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

**GALATIANS-005**. **THE SON SENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."*

*Galatians 4:4-5 (R.V.)*

It is generally supposed that by the fulness of time Paul means to indicate that Christ came at the moment when the world was especially prepared to receive Him, and no doubt that is a true thought. The Jews had been trained by law to the conviction of sin; heathenism had tried its utmost, had reached the full height of its possible development, and was decaying. Rome had politically prepared the way for the spread of the Gospel. Vague expectations of coming change found utterance even from the lips of Roman courtier poets, and a feeling of unrest and anticipation pervaded society; but while no doubt all this is true and becomes more certain the more we know of the state of things into which Christ came, it is to be noted that Paul is not thinking of the fulness of time primarily in reference to the world which received Him, but to the Father who sent Him. Our text immediately follows words in which the air is described as being under guardians and stewards until the time appointed of His Father, and the fulness of time is therefore the moment which God had ordained from the beginning for His coming. He, from of old, had willed that at that moment this Son should be born, and it is to the punctual accomplishment of His eternal purpose that Paul here directs our thoughts. No doubt the world's preparedness is part of the reason for the divine determination of the time, but it is that divine determination rather than the world's preparedness to which the first words of our text must be taken to refer.

The remaining portion of our text is so full of meaning that one shrinks from attempting to deal with it in our narrow space, but though it opens up depths beyond our fathoming, and gathers into one concentrated brightness lights on which our dim eyes can hardly look, we may venture to attempt some imperfect consideration even of these great words. Following their course of thought we may deal with

**I. The mystery of love that sent.**

The most frequent form under which the great fact of the incarnation is represented in Scripture is that of our text--God sent His Son. It is familiar on the lips of Jesus, but He also says that God gave His Son. One can feel a shade of difference in the two modes of expression. The former bringing rather to our thoughts the representative character of the Son as Messenger, and the latter going still deeper into the mystery of Godhead and bringing into view the love of the Father who spared not His Son but freely bestowed Him on men. Yet another word is used by Jesus Himself when He says, I came forth from God, and that expression brings into view the perfect willingness with which the Son accepted the mission and gave Himself, as well as was given by God. All three phases express harmonious, though slightly differing aspects of the same fact, as the facets of a diamond might flash into different colours, and all must be held fast if we would understand the unspeakable gift of God. Jesus was sent; Jesus was given; Jesus came. The mission from the Father, the love of the Father, the glad obedience of the Son, must ever be recognised as interpenetrating, and all present in that supreme act.

There have been many men specially sent forth from God, whose personal existence began with their birth, and so far as the words are concerned, Jesus might have been one of these. There was a man sent from God whose name was John, and all through the ages he has had many companions in his mission, but there has been only one who came as well as was sent, and He is the true light which lighteth every man. To speak in theological language of the pre-existence of the Son is cold, and may obscure the truth which it formulates in so abstract a fashion, and may rob it of power to awe and impress. But there can be no question that in our text, as is shown by the juxtaposition of sent and born, and in all the New Testament references to the subject, the birth of Jesus is not regarded as the beginning of the being of the Son. The one lies far back in the depths of eternity and the mystery of the divine nature, the other is a historical fact occurring in a definite place and at a dated moment. Before time was the Son was, delighting in the Father, and in the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and He who in respect of His expression of the Father's mind and will was the Word, was the Son in respect of the love that bound the Father and Him in one. Into the mysteries of that love and union no eyes can penetrate, but unless our faith lays hold of it, we know not the God whom Jesus has declared to us. The mysteries of that divine union and communion lie beyond our reach, but well within the grasp of our faith and the work of the Son in the world, ever since there was a world, is not obscurely declared to all who have eyes to see and hearts to understand. For He has through all ages been the active energy of the divine power, or as the Old Testament words it, The Arm of the Lord, the Agent of creation, the Revealer of God, the Light of the world and the Director of Providence. He was in the world and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.

