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

**GALATIANS-001**. **FROM CENTRE TO CIRCUMFERENCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."*

*Galatians 2:20*

We have a bundle of paradoxes in this verse. First, I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. The Christian life is a dying life. If we are in any real sense joined to Christ, the power of His death makes us dead to self and sin and the world. In that region, as in the physical, death is the gate of life; and, inasmuch as what we die to in Christ is itself only a living death, we live because we die, and in proportion as we die.

The next paradox is, Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. The Christian life is a life in which an indwelling Christ casts out, and therefore quickens, self. We gain ourselves when we lose ourselves. His abiding in us does not destroy but heightens our individuality. We then most truly live when we can say, Not I, but Christ liveth in me; the soul of my soul and the self of myself.

And the last paradox is that of my text, The life which I live in the flesh, I live in (not by) the faith of the Son of God. The true Christian life moves in two spheres at once. Externally and superficially it is in the flesh, really it is in faith. It belongs not to the material nor is dependent upon the physical body in which we are housed. We are strangers here, and the true region and atmosphere of the Christian life is that invisible sphere of faith.

So, then, we have in these words of my text a Christian man's frank avowal of the secret of his own life. It is like a geological cutting, it goes down from the surface, where the grass and the flowers are, through the various strata, but it goes deeper than these, to the fiery heart, the flaming nucleus and centre of all things. Therefore it may do us all good to make a section of our hearts and see whether the strata there are conformable to those that are here.

**I. Let us begin with the centre, and work to the surface. We have, first, the great central fact named last, but round which all the Christian life is gathered.**

The Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me. These two words, the loving and the giving, both point backwards to some one definite historical fact, and the only fact which they can have in view is the great one of the death of Jesus Christ. That is His giving up of Himself. That is the signal and highest manifestation and proof of His love.

Notice (though I can but touch in the briefest possible manner upon the great thoughts that gather round these words) the three aspects of that transcendent fact, the centre and nucleus of the whole Christian life, which come into prominence in these words before us. Christ's death is a great act of self-surrender, of which the one motive is His own pure and perfect love. No doubt in other places of Scripture we have set forth the death of Christ as being the result of the Father's purpose, and we read that in that wondrous surrender there were two givings up The Father freely gave Him up to the death for us all. That divine surrender, the Apostle ventures, in another passage, to find dimly suggested from afar, in the silent but submissive and unreluctant surrender with which Abraham yielded his only begotten son on the mountain top. But besides that ineffable giving up by the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ Himself, moved only by His love, willingly yields Himself. The whole doctrine of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has been marred by one-sided insisting on the truth that God sent the Son, to the forgetting of the fact that the Son came; and that He was bound to the Cross neither by cords of man's weaving nor by the will of the Father, but that He Himself bound Himself to that Cross with the cords of love and the bands of a man, and died from no natural necessity nor from any imposition of the divine will upon Him unwilling, but because He would, and that He would because He loved. He loved me, and gave Himself for me.

Then note, further, that here, most distinctly, that great act of self-surrendering love which culminates on the Cross is regarded as being for man in a special and peculiar sense. I know, of course, that from the mere wording of my text we cannot argue the atoning and substitutionary character of the death of Christ, for the preposition here does not necessarily mean instead of, but for the behoof of. But admitting that, I have another question. If Christ's death is for the behoof of men, in what conceivable sense does it benefit them, unless it is in the place of men? The death for me is only for me when I understand that it is instead of me. And practically you will find that wherever the full-orbed faith in Christ Jesus as the death for all the sins of the whole world, bearing the penalty and bearing it away, has begun to falter and grow pale, men do not know what to do with Christ's death at all, and stop talking about it to a very large extent.

Unless He died as a sacrifice, I, for one, fail to see in what other than a mere sentimental sense the death of Christ is a death for men.

