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

**JEREMIAH-006. A QUESTION FOR THE BEGINNING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"What will ye do in the end?"*

*Jeremiah 5:31*

I find that I preached to the young from this text just thirty years since--nearly a generation ago. How few of my then congregation are here to-night! how changed they and I are! and how much nearer the close we have drifted! How many of the young men and women of that evening have gone to meet the end, and how many of them have wrecked their lives because they would not face and answer this question!

Ah, dear young friends, if I could bring some of the living and some of the dead, and set them to witness here instead of me, they would burn in on you, as my poor words never can do, the insanity of living without a satisfactory and sufficient reply to the question of my text, What will ye do in the end?

In its original application these words referred to a condition of religious and moral corruption in which a whole nation was involved. The men that should have spoken for God were prophesying lies. The priests connived at profitable falsehoods because by these their rule was confirmed. And the deluded populace, as is always the case, preferred smooth falsehoods to stern truths. So the prophet turns round indignantly, and asks what can be the end of such a welter and carnival of vice and immorality, and beseeches his contemporaries to mend their ways by bethinking themselves of what their course led to.

But we may dismiss the immediate application of the words for the sake of looking at the general principle which underlies them. It is a very familiar and well-worn one. It is simply this, that a large part of the wise conduct of life depends on grave consideration of consequences. It is a sharp-pointed question, that pricks many a bubble, and brings much wisdom down into the category of folly. There would be less misery in the world, and fewer fair young lives cast away upon grim rocks, if the question of my text were oftener asked and answered.

**I. I note, first, that here is a question which every wise man will ask himself.**

I do not mean to say that the consideration of consequences is the highest guide, nor that it is always a sufficient one; nor that it is, by any means, in every case, an easily applied one. For we can all conceive of circumstances in which it is the plainest duty to take a certain course of action, knowing that, as far as this life is concerned, it will bring down disaster and ruin. Do right! and face any results therefrom. He who is always forecasting possible issues has a very leaden rule of conduct, and will be so afraid of results that he will not dare to move; and his creeping prudence will often turn out to be the truest imprudence.

But whilst all that is true, and many deductions must be made from the principle which I have laid down, that the consideration of circumstances is a good guide in life, yet there are regions in which the question comes home with direct and illuminating force. Let me just illustrate one or two of these.

Take the lower application of the question to nearer ends in life. Now this awful life that we live is so strangely concatenated of causes and effects, and each little deed drags after it such a train of eternal and ever-widening consequences, that a man must be an idiot if he never looks an inch beyond his nose to see the bearing of his actions. I believe that, in the long-run, and in the general, condition is the result of character and of conduct; and that, whatsoever deductions may be necessary, yet, speaking generally, and for the most part, men are the architects of their own condition, and that they make the houses that they dwell in to fit the convolutions of the body that dwells within them. And, that being so, it being certain that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, and that no deed, be it ever so small, be it ever so evanescent, be it ever so entirely confined within our own inward nature, and never travelling out into visibility in what men call actions--that every one of such produces an eternal, though it may be an all but imperceptible effect, upon ourselves; oh, surely there can be nothing more ridiculous than that a man should refrain from forecasting the issue of his conduct, and saying to himself? What am I to do in the end?

If you would only do that in regard to hosts of things in your daily life you could not be the men and women that you are. If the lazy student would only bring clearly before his mind the examination-room, and the unanswerable paper, and the bitter mortification when the pass-list comes out and his name is not there, he would not trifle and dawdle and seek all manner of diversions as he does, but he would bind himself to his desk and his task. If the young man who begins to tamper with purity, and in the midst of the temptations of a great city to gratify the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh, because he is away from the shelter of his father's house, and the rebuke of his mother's purity, could see, as the older of us have seen, men with their bones full of the iniquity of their youth, or drifted away from the city to die, down in the country like a rat in a hole, do you think the temptations of the streets and low places of amusement would not be stripped of their fascination? If the man beginning to drink were to say to himself, What am I to do in the end? when the craving becomes physical, and volition is suspended, and anything is sacrificed in order to still the domineering devil within, do you think he would begin? I do not believe that all sin comes from ignorance, but sure I am that if the sinful man saw what the end is he would, in nine cases out of ten, be held back. What will ye do in the end? Use that question, dear friends, as the Ithuriel spear which will touch the squatting tempter at your ear, and there will start up, in its own shape, the fiend.