Now all this teaching that the Son was long before Jesus was born is no mere mysterious dogma without bearing on daily needs, but stands in the closest connection with Christ's work and our faith in it. It is the guarantee of His representative character; on it depends the reliableness of His revelation of God. Unless He is the Son in a unique sense, how could God have spoken unto us in Him, and how could we rely on His words? Unless He was the effulgence of His glory and the express image of His person': how could we be sure that the light of His countenance was light from God and that in His person God was so presented as that he who had seen Him had seen the Father? The completeness and veracity of His revelation, the authoritative fulness of His law, the efficacy of His sacrifice and the prevalence of His intercession all depend on the fact of His divine life with God long before His human life with men. It is a plain historical fact that a Christianity which has no place for a pre-existent Son in the bosom of the Father has only a maimed Christ in reference to the needs of sinful men. If our Christ were not the eternal Son of God, He will not be the universal Saviour of men.

Nor is this truth less needful in its bearing on modern theories which will have nothing to say to the supernatural, and in a fatalistic fashion regard history as all the result of an orderly evolution in which the importance of personal agents is minimised. To it Jesus, like all other great men, is a product of His age, and the immediate result of the conditions under which He appeared. But when we look far beyond the manger of Bethlehem into the depths of Eternity and see God so loving the world as to give His Son, we cannot but recognise that He has intervened in the course of human history and that the mightiest force in the development of man is the eternal Son whom He sent to save the world.

**II. The miracle of lowliness that came.**

The Apostle goes on from describing the great fact which took place in heaven to set forth the great fact which completed it on earth. The sending of the Son took effect in the birth of Jesus, and the Apostle puts it under two forms, both of which are plainly designed to present Christ's manhood as His full identification of Himself with us. The Son of God became the son of a woman; from His mother He drew a true and complete humanity in body and soul. The humanity which He received was sufficiently kindred with the divinity which received it to make it possible that the one should dwell in the other and be one person. As born of a woman the Son of God took upon Himself all human experiences, became capable of sharing our pure emotions, wept our tears, partook in our joys, hoped and feared as we do, was subject to our changes, grew as we grow, and in everything but sin, was a man amongst men.

But the Son of God could not be as the sons of men. Him the Father heard always. Even when He came down from Heaven and became the Son of Man, He continued to be The Son of Man which is in Heaven. Amid all the distractions and limitations of His earthly life, the continuity and depth of His communion with the Father were unbroken and the completeness of His obedience undiminished. He was a Man, but He was also the Man, the one realised ideal of humanity that has ever walked the earth, to whom all others, even the most complete, are fragments, the fairest foul, the most gracious harsh. In Him and in Him only has been given the world assurance of a man.

The other condition which is here introduced is born under the law, by which it may be noted that the Apostle does not mean the Jewish law, inasmuch as he does not use the definite article with the word. No doubt our Lord was born as a Jew and subject to the Jewish law, but the thought here and in the subsequent clause is extended to the general notion of law. The very heart of our Lord's human identification is that He too had duties imperative upon Him, and the language of one of the Messianic psalms was the voice of His filial will during all His earthly life; Lo! I come, in the volume of the Book it is written of Me, I delight to do Thy will and Thy law is within My heart. The very secret of His human life was discovered by the heathen centurion, at whose faith He marvelled, who said, I also am a man under authority; so was Jesus. The Son had ever been obedient in the sweet communion of Heaven, but the obedience of Jesus was not less perfect, continual and unstained. It was the man Jesus who summed up His earthly life in I do always the things that please Him; it was the man Jesus who, under the olives in Gethsemane, made the great surrender and yielded up His own will to the will of the Father who sent Him.

He was under law in that the will of God dominated His life, but He was not so under it as we are on whom its precepts often press as an unwelcome obligation, and who know the weight of guilt and condemnation. If there is any one characteristic of Jesus more conspicuous than another it is the absence in Him of any consciousness of deficiency in His obedience to law, and yet that absence does not in the smallest degree infringe on His claim to be meek and lowly in heart. Which of you convinceth Me of sin? would have been from any other man a defiance that would have provoked a crushing answer if it had not been taken as a proof of hopeless ignorance of self, but when Christ asks the question, the world is silent. The silence has been all but unbroken for nineteen hundred years, and of all the busy and often unfriendly eyes that have been occupied with Him and the hostile pens that have been eager to say something new about Him, none have discovered a flaw, or dared to hint a fault. That character has stamped its own impression of perfectness on all eyes even the most unfriendly or indifferent. In Him there is seen the perfect union and balance of opposite characteristics; the rest of us, at the best, are but broken arcs; Jesus is the completed round. He is under law as fully, continuously and joyfully obedient; but for Him it had no accusing voice, and it laid on Him no burden of broken commandments. He was born of a woman, born under law, but he lived separate from sinners though identified with them.

