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

**ECCLESIASTES-012. A NEW YEAR'S SERMON TO THE YOUNG by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.... Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them."*

*Ecclesiastes 11:9; 12:1*

This strange, and in some places perplexing Book of Ecclesiastes, is intended to be the picture of a man fighting his way through perplexities and half-truths to a clear conviction in which he can rest. What he says in his process of coming to that conviction is not always to be taken as true. Much that is spoken in the earlier portion of the Book is spoken in order to be confuted, and its insufficiency, its exaggerations, its onesidedness, and its half-truths, to be manifest in the light of the ultimate conclusion to which he comes. Through all these perplexities he goes on sounding his dim and perilous way, with pitfalls on this side of him and bogs on that, till he comes out at last upon the open way, with firm ground under foot and a clear sky overhead. These phrases which I have taken are the opening sentences and the final conclusion on which he rests. How then are they meant to be understood? Is that saying, Rejoice, O young man! in the days of thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes, to be taken as a bit of fierce irony? Is this a man taking the maxims of the foolish world about him and seeming to approve of them in order that he may face round at the end with a quick turn and a cynical face and hand them back their maxims along with that which will shatter them to pieces--as if he said, Oh, yes! go on, talk your fill about making the best of this world, and rejoicing and doing as you like, dancing on the edge of a precipice, and fiddling, like Nero, whilst a worse fire than that of Rome is burning? Well, I do not think that is the meaning of it. Though there is irony to be found in the Bible, I do not think that fierce irony like that which might do for the like of Dean Swift, is the intention of the Preacher. So I take these words to be said in good faith, as a frank recognition of the fact that, after all we have been hearing about vanity and vexation of spirit, life is worth living for, and that God means young people to be glad and to make the best of the fleeting years that will never come back with the same buoyancy and elasticity all their lives long. And then I take it that the words added are not meant to destroy or neutralise the concession of the first sentence, but only to purify and ennoble a gladness which, without them, would be apt to be stained by many a corruption, and to make permanent a joy which, without them, would be sure to die down into the miserable, peevish, and feeble old age of which the grim picture follows, and to be quenched at last in death. So there are three words that I take out of this text of mine, and that I want to bring before my young friends as exhortations which it is wise to follow. These are Rejoice, Reflect, Remember. Rejoice--the fitting gladness of youth; reflect--the solemn thought that will guard the gladness from stain; remember--the religion which will make these things ever last.

First of all Rejoice. Do as you like, for that is the English translation of the words, Walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes. Buoyantly and cheerfully follow the inclinations and the desires which are stamped upon your nature and belong to your time of life. All young things are joyful, from the lamb in the pastures upwards, and are meant to be so. The mere bounding sense of physical strength which leads so many of you young men astray is a good thing and a blessed thing--a blessing to be thankful for and to cherish. Your smooth cheeks, so unlike those of old age, are only an emblem of the comparative freedom from care which belongs to your happy condition. Your memories are not yet like some--a book written within and without with the records of mourning and disappointment and crosses. There are in all probability long years stretching before you, instead of a narrow strip of barren sand, before you come to the great salt sea that is going to swallow you up, as is the case with some of us. Christianity looks with complacency on your gladness, and does not mean to clip the wing of one white-winged pleasure, or to breathe one glimmer of blackness on your atmosphere. You are meant to be glad, but it is gladness in a far higher sense that I want to secure for you, or rather to make you secure for yourselves. God delights in the prosperity and light-hearted buoyancy of His children, especially of His young children. Ah! but I know there are young lives over which poverty or ill-health or sorrows of one kind or another have cast a gloom as incongruous to your time of life as snow in the garden in the spring, that pinches the crocuses and weighs down young green beech-leaves, would be. And if I am speaking to any young man or young woman at this time who by reason of painful outward circumstances has had but a chilling spring and youth, I would say to them, don't lose heart; a cloudy morning often breaks into a perfect day. It is good for a man to have to bear the yoke in his youth, and if you miss joy, you may get grace and strength and patience, which will be a blessing to you all your days. For all that, the ordinary course of things is that the young should be glad, and that the young life should be as the rippling brook in the sunshine. I want to leave upon your minds this impression, that it is all right and all in the order of God's providence, who means every one of you to rejoice in the days of your youth. The text says further, Walk in the ways of thine heart. That sounds very like the unwholesome teaching, Follow nature; do as you like; let passions and tastes and inclinations be your guides.

