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

**GALATIANS-011**. **THE OWNER'S BRAND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."*

*Galatians 6:17*

The reference in these words is probably to the cruel custom of branding slaves as we do cattle, with initials or signs, to show their ownership. It is true that in old times criminals, and certain classes of Temple servants, and sometimes soldiers, were also so marked, but it is most in accordance with the Apostle's way of thinking that he here has reference to the first class, and would represent himself as the slave of Jesus Christ, designated as His by the scars and weaknesses which were the consequences of his apostolic zeal. Imprisonment, beating by the Jewish rod, shipwrecks, fastings, weariness, perils, persecutions, all these he sums up in another place as being the tokens by which he was approved as an apostle of Jesus Christ. And here he, no doubt, has the same thought in his mind, that his bodily weakness, which was the direct issue of his apostolic work, showed that he was Christ's. The painful infirmity under which, as we learn, he was more especially suffering, about the time of writing this letter, may also have been in his mind.

All through this Epistle he has been thundering and lightning against the disputers of this apostolic authority. And now at last he softens, and as it were, bares his thin arm, his scarred bosom, and bids these contumacious Galatians look upon them, and learn that he has a right to speak as the representative and messenger of the Lord Jesus.

So we have here two or three points, I think, worth considering. First, think for a moment of the slave of Christ; then of the brands which mark the ownership; then of the glory in the servitude and the sign; and then of the immunity from human disturbances which that service gives. From henceforth let no man trouble me. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

**I. First, then, a word or two about that conception of the slave of Christ.**

It is a pity that our Bible has not rendered the title which Paul ever gives himself at the beginning of his letters, by that simple word slave, instead of the feebler one, servant. For what he means when he calls himself the servant of Jesus Christ is not that he bore to Christ the kind of relation which servants among us bear to those who have hired and paid them, and to whom they have come under obligations of their own will which they can terminate at any moment by their own caprice; but that he was in the roughest and simplest sense of the word, Christ's slave.

What lies in that metaphor? Well, it is the most uncompromising assertion of the most absolute authority on the one hand, and claim of unconditional submission and subjection on the other.

The slave belonged to his master; the master could do exactly as he liked with him. If he killed him nobody had anything to say. He could set him to any task; he could do what he liked with any little possession or property that the slave seemed to have. He could break all his relationships, and separate him from wife and kindred.

All that is atrocious and blasphemous when it is applied to the relations between man and man, but it is a blessed and magnificent truth when it is applied to the relations between a man and Christ. For this Lord has absolute authority over us, and He can do what He likes with everything that belongs to us; and we, and our duties, and our circumstances, and our relationships, are all in His hands, and the one thing that we have to render to Him is utter, absolute, unquestioning, unhesitating, unintermittent and unreserved obedience and submission. That which is abject degradation when it is rendered to a man, that which is blasphemous presumption when it is required by a man, that which is impossible, in its deepest reality, as between man and man, is possible, is blessed, is joyful and strong when it is required by, and rendered to, Jesus Christ. We are His slaves if we have any living relationship to Him at all. Where, then, in the Christian life, is there a place for self-will; where a place for self-indulgence; where for murmuring or reluctance; where for the assertion of any rights of my own as against that Master? We owe absolute obedience and submission to Jesus Christ.

And what does the metaphor carry as to the basis on which this authority rests? How did men acquire slaves? Chiefly by purchase. The abominations of the slave market are a blessed metaphor for the deep realities of the Christian life. Christ has bought you for His own. The only thing that gives a human soul the right to have any true authority over another human soul is that it shall have yielded itself to the soul whom it would control. We must first of all give ourselves away before we have the right to possess, and the measure in which we give ourselves to another is the measure in which we possess another. And so Christ our Lord, according to the deep words of one of Paul's letters, gives Himself for us, that He might purchase unto Himself a people for His possession. Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price.

Therefore the absolute authority, and unconditional surrender and submission which are the very essence of the Christian life, at bottom are but the corresponding and twofold effects of one thing, and that is love. For there is no possession of man by man except that which is based on love. And there is no submission of man to man worth calling so except that which is also based therein.

Thou hearts alone wouldst move;

Thou only hearts dost love.

The relation in both its parts, on the side of the Master and on the side of the captive bondsman, is the direct result and manifestation of that love which knits them together.