But the main application that I would ask you to make of the words of my text is in reference to the final end, the passing from life. Death, the end, is likewise Death, the beginning. If it were an absolute end, as coarse infidelity pretends to believe it is, then, of course, such a question as my text would have no kind of relevance. What will ye do in the end? Nothing! for I shall be nothing. I shall just go back to the nonentity that I was. I do not need to trouble myself. Ah, but Janus has two faces, one turned to the present and one to the future. His temple has two gates, one which admits from this lower level, and one, at the back, which launches us out on to the higher level. The end is a beginning, and the beginning is retribution. The end of sowing is the beginning of harvest. The man finishes his work and commences to live on his wages. The brewing is over, and the drinking of the brewst commences.

And so, brother, What will ye do in the end--which is not an end, but which is a beginning? Surely every wise man will take that question into consideration. Surely, if it be true that we all of us are silently drifting to that one little gateway through which we have to pass one by one, and then find ourselves in a region all full of consequences of the present, he has a good claim to be counted a prince of fools who jumps the life to come, and, in all his calculations of consequences, which he applies wisely and prudently to the trifles of the present, forgets to ask himself, And, after all that is done, what shall I do then? You remember the question in the old ballad:

"What good came of it at last? ...

Nay, that I cannot tell, quoth he;

But 'twas a famous victory."

Ay, but what came of it at the last? Oh brother, that one question, pushed to its issues, condemns the wisdom of this world as folly, and pulverises into nothingness millions of active lives and successful schemes. What then? What then? I have much goods laid up for many years. Well and good, what then? I will say to my soul, Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. Yes, what then? This night thy soul shall be required of thee. He never thought of that! And so his epitaph was Thou fool!

**II. So, secondly, mark, here is a question which a great many of us never think about.**

I do not mean, now, so much in reference to the nearer ends compassed in this life, though even in regard to them it is only too true; I mean rather in regard to that great and solemn issue to which we are all tending. But in regard of both, it seems to me one of the strangest things in all the world that men should be content so commonly to be ignorant of what they perfectly well know, and never to give attention to that of which, should they bethink themselves, they are absolutely certain.

What will ye do in the end? Why! half of us put away that question with the thought in our minds, if not expressed, at least most operative, There is not going to be any end; and it is always going to be just like what it is to-day. Did you ever think that there is no good ground for being sure that the sun will rise to-morrow; that it rose for the first time once; that there will come a day when it will rise for the last time? The uniformity of Nature may be a postulate, but you cannot find any logical basis for it. Or, to come down from heights of that sort, have you ever laid to heart, brother, that the only unchangeable thing in this world is change, and the only thing certain, that there is no continuance of anything; and that, therefore, you and I are bound, if we are wise, to look that fact in the face, and not to allow ourselves to be befooled by the difficulty of imagining that things will ever be different from what they are? Oh! many of us-- I was going to say most of men, I do not know that it would be an exaggeration--are like the careless inhabitants of some of those sunny, volcanic isles in the Eastern Ocean, where Nature is prodigally luxuriant and all things are fair, but every fifty years or so there comes a roar and the island shakes, and half of it, perhaps, is overwhelmed, and the lava flows down and destroys gleaming houses and smiling fields, and heaven is darkened with ashes, and then everything goes on as before, and people live as if it was never going to happen again, though every morning, when they go out, they see the cone towering above their houses, and the thin column of smoke, pale against the blue sky.

It is not altogether sinful or bad that we should live, to some extent, under the illusion of a fixity and a perpetuity which has no real existence, for it helps to concentrate effort and to consolidate habit, and to make life possible. But for men to live, as so many of us do, never thinking of what is more certain than anything else about us, that we shall slide out of this world, and find ourselves in another, is surely not the part of wisdom.

Another reason why so many of us shirk this question is the lamentable want of the habit of living by principle and reflection. Most men never see their life steadily, and see it whole. They live from hand to mouth, they are driven this way and that way; they adapt means to ends In regard to business or the like, but in the formation of their character, and in the moulding of their whole being, crowds of them live a purely mechanical, instinctive, unreflective life. There is nothing more deplorable than the small extent to which reflection and volition really shape the lives of the bulk of mankind. Most of us take our cue from our circumstances, letting them dominate us. They tell us that in Nature there is such a thing as protective mimicry, as it is called-animals having the power--some of them to a much larger extent than others--of changing their hues in order to match the gravel of the stream in which they swim or the leaves of the trees on which they feed. That is like what a great many of us do. Put us into a place where certain forms of frivolity or vice are common, and we go in for them. Take us away from these and we change our hue to something a little whiter. But all through we never know what it is to put forth a good solid force of resistance and to say, No! I will not! or, what is sometimes quite as hard to say, Yes! though, as Luther said in his strong way, there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the housetops, I will! If people would live more by reflection and by the power of a resisting will, this question of my text would come oftener to them.

