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

**JEREMIAH-009. AN IMPOSSIBILITY MADE POSSIBLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Can the Ethiopian change his skin?"*

*Jeremiah 13:23*

*"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."*

*2 Corinthians 5:17*

*"Behold, I make all things new."*

*Revelation 21:5*

Put these three texts together. The first is a despairing question to which experience gives only too sad and decisive a negative answer. It is the answer of many people who tell us that character must be eternal, and of many a baffled man who says, It is of no use--I have tried and can do nothing. The second text is the grand Christian answer, full of confidence. It was spoken by one who had no superficial estimate of the evil, but who had known in himself the power of Christ to revolutionise a life, and make a man love all he had hated, and hate all he had loved, and fling away all he had treasured. The last text predicts the completion of the renovating process lying far ahead, but as certain as sunrise.

**I. The unchangeableness of character, especially of faults.**

We note the picturesque rhetorical question here. They were occasionally accustomed to see the dark-skinned, Ethiopian, whether we suppose that these were true negroes from Southern Egypt or dark Arabs, and now and then leopards came up from the thickets on the Jordan, or from the hills of the southern wilderness about the Dead Sea. The black hue of the man, the dark spots that starred the skin of the fierce beast, are fitting emblems of the evil that dyes and speckles the soul. Whether it wraps the whole character in black, or whether it only spots it here and there with tawny yellow, it is ineradicable; and a man can no more change his character once formed than a negro can cast his skin, or a leopard whiten out the spots on his hide.

Now we do not need to assert that a man has no power of self-improvement or reformation. The exhortations of the prophet to repentance and to cleansing imply that he has. If he has not, then it is no blame to him that he does not mend. Experience shows that we have a very considerable power of such a kind. It is a pity that some Christian teachers speak in exaggerated terms about the impossibility of such self-improvement.

But it is very difficult.

Note the great antagonist as set forth here--Habit, that solemn and mystical power. We do not know all the ways in which it operates, but one chief way is through physical cravings set up. It is strange how much easier a second time is than a first, especially in regard to evil acts. The hedge once broken down, it is very easy to get through it again. If one drop of water has percolated through the dyke, there will be a roaring torrent soon. There is all the difference between once and never; there is small difference between once and twice. By habit we come to do things mechanically and without effort, and we all like that. One solitary footfall across the snow soon becomes a beaten way. As in the banyan-tree, each branch becomes a root. All life is held together by cords of custom which enable us to reserve conscious effort and intelligence for greater moments. Habit tends to weigh upon us with a pressure heavy as frost, and deep almost as life. But also it is the ally of good.

The change to good is further made difficult because liking too often goes with evil, and good is only won by effort. It is a proof of man's corruption that if left alone, evil in some form or other springs spontaneously, and that the opposite good is hard to win. Uncultivated soil bears thistles and weeds. Anything can roll downhill. It is always the least trouble to go on as we have been going.

Further, the change is made difficult because custom blinds judgment and conscience. People accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere are not aware of its foulness.

How long it takes a nation, for instance, to awake to consciousness of some national crime, even when the nation is Christian! And how men get perfectly sophisticated as to their own sins, and have all manner of euphemisms for them!

Further, how hard it is to put energy into a will that has been enfeebled by long compliance. Like prisoners brought out of the Bastille.

So if we put all these reasons together, no wonder that such reformation is rare.

I do not dwell on the point that it must necessarily be confined within very narrow limits. I appeal to experience. You have tried to cure some trivial habit. You know what a task that has been--how often you thought that you had conquered, and then found that all had to be done over again. How much more is this the case in this greater work! Often the efforts to break off evil habits have the same effect as the struggles of cattle mired in a bog, who sink the deeper for plunging. The sad cry of many a foiled wrestler with his own evil is, O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? We do not wish to exaggerate, but simply to put it that experience shows that for men in general, custom and inclination and indolence and the lack of adequate motive weigh so heavily that a thorough abandonment of evil, much more a hearty practice of good, are not to be looked for when once a character has been formed. So you young people, take care. And all of us listen to--

**II. The great hope for individual renewal.**

The second text sets forth a possibility of entire individual renewal, and does so by a strong metaphor.