Therefore the Christian slavery, with its abject submission, with its utter surrender and suppression of mine own will, with its complete yielding up of self to the control of Jesus, who died for me; because it is based upon His surrender of Himself to me, and in its inmost essence it is the operation of love, is therefore co-existent with the noblest freedom.

This great Epistle to the Galatians is the trumpet call and clarion proclamation of Christian liberty. The breath of freedom blows inspiringly through it all. The very spirit of the letter is gathered up in one of its verses, I have been called unto liberty, and in its great exhortation, Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free. It is then sufficiently remarkable and profoundly significant that in this very letter, which thus is the protest of the free Christian consciousness against all limitations and outward restrictions, there should be this most emphatic declaration that the liberty of the Christian is slavery and the slavery of the Christian is freedom. He is free whose will coincides with his outward law. He is free who delights to do what he must do. He is free whose rule is love, and whose Master is Incarnate Love. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed. O Lord, truly I am Thy servant, Thou hast loosed my bands. I bear in my body the charter of my liberty, for I bear in my body the brand of the Lord Jesus.

**II. And so now a word in the next place about these marks of ownership.**

As I have said, the Apostle evidently means thereby distinctly the bodily weaknesses, and possibly diseases, which were the direct consequences of his own apostolic faithfulness and zeal. He considered that he proved himself to be a minister of God by his stripes, imprisonments, fastings, by all the pains and sufferings and their permanent consequences in an enfeebled constitution, which he bore because he had preached the Cross of Christ. He knew that these things were the result of his faithful ministry. He believed that they had been sent by no blundering, blind fate; by no mere secondary causes; but by his Master Himself, whose hand had held the iron that branded into the hissing flesh the marks of His ownership. He felt that by means of these he had been drawn nearer to his Master, and the ownership had been made more perfect. And so in a rapture of contempt of pain, this heroic soul looks upon even bodily weakness and suffering as being the signs that he belonged to Christ, and the means of that possession being made more perfect.

Now, what is all that to us Christian people who have no persecutions to endure, and none of whom I am afraid have ever worked hard enough for Christ to have damaged our health by it? Is there anything in this text that may be of general application to us all? Yes! I think so. Every Christian man or woman ought to bear, in his or her body, in a plain, literal sense, the tokens that he or she belongs to Jesus Christ. You ask me how? If thy foot or thine hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.

There are things in your physical nature that you have to suppress; that you have always to regulate and coerce; that you have sometimes entirely to cast away and to do without, if you mean to be Jesus Christ's at all. The old law of self-denial, of subduing the animal nature, its passions, appetites, desires, is as true and as needful to-day as it ever was; and for us all it is essential to the loftiness and purity of our Christian life that our animal nature and our fleshly constitution should be well kept down under heel and subdued. As Paul himself said in another place, I bring under my body, and I keep it in subjection, lest by any means I should myself, having proclaimed to others the laws of the contest, be rejected from the prize. Oh, you Christian men and women! if you are not living a life of self-denial, if you are not crucifying the flesh, with its affections and lusts, if you are not bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Christ may be manifested in your mortal body, what tokens are there that you are Christ's slaves at all?

Then, besides this, we may expand the thought even further, and say that, in a very real sense, all the pains and sorrows and disappointments and afflictions that mainly touch our mortal part should be taken by us as, and made by us to be, the tokens that we belong to the Master.

But it is not only in limitations and restrictions and self-denials and pains that Christ's ownership of us ought to be manifested in our daily lives, and so by means of our mortal bodies, but if there be in our hearts a deep indwelling possession of the grace and sweetness of Christ, it will make itself visible, ay! even in our faces, and beauty born of our communion with Him shall pass into and glorify even rugged and care-lined countenances. There may be, and there ought to be, in all Christian people, manifestly visible the tokens of the indwelling serenity of the indwelling Christ. And it should not be left to some moment of rapture at the end of life, for men to look upon us, to behold our faces, as it had been the face of an angel, but by our daily walk, by our countenances full of a removed tranquillity, and a joy that rises from within, men ought to take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus, and it should be the truth--I bear in my body the tokens of His possession.