And there is another cause that I must touch on for one moment, why so many people neglect this question, and that is because they are uneasily conscious that they durst not face it. I know of no stranger power than that by which men can ignore unwelcome questions; and I know of nothing more tragical than the fact that they choose to exercise the power. What would you think of a man who never took stock because he knew that he was insolvent, and yet did not want to know it? And what do you think of yourselves if, knowing that the thought of passing into that solemn eternity is anything but a cheering one, and that you have to pass thither, you never turn your head to look at it? Ah, brother, if it be true that this question of my text is unpleasant to you to hear put, be sure that that is the strongest reason why you should put it.

**III. Thirdly, here is a question especially directed to you young folk.**

It is so because you are specially tempted to forget it. It may seem as if there were no people in the world that had less need to be appealed to, as I have been appealing to you, by motives drawn from the end of life, than you who are only standing at its beginning. But it is not so. An old rabbi was once asked by his pupil when he should fulfil a certain precept of the law, and the answer was, The day before you die. But, said the disciple, I may die to-morrow. Then, said the master, do it to-day. And so I say to you, do not make sure that the beginning at which you stand is separated by a long tract of years from the end to which you go. It may be, but it may not be. I know that arguments pleading with men to be Christians, and drawn from the consideration of a future life, are not fashionable nowadays, but I am persuaded that that preaching of the Gospel is seriously defective, and will be lamentably ineffective, which ignores this altogether. And, therefore, dear friends, I say to you that, although in all human probability a stretch of years may lie between you and the end of life, the question of my text is one specially adapted to you.

And it is so because, with your buoyancy, with your necessarily limited experience, with the small accumulation of results that you have already in your possession, and with the tendencies of your age to live rather by impulse than by reflection, you are specially tempted to forget the solemn significance of this interrogation. And it is a question especially for you, because you have special advantages in the matter of putting it. We older people are all fixed and fossils, as you are very fond of telling us. The iron has cooled and gone into rigid shapes with us. It is all fluent with you. You may become pretty nearly what you like. I do not mean in regard to circumstances: other considerations come in to determine these; but circumstances are second, character is first; and I do say, in regard to character, you young folk have all but infinite possibilities before you; and, I repeat, may become almost anything that you set yourselves to be. You have no long, weary trail of failures behind you, depressing and seeming to bring an entail of like failure with them for the future. You have not yet acquired habits--those awful things that may be our worst foes or our best friends--you have not yet acquired habits that almost smother the power of reform and change. You have, perhaps, years before you in which you may practise the lessons of wisdom and self-restraint which this question fairly fronted would bring. And so I lay it on your hearts, dear young friends. I have little hope of the old people. I do not despair of any, God forbid! but the fact remains that the most of the men who have done anything for God and the world worth doing have been under the influence of Christian principle in their early days. And from fifteen to one or two and twenty is the period in which you get the set which, in all likelihood, you will retain through eternity. So, What will ye do in the end? Answer the question whilst yet it is possible to answer it, with a stretch of years before you in which you may work out the conclusions to which the answer brings.

**IV. And that leads me to say, last of all, and but a word, that here is a question which Jesus Christ alone enables a man to answer with calm confidence.**

As I have said, the end is a beginning; the passage from life is the entrance on a progressive and eternal state of retribution. And Jesus Christ tells us two other things. He tells us that that state has two parts; that in one there is union with Him, life, blessedness for ever; and that in the other there is darkness, separation from Him, death, and misery. These are the facts, as revealed by the incarnate Word of God, on which answers to this question must be shaped.

What will ye do in the end? If I am trusting to Him; if I have brought my poor, weak nature and sinful soul to Him, and cast them upon His merciful sacrifice and mighty intercession and life-giving Spirit, then I can say: As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness. Ay, and what about those who do not take Him for their Prince and their Saviour? What will ye do in the end? When life's illusions are over, when all its bubbles are burst, when conscience awakes, and when you stand to give an account of yourself to God, What will ye do in the end which is a beginning? Can thy heart endure and thy hand be strong in the day that I shall deal with thee? Oh brother, do not turn away from that Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending! If you will cleave to Him, then you may let the years and weeks slip away without regret; and whether the close be far off or near, death will be robbed of all its terrors, and the future so filled with blessedness, that of you the wise man's paradox will be true: Better is the end of a thing than the beginning, and the day of death than the day of birth.