And lastly, about this matter, observe how here we have brought into vivid prominence the great thought that Jesus Christ in His death has regard to single souls. We preach that He died for all. If we believe in that august title which is laid here as the vindication of our faith on the one hand, and as the ground of the possibility of the benefits of His death being world-wide on the other--viz. the Son of God--then we shall not stumble at the thought that He died for all, because He died for each. I know that if you only regard Jesus Christ as human I am talking utter nonsense; but I know, too, that if we believe in the divinity of our Lord, there need be nothing to stumble us, but the contrary, in the thought that it was not an abstraction that He died for, that it was not a vague mass of unknown beings, clustered together, but so far away that He could not see any of their faces, for whom He gave His life on the Cross. That is the way in which, and in which alone, we can embrace the whole mass of humanity--by losing sight of the individuals. We generalise, precisely because we do not see the individual units; but that is not God's way, and that is not Christ's way, who is divine. For Him the all is broken up into its parts, and when we say that the divine love loves all, we mean that the divine love loves each. I believe (and I commend the thought to you) that we do not fathom the depth of Christ's sufferings unless we recognise that the sins of each man were consciously adding pressure to the load beneath which He sank; nor picture the wonders of His love until we believe that on the Cross it distinguished and embraced each, and, therefore, comprehended all. Every man may say, He loved me, and gave Himself for me.

**II. So much, then, for the first central fact that is here. Now let me say a word, in the second place, about the faith which makes that fact the foundation of my own personal life.**

I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me. I am not going to plunge into any unnecessary dissertations about the nature of faith; but may I say that, like all other familiar conceptions, it has got worn so smooth that it glides over our mental palate without roughening any of the papillae or giving any sense or savour at all? And I do believe that dozens of people like you, who have come to church and chapel all your lives, and fancy yourselves to be fully au fait at all the Christian truth that you will ever hear from my lips, do not grasp with any clearness of apprehension the meaning of that fundamental word faith.

It is a thousand pities that it is confined by the accidents of language to our attitude in reference to Jesus Christ. So some of you think that it is some kind of theological juggle which has nothing to do with, and never can be seen in operation in, common life. Suppose, instead of the threadbare, technical faith we took to a new translation for a minute, and said trust, do you think that would freshen up the thought to you at all? It is the very same thing which makes the sweetness of your relations to wife and husband and friend and parent, which, transferred to Jesus Christ and glorified in the process, becomes the seed of immortal life and the opener of the gate of Heaven. Trust Jesus Christ. That is the living centre of the Christian life; that is the process by which we draw the general blessing of the Gospel into our own hearts, and make the world-wide truth, our truth.

I need not insist either, I suppose, on the necessity, if our Christian life is to be modelled upon the Apostolic lines, of our faith embracing the Christ in all these aspects in which I have been speaking about His work. God forbid that I should seem to despise rudimentary and incomplete feelings after Him in any heart which may be unable to say Amen to Paul's statement here. I want to insist very earnestly, and with special reference to the young, that the true Christian faith is not merely the grasp of the person, but it is the grasp of the Person who is declared to be the Son of God, and whose death is the voluntary self-surrender motived by His love, for the carrying away of the sins of every single soul in the whole universe. That is the Christ, the full Christ, cleaving to whom our faith finds somewhat to grasp worthy of grasping. And I beseech you, be not contented with a partial grasp of a partial Saviour; neither shut your eyes to the divinity of His nature, nor to the efficacy of His death, but remember that the true Gospel preaches Christ and Him crucified; and that for us, saving faith is the faith that grasps the Son of God Who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Note, further, that true faith is personal faith, which appropriates, and, as it were, fences in as my very own, the purpose and benefit of Christ's giving of Himself. It is always difficult for lazy people (and most of us are lazy) to transfer into their own personal lives, and to bring into actual contact with themselves and their own experience, wide, general truths. To assent to them, when we keep them in their generality, is very easy and very profitless. It does no man any good to say All men are mortal; but how different it is when the blunt end of that generalisation is shaped into a point, and I say I have to die! It penetrates then, and it sticks. It is easy to say All men are sinners. That never yet forced anybody down on his knees. But when we shut out on either side the lateral view and look straight on, on the narrow line of our own lives, up to the Throne where the Lawgiver sits, and feel I am a sinful man, that sends us to our prayers for pardon and purity. And in like manner nobody was ever wholesomely terrified by the thought of a general judgment. But when you translate it into I must stand there, the terror of the Lord persuades men.