Well, that needs to be set round with a good many guards to prevent it becoming a doctrine of devils. But for all that, I wish you to notice that that has a great and a religious side to it. You have come into possession of this mystical life of yours, a possession which requires that you must choose what kind of life you will follow. Every one has this awful prerogative of being able to walk in the way of their heart. You have to answer for the kind of way that is, and the kind of heart out of which it has come. But I want to go to more important things, and so with a clear understanding that the joy of youth is all right and legitimate, that you are intended to be glad, and to feel the physical and intellectual spring and buoyancy of early days, let us go on to the next thing. Rejoice, says my text, and it adds, Reflect. It is one of the blessings of your time of life, my young friends, that you do not do much of that. It is one of your happy immunities that you are not yet in the habit of looking at life as a whole, and considering actions and consequences. Keep that spontaneity as long as you can; it is a good thing to keep. But for all that, do not forget this awful thing, that it may turn to exaggeration and excess, and that it needs, like all other good things, to be guarded and rightly used. And so, Rejoice, and walk in the sight of thine eyes; but--know that for all these things God will bring thee to judgment. Well, now, is that thought to come in (I was going to say, like a mourning-coach driven through a wedding procession) to kill the joys we have been seeming to receive from the former words? Are we taking back all that we have been giving, and giving out instead something that will make them all cower and be quiet, like the singing birds that stop their singing and hide in the leaves when they see the kite in the sky? No, there is no need for anything of the sort. For all these things God will bring thee to judgment': that is not the thought that kills, but that purifies and ennobles. Regard being had to the opinions expressed at various points in the earlier portion of this Book, we may be allowed to think of this testimony as having reference to the perpetual judgment that is going on in this world always over every man's life. A great German thinker has it, in reference to the history of nations, that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, and although that is not true if it is a denial of a physical day of judgment, it is true in a very profound and solemn sense with regard to the daily life of every man, that whether there be a judgment-seat beyond the grave or not, and whether this Preacher knew anything about that or no, there is going on through the whole of a man's life, and evolving itself, this solemn conviction, that we are to pass away from this present life. All our days are knit together as one whole. Yesterday is the parent of today, and today is the parent of all the tomorrows. The meaning and the deepest consequence of man's life is that no feeling, no thought that flits across the mirror of his life and heart dies utterly, leaving nothing behind it. But rather the metaphor of the Apostle is the true one, That which thou sowest, that shalt thou also reap. All your life a seed-time, all your life a harvest-time too, for the seed which I sow today is the seed which I have reaped from all my former sowings, and so cause and consequence go rolling on in life in extricable entanglement, issuing out in this, that whatever a man does lives on in him, and that each moment inherits the whole consequence of his former life. And now, you young men and women, you boys and girls, mind! this seed-time is the one that will be most powerful in your lives, and there is a judgment you do not need to die to meet. If you are idle at school, you will never learn Latin when you go to business. If you are frivolous in your youth, if you stain your souls and soil your lives by outward coarse sin here in Manchester in your young days, there will be a taint about you all your lives. You cannot get rid of that brave law that Whatever a man sows, that, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold, that shall he also reap--the same kind, but infinitely multiplied in quantity. Let me therefore name some of the ways in which your joys or pleasures, as lads, as boys and girls, as growing young men and women, will bring you to judgment. Health, that is one; position, that is two; reputation, that is three; character, that is four. Did you ever see them build one of those houses they make in some parts of the country, with concrete instead of stones? Take a spadeful of the mud, and put it into a frame on the wall. When it is dry, take away the frame and the supports, and it hardens into rock. You take your single deeds--the mud sometimes, young men!--pop them on the wall, and think no more about it. Ay, but they stop there and harden there, and lo! a character--a house for your soul to live in--health, position, memory, capacity, and all that. If you have not done certain things which you ought to have done, you will never be able to do them, and there are the materials for a judgment. That is going on every moment, and especially is it going on in the region of your pleasures. If they are unworthy, you are unworthy; if they are gross, and coarse, and low, and animal, they are dragging you down; if they are frivolous and foolish, they are making you a poor butterfly of a creature that is worth nothing and will be of no good to anybody; if they are pure, and chaste, and lofty, and virginal and white, they will make your souls good and gracious and tender with the tenderness and beauty of God.

