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

**JOHN-018**. **THE BRAZEN SERPENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness ..."*

*John 3:14*

This is the second of the instances in this Gospel in which our Lord lays His hand upon an institution or incident of the Old Testament, as shadowing forth some aspect of His work. In the first of these instances, under the image of the ladder that Jacob saw, our Lord presented Himself as the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth; here He goes a step further into the heart of His work, and under the image, very eloquent to the Pharisee to whom He was speaking, of the brazen serpent lifted up on the pole in the desert, proclaims Himself as the medium of healing and of life to a poisoned world.

Now, Nicodemus has a great many followers to-day. He took up a position which many take up. He recognised Christ as a Teacher, and was willing to accord to the almost unknown young man from Galilee the coveted title of Rabbi. He came to Him with a little touch of condescension, and evidently thought that for him, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the upper and educated classes, to be willing to speak of Jesus as a Teacher, was an endorsement that the young aspirant might be gratified to receive. Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher sent from God--but he stopped there. He is not the only one who compliments Jesus Christ, while he degrades Him from His unique position. Now, to this inadequate conception of our Lord's Person and work, Christ opposed the solemn insistence on the incapacity of human nature as it is, to enter into communion with, and submission to, God. And then He passes on to speak--in precise parallelism with the position that He took up when He likened Himself to the Ladder of Jacob's vision--of Himself as being the Son of Man that came down from Heaven, and therefore is able to reveal heavenly things. In my text He further unveils in symbol the mystery and dignity of His Person and of His work, whilst He speaks of a mysterious lifting up of this Son of Man who came down from heaven. These are the truths that the conception of Christ as a great Teacher needs for its completion; the contrariety of human nature with the divine will, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Crucifixion of the Incarnate Son. And so we have here three points, to which I desire to turn, as setting forth the conception of His own work which Jesus Christ presented as completing the conception of it, to which Nicodemus had attained.

**I. There is, first, the lifting up of the Son of Man.**

Now, of course, the sole purpose of setting that brazen serpent on the pole was to render it conspicuous, and all that Nicodemus could then understand by the symbol was that, in some unknown way, this heaven-descended Son of Man should be set forth before Israel and the world as being the Healer of all their diseases. But we are wiser, after the event, than the ruler of the Jews could be at the threshold of Christ's ministry. We have also to remember that this is not the only occasion, though it is the first, on which our Lord used this very significant expression. For twice over in this Gospel we find it upon His lips--once when, addressing the unbelieving multitude, He says When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He; and once when in soliloquy, close on Calvary, He says, as the vision of a world flocking to Him rises before Him on occasion of the wish of a few Greek proselytes to see Him, I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me. We do not need, though we have, the Evangelist's commentary, this He spake signifying what death He should die.

So, if we accept the historical veracity of this Gospel, we here perceive Jesus Christ, at the very beginning of His career, and before the dispositions of the nation towards Him had developed themselves in action, discerning its end, and seeing, gaunt and grim before Him, the Cross that was lifted up on Calvary. Enthusiasts and philanthropists and apostles of all sorts, in the regions of science and beneficence and morals and religion, begin their career with trusting that their brethren should have understoodthat God was speaking through them. But no illusion of that sort, according to these Evangelists, drew Jesus Christ out of His seclusion at Nazareth and impelled Him on His career. From the beginning He knew that the Cross was to be the end. That Cross was not to Him a necessity, accepted as the price of faithfulness in doing His work, so that His attitude was, I will speak what is in Me, though I die for it, but it was to Him the very heart of the work which He came to do. Therefore, after He had said to the ruler of the Jews that the Son of Man, as descended from Heaven, was able to speak of heavenly things, He added the deeper necessity, He must be lifted up. Where lay the must? In the requirement of the work which He had set Himself to do. Beneath this great saying there lies a pathetic, stern, true conception of the condition of human nature. That desert encampment, with the poisoned men dying on every hand, is the emblem under which Jesus Christ, the gentlest and the sweetest soul that ever lived, looked out upon humanity. And it was because the facts of human nature called for something far more than a teacher that He said the Son of Man must be lifted up. For what they needed, and what He had set Himself to bring, could only be brought by One who yielded Himself up for the sins of the whole world.

But that must, which thus arose from the requirements of the task that He had set before Him, had its source in His own heart; it was no necessity imposed upon Him from without. True, it was a necessity laid on Him by filial obedience, but also true, it was the necessity accepted by Him in pursuance of the impulse of His own heart. He must die because He must save, and He must save because He loved. So He was not nailed to the Cross by the nails and hammers of the Roman soldiers, and the taunt that was flung at Him as He hung there had a deeper meaning, as scoffs thrown at Him and His cause ordinarily have, than the scoffers understood: He saved others, and therefore Himself He cannot save.

So here we have Christ accepting, as well as discerning, the Cross. And we have more than that. We have Christ looking at the Cross as being, not humiliation, but exaltation. The Son of Man must be lifted up. And what does that mean? It means the same thing that He said when, near the end, He declared, The hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified. We are accustomed to speak--and we speak rightly--of His death as being the lowest point of the humiliation which was inherent in the very fact of His humanity. He condescended to be born; He stooped yet more to die. But whilst that is true, the other side is also true--that in the Cross Christ is lifted up, and that it is His Throne. For what see we there? The highest exhibition, the tenderest revelation, of His perfect love. And what see we there besides? The supreme manifestation of the highest power.

'Twas great to speak a world from nought,

'Tis greater to redeem.