In like manner that great truth which we all of us say we believe, that Christ has died for the world, is utterly useless and profitless to us until we have translated it into Paul's world, loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not say that the essence of faith is the conversion of the general statement into the particular application, but I do say that there is no faith which does not realise one's personal possession of the benefits of the death of Christ, and that until you turn the wide word into a message for yourself alone, you have not yet got within sight of the blessedness of the Christian life. The whole river may flow past me, but only so much of it as I can bring into my own garden by my own sluices, and lift in my own bucket, and put to my own lips, is of any use to me. The death of Christ for the world is a commonplace of superficial Christianity, which is no Christianity; the death of Christ for myself, as if He and I were the only beings in the universe, that is the death on which faith fastens and feeds.

And, dear brother, you have the right to exercise it. The Christ loves each, and therefore He loves all; that is the process in the divine mind. The converse is the process in the revelation of that mind; the Bible says to us, Christ loves all, and therefore we have the right to draw the inference that He loves each. You have as much right to take every whosoever of the New Testament as your very own, as if on the page of your Bible that whosoever was struck out, and your name, John, Thomas, Mary, Elizabeth, or whatever it is, were put in there. He loved me. Can you say that? Have you ever passed from the region of universality, which is vague and profitless, into the region of personal appropriation of the person of Jesus Christ and His death?

**III. And now, lastly, notice the life which is built upon this faith.**

The true Christian life is dual. It is a life in the flesh, and it is also a life in faith. These two, as I have said, are like two spheres, in either of which a man's course is passed, or, rather, the one is surface and the other is central. Here is a great trailing spray of seaweed floating golden on the unquiet water, and rising and falling on each wave or ripple. Aye! but its root is away deep, deep, deep below the storms, below where there is motion, anchored upon a hidden rock that can never move. And so my life, if it be a Christian life at all, has its surface amidst the shifting mutabilities of earth, but its root in the silent eternities of the centre of all things, which is Christ in God. I live in the flesh on the outside, but if I am a Christian at all, I live in the faith in regard of my true and proper being.

This faith, which grasps the Divine Christ as the person whose love-moved death is my life, and who by my faith becomes Himself the Indwelling Guest in my heart; this faith, if it be worth anything, will mould and influence my whole being. It will give me motive, pattern, power for all noble service and all holy living. The one thing that stirs men to true obedience is that their hearts be touched with the firm assurance that Christ loved them and died for them.

We sometimes used to see men starting an engine by manual force; and what toil it was to get the great cranks to turn, and the pistons to rise! So we set ourselves to try and move our lives into holiness and beauty and nobleness, and it is dispiriting work. There is a far better, surer way than that: let the steam in, and that will do it. That is to say--let the Christ in His dying power and the living energy of His indwelling Spirit occupy the heart, and activity becomes blessedness, and work is rest, and service is freedom and dominion.

The life that I live in the flesh is poor, limited, tortured with anxiety, weighed upon by sore distress, becomes dark and gray and dreary often as we travel nearer the end, and is always full of miseries and of pains. But if within that life in the flesh there be a life in faith, which is the life of Christ Himself brought to us through our faith, that life will be triumphant, quiet, patient, aspiring, noble, hopeful, gentle, strong, Godlike, being the life of Christ Himself within us.

So, dear friends, test your faith by these two tests, what it grasps and what it does. If it grasps a whole Christ, in all the glory of His nature and the blessedness of His work, it is genuine; and it proves its genuineness if, and only if, it works in you by love; animating all your action, bringing you ever into the conscious presence of that dear Lord, and making Him pattern, law, motive, goal, companion and reward. To me to live is Christ.

If so, then we live indeed; but to live in the flesh is to die; and the death that we die when we live in Christ is the gate and the beginning of the only real life of the soul.