But that is not all. I am not going to travel beyond the limits of this present life with any words of mine, but as I read this final conclusion in this Book of Ecclesiastes, I think I can perceive that the doubts and the scepticisms about a future life, and the difference between a man and a beast which are spoken of in the earlier chapters, have all been overcome, and the clear conviction of the writer is expressed in these twofold great sayings: The spirit shall return unto God who gave it, and the words with which He stamps all His message upon our hearts, the final words of His book; God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing. And I come to you and say, I suppose you believe in a state of retribution beyond? I suppose that most of the young folk I am speaking to now at all events believe that Thou wilt come to be our judge, as the Te Deum has it; and that it is this same personal self of mine that is to stand there who is sitting here? God shall bring thee into judgment. Never mind what is to come of the body, the quivering, palpitating, personal centre. The very same self that I know myself to be will be carried there. Now, take that with you and lay it to heart, and let it have a bearing on your pleasure. It will kill nothing that deserves to live, it will take no real joy out of a man's life. It will only strain out the poison that would kill you. You turn that thought upon your heart, my friends. Is it like a policeman's bull's-eye turned upon a lot of bad characters hiding under a railway arch in the corner there? If so, the sooner you get rid of the pleasures and inclinations that slink away when that beam of light strikes their ugly faces, the better for yourselves and for your lives. Rejoice in the way of thine heart and, that thy joy may be pure, know that for all this God will bring thee into judgment.

And now my last word, Remember God, says my text. The former two sayings, if taken by themselves, would make a very imperfect guide to life. Self-indulgence regulated by the thought of retribution is a very low kind of life after all. There is something better in this world, and that is work; something higher, and that is duty; something nobler than self-indulgence, and that is self-sacrifice. And so no religion worthy the name contents itself by saying to a man, Be good and you will be glad; but, Never mind whether you are glad; be good at any rate, and such gladness as is good for you will come to you, and you can want the rest. Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Recall God to your thoughts, and keep Him in your mind all the day long. That is wonderfully unlike your life, is it not? Remember thy Creator; shift the centre of your life. What I have been saying might be true of a man, the centre of whose life was himself, and such a man is next door to a devil, for, I suppose, the definition of devil is self-engrossed still, and whosoever lives for himself is dead. Don't let the earth be the centre of your system, but the sun. Do not live to yourselves, or your pleasures will all be ignoble and creeping, but live to God. Remember. Well, then, you and I know a good deal more about God than the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes did--both about what He is and how to remember Him. I am not going to content myself by taking his point of view, but I must take a far higher and a far better one. If he had been here he would have said Remember God. He would have said, Look at God in Jesus Christ, and trust Him and love Him; go to Him as your Saviour, and take all the burden of your past sin and lay it upon His merciful shoulders, and for His dear sake look for forgiveness and cleansing; and then for His dear sake live to serve and bless Him. Never mind about yourself, and do not think much about your gladness. Follow in the footsteps of Him who has shown us that the highest joy is to give oneself utterly away. Love Jesus Christ and trust Him and serve Him, and that will make all your gladness permanent. There is one thing I want to teach you. Look at that description, or rather read when you go home the description which follows my text, of that wretched old man who has got no hope in God and no joy, feeble in body, going down to the grave, and dying out at last. That is what rejoicing in the days of thy youth, and walking in the ways of thine own heart, come to when you do not remember God. There is nothing more miserable on the face of this earth than an ill-conditioned old man, who is ill-conditioned because he has lost his early joys and early strength, and has got nothing to make up for them. How many of your joys, my dear young friends, will last when old age comes to you? How many of them will survive when your eye is no longer bright, and your hand no longer strong, and your foot no longer fleet? How many of them, young woman! when the light is out of your eye, and the beauty and freshness out of your face and figure, when you are no longer able for parties, when it is no longer a pastime to read novels, and when the ballroom is not exactly the place for you,--how many of your pleasures will survive? Young man! how many of yours will last when you can no longer go into dissipation, and stomach and system will no longer stand fast living, nor athletics, and the like? Oh! let me beseech thee, go to the ant and consider her ways, who in the summer layeth up for the winter; and do ye likewise in the days of your youth, store up for yourselves that which knows no change and laughs at the decay of flesh and sense. A thousand motives coincide and press on my memory if I had words and time to speak them. Let me beseech you--especially you young men and women of this congregation, of some of whom I may venture to speak as a father to his children, whom I have seen growing up, as it were, from your mothers arms, and the rest of you whom I do not know so well--Oh! carry away with you this beseeching entreaty of mine at the end. Love Jesus Christ and trust to Him as your Saviour; serve Him as your Captain and your King in the days of your youth. Do not offer Him the fag end of a life--the last inch of the candle that is burning down into the socket. Do it now, for the moments are flying, and you may never have Him offered to you any more. If there is any softening, any touch of conscience in your heart, yield to the impulse and do not stifle it. Take Christ for your Saviour, take Him now--Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.