**III. The marvel of exaltation that results.**

Our Lord's lowliness is described in the two clauses which we have just been considering. They express His identification with us from a double point of view, and that double point of view is continued in the final clauses of our text which state the double purpose of God in sending His Son. He became one with us that we might become one with Him. The two elements of this double purpose are stated in the reverse order to the two elements of Christ's lowliness. The redemption of them that were under law is presented as the reason for His being born under law, and our reception of the adoption of sons is the purpose of the Son's being sent and born of a woman. The order in which Paul here deals with the two parts of the divine purpose is not to be put down to mere rhetorical ornament, but corresponds to the order in which these two elements are realised by men. For there must be redemption from law before there is the adoption of sons.

We have already had occasion to point out that law here must be taken in the wide sense and not restricted to the Jewish law. It is a world-wide redemption which the Father's love had in view in sending His Son, but that all-comprehending, fatherly love could not reach its aim by the mere forth-putting of its own energy. A process was needed if the divine heart was to accomplish its desire, and the majestic stages in that process are set forth here by Paul. The world was under law in a very sad fashion, and though Jesus has come to redeem them that are under law, the crushing weight of commandments flouted, of duties neglected, of sins done, presses heavily upon many of us. And yet how many of us there are who do not know the burden that we carry and have had no personal experience like that of Bunyan's Christian with the pack on his back all but weighing him down? Jesus Christ has become one of us, and in His sinless life has magnified the law and made it honourable, and in His sinless death He endures the consequences of sin, not as due to Himself, but because they are man's. But we must carefully keep in view, that as we have already pointed out, we are to think of Christ's mission as His coming as well as the Father's sending, and that therefore we do not grasp the full idea of our Lord's enduring the consequences of sin unless we take it as meaning His voluntary identification of Himself in love with us sinful men. His obedience was perfect all His life long, and His last and highest act of obedience was when He became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.

This is the only means by which the burden of law in any of its forms can be taken away from us. For a law which is not loved will be heavy and hard however holy and just and good it may be, and a law which we have broken will become sooner or later its own avenger. Faithful in Pilgrim's Progress tells how So soon as a man overtook me he was but a word and a blow, for down he knocked me and laid me for dead... . He struck me another deadly blow on the breast and beat me down backward, so I lay at his foot as dead as before, so when I came to myself again I cried him "Mercy," but he said, "I know not how to show mercy," and with that knocked me down again; he had doubtless made an end of me but that one came by and bid him forbear... . I did not know him at first, but as he went by I perceived the holes in his hands and in his sides. He was born under law that He might redeem them that were under law.

The slaves bought into freedom are received into the great family. The Son has become flesh that they who dwell in the flesh may rise to be sons, but the Son stands alone even in the midst of His identification with us, and of the great results which follow for us from it. He is the Son by nature; we are sons by adoption. He became man that we might share in the possession of God. When the burden of law is lifted off it is possible to bestow the further blessing of sonship, but that blessing is only possible through Him in whom, and from whom, we derive a life which is divine life. There is a profound truth in the prophetic sentence, Behold I and the children which God hath given me! for, in one aspect, believers are the children of Christ, and in another, they are sons of God.

We have been speaking of the Son's identification with us in His mission, and our identification with Him, but that identification depends on ourselves and is only an accomplished fact through our faith. When we trust in Him it is true that all His--His righteousness, His Sonship, His union with the Father--is ours, and that all ours--our sins, our guilt, our alienation from God and our dwelling in the far-off land of rags and vice--is His. In His voluntary identification with us, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. It is for us to determine whether we will lay on Him our iniquities, as the Father has already laid the iniquities of us all. Are we by faith in Him who was born of a woman, born under law, making our very own the redemption from the law which He has wrought and the adoption of sons which He bestows?