the present as to lose the consciousness of the eternal--as a man swept over Niagara, blinded by the spray and deafened by the rush, would see or hear nothing outside the green walls of the death that encompassed him. And yet the blue sky with its peaceful spaces stretches above the hell of waters.

So the thought is in us all--a presentiment and a consciousness; and that universal presentiment itself goes far to establish the reality of the unseen order of things to which it is directed. The great planet that moves on the outmost circle of our system was discovered because that next it wavered in its course in a fashion which was inexplicable, unless some unknown mass was attracting it from across millions of miles of darkling space. And there are perturbations in our spirits which cannot be understood, unless from them we may divine that far-off and unseen world, that has power from afar to sway in their orbits the little lives of mortal men. It draws us to itself--but, alas! the attraction may be resisted and thwarted. The dead mass of the planet bends to the drawing, but we can repel the constraint which the eternal world would exercise upon us--and so that consciousness which ought to be our nobleness, as it is our prerogative, may become our shame, our misery, and our sin.

That Eternity which is set in our hearts is not merely the thought of ever-during Being, or of an everlasting order of things to which we are in some way related. But there are connected with it other ideas besides those of mere duration. Men know what perfection means. They understand the meaning of perfect goodness; they have the notion of infinite Wisdom and boundless Love. These thoughts are the material of all poetry, the thread from which the imagination creates all her wondrous tapestries. This capacity for the Infinite, as people call it--which is only a fine way of putting the same thought as that in our text--which is the prerogative of human spirits, is likewise the curse of many spirits. By their misuse of it they make it a fatal gift, and turn it into an unsatisfied desire which gnaws their souls, a famished yearning which roars, and suffers hunger. Knowing what perfection is, they turn to limited natures and created hearts for their rest. Having the haunting thought of an absolute Goodness, a perfect Wisdom, an endless Love, an eternal Life--they try to find the being that corresponds to their thought here on earth, and so they are plagued with endless disappointment.

My brother! God has put eternity in your heart. Not only will you live for ever, but also in your present life you have a consciousness of that eternal and infinite and all-sufficient Being that lives above. You have need of Him, and whether you know it or not, the tendrils of your spirits, like some climbing plant not fostered by a careful hand but growing wild, are feeling out into the vacancy in order to grasp the stay which they need for their fruitage and their strength.

By the make of our spirits, by the possibilities that dawn dim before us, by the thoughts whose very sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality,--by all these and a thousand other signs and facts in every human life we say, God has set eternity in their hearts!

**II. And then turn to the second idea that is here. The disproportion between this our nature, and the world in which we dwell.**

The writer of this book (whether Solomon or no we need not stay to discuss) looks out upon the world; and in accordance with the prevailing tone of all the earlier parts of his contemplations, finds in this prerogative of man but another reason for saying, All is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Two facts meet him antagonistic to one another: the place that man occupies, and the nature that man bears. This creature with eternity in his heart, where is he set? what has he got to work upon? what has he to love and hold by, to trust to, and anchor his life on? A crowd of things, each well enough, but each having a time--and though they be beautiful in their time, yet fading and vanishing when it has elapsed. No multiplication of times will make eternity. And so with that thought in his heart, man is driven out among objects perfectly insufficient to meet it.

Christ said, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head--and while the words have their proper and most pathetic meaning in the history of His own earthly life of travail and toil for our sakes, we may also venture to give them the further application, that all the lower creatures are at rest here, and that the more truly a man is man, the less can he find, among all the shadows of the present, a pillow for his head, a place of repose for his heart. The animal nature is at home in the material world, the human nature is not.

Every other creature presents the most accurate correspondence between nature and circumstances, powers and occupations. Man alone is like some poor land-bird blown out to sea, and floating half-drowned with clinging plumage on an ocean where the dove finds no rest for the sole of her foot, or like some creature that loves to glance in the sunlight, but is plunged into the deepest recesses of a dark mine. In the midst of a universe marked by the nicest adaptations of creatures to their habitation, man alone, the head of them all, presents the unheard-of anomaly that he is surrounded by conditions which do not fit his whole nature, which are not adequate for all his powers, on which he cannot feed and nurture his whole being. To what purpose is this waste? Hast thou made all men in vain? Everything is beautiful in its time. Yes, and for that very reason, as this Book of Ecclesiastes says in another verse, Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him. It was happy when we loved; but the day of indifference and alienation and separation comes. Our spirits were glad when we were planting; but the time for plucking up that which was planted is sure to draw near. It was blessed to pour out our souls in the effluence of love, or in the fullness of thought, and the time to speak was joyous; but the dark day of silence comes on. When we twined hearts and clasped hands together it was glad, and the time when we embraced was blessed; but the time to refrain from embracing is as sure to draw near. It is good for the eyes to behold the sun, but so certainly as it rolls to its bed in the west, and leaves the world to darkness and to us, do all earthly occupations wane and fade, and all possessions shrivel and dwindle, and all associations snap and drop and end, and the whirligig of time works round and takes away everything which it once brought us.