**III. Now, once more notice the glorying in the slavery and its signs.**

I bear, says Paul; and he uses, as many of you may know, a somewhat remarkable word, which does not express mere bearing in the sense of toleration and patient endurance, although that is much; nor mere bearing in the sense of carrying, but implies bearing with a certain triumph as men would do who, coming back victorious from conflict, and being received into the city, were proud to show their scars, the honourable signs of their courage and constancy. So, with a triumph that is legitimate, the Apostle solemnly and proudly bears before men the marks of the Lord Jesus. Just as he says in another place:--Thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us about in triumph in Jesus Christ, He was proud of being dragged at the conqueror's chariot wheels, chained to them by the cords of love; and so he was proud of being the slave of Christ.

It is a degradation to a man to yield abject submission, unconditional service to another man. It is the highest honour of our natures so to bow before that dear Lord. To prostrate ourselves to Him is to lift ourselves high in the scale of being. The King's servant is every other person's master. And he that feels that he is Christ's, may well be, not proud but conscious, of the dignity of belonging to such a Lord. The monarch's livery is a sign of honour. In our old Saxon kingdom the king's menials were the first nobles. So it is with us. The aristocracy of humanity are the slaves of Jesus Christ.

And let us be proud of the marks of the branding iron, whether they come in the shape of sorrows and pains, or otherwise. It is well that we should have to carry these. It is blessed, and a special mark of the Master's favour that He should think it worth His while to mark us as His own, by any sorrow or by any pain. Howsoever hot may be the iron, and howsoever deeply it may be pressed by His firm, steady, gentle hand upon the quivering flesh and the shrinking heart, let us be thankful if He, even by it, impresses on us the manifest tokens of ownership. Oh, brethren! if we could come to look upon sorrows and losses with this clear recognition of their source, meaning and purpose, they change their nature, the paradox is fulfilled that we do gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles. I bear in my body, with a solemn triumph and patient hope, the marks of the Lord Jesus.

IV. And now, lastly, the immunity from any disturbance which men can bring, which these marks, and the servitude they express, secure.

From henceforth let no man trouble me. Paul claims that his apostolic authority, having been established by the fact of his sufferings for Christ, should give him a sacredness in their eyes; that henceforth there should be no rebellion against his teaching and his word. We may expand the thought to apply more to ourselves, and say that, in the measure in which we belong to Christ, and hear the marks of His possession of us, in that measure are we free from the disturbance of earthly influences and of human voices; and from all the other sources of care and trouble, of perturbation and annoyance, which harass and vex other men's spirits. Ye are bought with a price, says Paul elsewhere. Be not the servants of men. Christ is your Master; do not let men trouble you. Take your orders from Him; let men rave as they like. Be content to be approved by Him; let men think of you as they please. The Master's smile is life, the Master's frown is death to the slave; what matters it what other people may say? He that judgeth me is the Lord. So keep yourselves above the cackle of public opinion; do not let your creed be crammed down your throats even by a consensus of however venerable and grave human teachers. Take your directions from your Master, and pay no heed to other voices if they would command. Live to please Him, and do not care what other people think. You are Christ's servant; let no man trouble you.

And so it should be about all the distractions and petty annoyances that disturb human life and harass our hearts. A very little breath of wind will ruffle all the surface of a shallow pond, though it would sweep across the deep sea and produce no effect. Deepen your natures by close union with Christ, and absolute submission to Him, and there will be a great calm in them, and cares and sorrows, and all the external sources of anxiety, far away, down there beneath your feet, will show scarce so gross as beetles, whilst you stand upon the high cliff and look down upon them all. From henceforth no man shall trouble me. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

My brother! Whose marks do you bear? There are only two masters. If an eye that could see things as they are, were to go through this congregation, whose initials would it discern in your faces? There are some of us, I have no doubt, who in a very horrid sense bear in our bodies the marks of the idol that we worship. Men who have ruined their health by dissipation and animal sensualism--are there any of them here this morning? Are there none of us whose faces, whose trembling hands, whose diseased frames, are the tokens that they belong to the flesh and the world and the devil? Whose do you bear?

Oh! when one looks at all the faces that pass one upon the street--this all drawn with avarice and earthly-mindedness; that all bloated with self-indulgence and loose living--when one sees the mean faces, the passionate faces, the cruel faces, the vindictive faces, the lustful faces, the worldly faces, one sees how many of us bear in our bodies the marks of another lord. They have no rest day nor night who worship the beast; and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.

I pray you, yield yourselves to your true Lord, so on earth you may bear the beginnings of the likeness that stamps you His, and hereafter, as one of His happy slaves, shall do priestly service at His throne and see His face, and His name shall be in your foreheads.