If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, or as the words might be rendered, there is a new creation, and not only is he renewed, but all things are become new. He is a new Adam in a new world. Now,

**(a)** let us beware of exaggeration about this matter. There are often things said about the effects of conversion which are very far in advance of reality, and give a handle to caricature. The great law of continuity runs on through the change of conversion. Take a man who has been the slave of some sin. The evil will not cease to tempt, nor will the effects of the past on character be annihilated. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, remains true. In many ways there will be permanent consequences. There will remain the scars of old wounds; old sores will be ready to burst forth afresh. The great outlines of character do remain.

**(b)** What is the condition of renewal?

If any man be in Christ--how distinctly that implies something more than human in Paul's conception of Christ. It implies personal union with Him, so that He is the very element or atmosphere in which we live. And that union is brought about by faith in Him.

**(c)** How does such a state of union with Christ make a man over again?

It gives a new aim and centre for our lives. Then we live not unto ourselves; then everything is different and looks so, for the centre is shifted. That union introduces a constant reference to Him and contemplation of His death for us, it leads to self-abnegation.

It puts all life under the influence of a new love. The love of Christ constraineth. As is a man's love, so is his life. The mightiest devolution is to excite a new love, by which old loves and tastes are expelled. A new affection has expulsive power, as the new sap rising in the springtime pushes off the lingering withered leaves. So union with Him meets the difficulty arising from inclination still hankering after evil. It lifts life into a higher level where the noxious creatures that were proper to the swamps cannot live. The new love gives a new and mighty motive for obedience.

That union breaks the terrible chain that binds us to the past. All died. The past is broken as much as if we were dead. It is broken by the great act of forgiveness. Sin holds men by making them feel as if what has been must be--an awful entail of evil. In Christ we die to former self.

That union brings a new divine power to work in us. I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

It sets us in a new world which yet is the old. All things are changed if we are changed. They are the same old things, but seen in a new light, used for new purposes, disclosing new relations and powers. Earth becomes a school and discipline for heaven. The world is different to a blind man when cured, or to a deaf one,--there are new sights for the one, new sounds for the other.

All this is true in the measure in which we live in union with Christ.

So no man need despair, nor think, I cannot mend now. You may have tried and been defeated a thousand times. But still victory is possible, not without effort and sore conflict, but still possible. There is hope for all, and hope for ME.

**III. The completion in a perfectly renewed creation.**

The renovation here is only partial. Its very incompleteness is prophetic. If there be this new life in us, it obviously has not reached its fulness here, and it is obviously not manifested here for all that even here it is.

It is like some exotic that does not show its true beauty in our greenhouses. The life of a Christian on earth is a prophecy by both its greatness and its smallness, by both its glory and its shame, by both its brightness and its spots. It cannot be that there is always to be this disproportion between aspiration and performance, between willing and doing. Here the most perfect career is like a half-lighted street, with long gaps between the lamps.

The surroundings here are uncongenial to the new creatures. Foxes have holes--all creatures are fitted for their environment; only man, and eminently renewed man, wanders as a pilgrim, not in his home. The present frame of things is for discipline. The schooling over, we burn the rod. So we look for an external order in full correspondence with the new nature.

And Christ throned makes all things new. How far the old is renewed we cannot tell, and we need not ask. Enough that there shall be a universe in perfect harmony with the completely renewed nature, that we shall find a home where all things will serve and help and gladden and further us, where the outward will no more distract and clog the spirit.

Brethren, let that mighty love constrain you; and look to Christ to renew you. Whatever your old self may have been, you may bury it deep in His grave, and rise with Him to newness of life. Then you may walk in this old world, new creatures in Christ Jesus, looking for the blessed hope of entire renewal into the perfect likeness of Him, the perfect man, in a perfect world, where all old sorrows and sins have passed away and He has made all things new. Through eternity, new joys, new knowledge, new progress, new likeness, new service will be ours-- and not one leaf shall ever wither in the amaranthine crown, nor the cup of blessing ever become empty or flat and stale. Eternity will be but a continual renewal and a progressive increase of ever fresh and ever familiar treasures. The new and the old will be one.

Begin with trusting to Him to help you to change a deeper blackness than that of the Ethiopian's skin, and to erase firier spots than stain the tawny leopard's hide, and He will make you a new man, and set you in His own time in a new heaven and earth, where dwelleth righteousness.