And so man, with eternity in his heart, with the hunger in his spirit after an unchanging whole, an absolute good, an ideal perfectness, an immortal being--is condemned to the treadmill of transitory revolution. Nothing continueth in one stay, For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof. It is limited, it is changeful, it slips from under us as we stand upon it, and therefore, mystery and perplexity stoop down upon the providence of God, and misery and loneliness enter into the heart of man. These changeful things, they do not meet our ideal, they do not satisfy our wants, they do not last even our duration.

The misery of man is great upon him, said the text quoted a moment ago. And is it not? Is this present life enough for you? Sometimes you fancy it is. Many of us habitually act on the understanding that it is, and treat all that I have been saying about the disproportion between our nature and our circumstances as not true about them. This world not enough for me! you say--Yes! it is; only let me get a little more of it, and keep what I get, and I shall be all right. So then--a little more is wanted, is it? And that little more will always be wanted, and besides it, the guarantee of permanence will always be wanted, and failing these, there will be a hunger that nothing can fill which belongs to earth. Do you remember the bitter experience of the poor prodigal, he would fain have filled his belly with the husks? He tried his best to live upon the horny, innutritious pods, but he could not; and after them he still was perishing with hunger. So it is with us all when we try to fill the soul and satisfy the spirit with earth or aught that holds of it. It is as impossible to still the hunger of the heart with that, as to stay the hunger of the body with wise sayings or noble sentiments.

I appeal to your real selves, to your own past experience. Is it not true that, deep below the surface contentment with the world and the things of the world, a dormant but slightly slumbering sense of want and unsatisfied need lies in your souls? Is it not true that it wakes sometimes at a touch; that the tender, dying light of sunset, or the calm abysses of the mighty heavens, or some strain of music, or a line in a book, or a sorrow in your heart, or the solemnity of a great joy, or close contact with sickness and death, or the more direct appeals of Scripture and of Christ, stir a wistful yearning and a painful sense of emptiness in your hearts, and of insufficiency in all the ordinary pursuits of your lives? It cannot but be so; for though it be true that our natures are in some measure subdued to what we work in, and although it is possible to atrophy the deepest parts of our being by long neglect or starvation, yet you will never do that so thoroughly but that the deep-seated longing will break forth at intervals, and the cry of its hunger echo through the soul. Many of us do our best to silence it. But I, for my part, believe that, however you have crushed and hardened your souls by indifference, by ambition, by worldly cares, by frivolous or coarse pleasures, or by any of the thousand other ways in which you can do it--yet there is some response in your truest self to my poor words when I declare that a soul without God is an empty and an aching soul!

These things which, even in their time of beauty, are not enough for a man's soul--have all but a time to be beautiful in, and then they fade and die. A great botanist made what he called a floral clock to mark the hours of the day by the opening and closing of flowers. It was a graceful and yet a pathetic thought. One after another they spread their petals, and their varying colours glow in the light. But one after another they wearily shut their cups, and the night falls, and the latest of them folds itself together, and all are hidden away in the dark. So our joys and treasures, were they sufficient did they last, cannot last. After a summer's day comes a summer's night, and after a brief space of them comes winter, when all are killed and the leafless trees stand silent.

Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

We cleave to these temporal possessions and joys, and the natural law of change sweeps them away from us one by one. Most of them do not last so long as we do, and they pain us when they pass away from us. Some of them last longer than we do, and they pain us when we pass away from them. Either way our hold of them is a transient hold, and one knows not whether is the sadder--the bare garden beds where all have done blowing, and nothing remains but a tangle of decay, or the blooming beauty from which a man is summoned away, leaving others to reap what he has sown. Tragic enough are both at the best--and certain to befall us all. We live and they fade; we die and they remain. We live again and they are far away. The facts are so. We may make them a joy or a sorrow as we will. Transiency is stamped on all our possessions, occupations, and delights. We have the hunger for eternity in our souls, the thought of eternity in our hearts, the destination for eternity written on our inmost being, and the need to ally ourselves with eternity proclaimed even by the most short-lived trifles of time. Either these things will be the blessing or the curse of our lives. Which do you mean that they shall be for you?

**III. These thoughts lead us to consider the possible satisfying of our souls.**

This Book of Ecclesiastes is rather meant to enforce the truth of the weariness and emptiness of a godless life, than of the blessedness of a godly one. It is the record of the struggles of a soul--the confessions of an inquiring spirit--feeling and fighting its way through many errors, and many partial and unsatisfactory solutions of the great problem of life, till he reaches the one in which he can rest. When he has touched that goal his work is done. And so the devious way is told in the book at full length, while a sentence sets forth the conclusion to which he was working, even when he was most bewildered. The conclusion of the whole matter is Fear God and keep His commandments. That is all that a man needs. It is the whole of man. All is not vanity and vexation of spirit then--but all things work together for good to them that love God.

The Preacher in his day learned that it was possible to satisfy the hunger for eternity, which had once seemed to him a questionable blessing. He learned that it was a loving Providence which had made man's home so little fit for him, that he might seek the city which hath foundations. He learned that all the pain of passing beauty, and the fading flowers of man's goodliness, were capable of being turned into a solemn joy. Standing at the centre, he saw order instead of chaos, and when he had come back, after all his search, to the old simple faith of peasants and children in Judah, to fear God and keep His commandments, he understood why God had set eternity in man's heart, and then flung him out, as if in mockery, amidst the stormy waves of the changeful ocean of time.

And we, who have a further word from God, may have a fuller and yet more blessed conviction, built upon our own happy experience, if we choose, that it is possible for us to have that deep thirst slaked, that longing appeased. We have Christ to trust to and to love. He has given Himself for us that all our many sins against the eternal love and our guilty squandering of our hearts upon transitory treasures may be forgiven. He has come amongst us, the Word in human flesh, that our poor eyes may see the Eternal walking amidst the things of time and sense, and may discern a beauty in Him beyond whatsoever things are lovely. He has come that we through Him may lay hold on God, even as in Him God lays hold on us. As in mysterious and transcendent union the divine takes into itself the human in that person of Jesus, and Eternity is blended with Time; we, trusting Him and yielding our hearts to Him, receive into our poor lives an incorruptible seed, and for us the soul-satisfying realities that abide for ever mingle with and are reached through the shadows that pass away.

Brethren, yield yourselves to Him! In conscious unworthiness, in lowly penitence, let us cast ourselves on Jesus Christ, our Sacrifice, for pardon and peace! Trust Him and love Him! Live by Him and for Him! And then, the loftiest thoughts of our hearts, as they seek after absolute perfection and changeless love, shall be more than fulfilled in Him who is more than all that man ever dreamed, because He is the perfection of man, and the Son of God.

Love Christ and live in Him, taking Him for the motive, the spring, and the very atmosphere of your lives, and then no capacities will languish for lack of either stimulus or field, and no weariness will come over you, as if you were a stranger from your home. For if Christ be near us, all things go well with us. If we live for Him, the power of that motive will make all our nature blossom like the vernal woods, and dry branches break into leafage. If we dwell in Him, we shall be at home wherever we are, like the patriarch who pitched his tent in many lands, but always had the same tent wherever he went. So we shall have the one abode, though its place in the desert may vary--and we shall not need to care whether the encampment be beneath the palm-trees and beside the wells of Elim, or amidst the drought of Marah, so long as the same covering protects us, and the same pillar of fire burns above us.

Love Christ, and then the eternity in the heart will not be a great aching void, but will be filled with the everlasting life which Christ gives, and is. The vicissitude will really become the source of freshness and progress which God meant it to be. Everything which, when made our all-sufficient portion, becomes stale and unprofitable, even in its time, will be apparelled in celestial light. It shall all be lovely and pleasant while it lasts, and its beauty will not be saddened by the certainty of its decay, nor its empty place a pain when it has passed away.

Take Christ for Saviour and Friend, your Guide and Support through time, and Himself, your Eternity and Joy, then all discords are reconciled--and all things are yours--whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ s, and Christ is God s.