To save humanity, to make it possible that men should receive that second birth, and should enter into the Kingdom of God--that was a greater work, because a work not only of creation, but of restoration, than it was to send forth the stars on their courses and to preservethe ancient heavens from wrong. There is a revelation of divine might when we lift up our eyes on high, and see how, because He is great in power, not one faileth. But there is a mightier revelation of divine power when we see how, from amidst the ruins of humanity, He can restore the divine image, and piece together, as it were, without sign of flaw or crack or one fragment wanting, the fair image that was shattered into fragments by the blow of Sin's heavy mace. Power in its highest operation, power in its tenderest efficacy, power in its widest sweep, are set forth on the Cross of Christ, and that weak Man hanging there, dying in the dark, is the power of Godas well as the wisdom of God. The Cross is Christ's Throne, but it is His sovereign manifestation of love and power only if it is what, as I believe He told us it was, and what His servants from His lips caught the interpretation of it as being, the death for the sins of the sin-stricken world. Unless we can believe that, when He died, He died for us, I know not why Christ's death should appeal to our love. But if we recognise--as I pray that we all may recognise--that our deep need for something far more than Teacher or Pattern has been met in that great one Sacrifice for sins for ever, then the magnetism of the Cross begins to tell, and we understand what He meant when He said, I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me. Brethren, the Cross is His Throne, from which He rules the world, and if you strike His sacrifice for sins out of your conception of His work, you have robbed Him of sovereignty, and taken out of His hand the sceptre by which He governs the hearts and wills of rebellious and restored men.

**II. Notice, again, how we have here the look at the uplifted Son of Man.**

I do not need to paint for you what your own imaginations can sufficiently paint for yourselves--the scene in the wilderness where the dying men from the very outskirts of the camp could turn a filmy eye to the brazen serpent hanging in their midst. That look is the symbol of what we need, in order that the life-giving power of Christ should enter into our death. There is no better description of the act of Christian faith than that picture of the dying Israelite turning his languid eye to the symbol of healing and life. That trust which Jesus emphasises here in whosoever believeth on Him, He opposes very emphatically to Nicodemus's confession, We know that Thou art a Teacher. We know--you have to go a step further, Nicodemus! We know; well and good, but are you included in whosoever believeth? Faith is an advance on credence. There is an intellectual side to it, but its essence is what is the essence of trust always, the act of the will throwing itself on that which is discerned to be trustworthy. You know that a given man is reliable--that is not relying on him. You have to go a step further. And so, dear brethren, you may believe thirty-nine or thirty-nine thousand Articles with an unfaltering credence, and you may be as far away from faith as if you did not believe one of them. There may be a perfect belief and an absolute want of faith. And on the other hand, blessed be God! there may be a real and an operative trust with a very imperfect or mistaken creed. The wild flowers on the rock bloom fair and bright, though they have scarcely any soil in which to strike their roots, and the plants in the most fertile garden may fail to produce flowers and seed. So trust and credence are not always of the same magnitude.

This trust is no arbitrary condition. The Israelite was bid to turn to the brazen serpent. There was no connection between his look and his healing, except in so far as the symbol was a help to, and looking at it was a test of, his faith in the healing power of God. But it is no arbitrary appointment, as many people often think it is, which connects inseparably together the look of faith and the eternal life that Christ gives. For seeing that salvation is no mere external gift of shutting up some outward Hell and opening the door to some outward Heaven, but is a state of heart and mind, of relation to God, the only way by which that salvation can come into a man's heart is that he, knowing his need of it, shall trust Christ, and through Him the new life will flow into his heart. Faith is trust, and trust is the stretching out of the hand to take the precious gift, the opening of the heart for the influx of the grace, the eating of the bread, the drinking of the water, of life.

It is the only possible condition. God forbid that I should even seem to depreciate other forms of healing men's evils and redressing men's wrongs, and diminishing the sorrows of humanity! We welcome them all; but education, art, culture, refinement, improved environment, bettered social and political conditions, whilst they do a great deal, do not go down to the bottom of the necessity. And after you have built your colleges and art museums and stately pleasure-houses, and set every man in an environment that is suited to develop him, you will find out what surely the world might have found out already, that, as in some stately palace built in the Campagna, the malaria is in the air, and steals in at the windows, and infects all the inhabitants. Thank God for all these other things! but you cannot heal a man who has poison in his veins by administering cosmetics, and you cannot put out Vesuvius with a jugful of water. If the camp is to be healed, the Christ must be lifted up.

**III. And now, lastly, here we have the life that comes with a look at the lifted-up Son of Man.**

Those of you who are using the Revised Version will see that there is a little change made here, partly by the exclusion of a clause and partly by changing the order of the words. The alteration is not only nearer the original text, but brings out a striking thought. It reads that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. Now, it is far too late a period of my discourse to enlarge upon all that these great words would suggest to us, but let me just, in a sentence or two, mark the salient points.

Eternal life; do not bring that down to the narrow and inadequate conception of unending existence. It involves that, but it means a great deal more. It means a life of such a sort as is worth calling life, which is a life in union with God, and therefore full of blessedness, full of purity, full of satisfaction, full of desire and aspiration, and all these with the stamp of unendingness deeply impressed upon them. And that is what comes to us through the look. Not only is the process of dying arrested, but there is substituted for it a new process of growing possession of a new life. You must be born again, Christ had been saying to Nicodemus. The change that passes upon a man when once he has anchored his trust on Jesus Christ, the uplifted Son of Man, is so profound that it is nothing else than a new birth, and a new life comes into his veins untainted by the poison, and with no proclivity to death.

May have eternal life--now, here, on the instant. That eternal life is no future gift to be bestowed upon mortal men when they have passed through the agony of death, but it is a gift which comes to us here, and may come to any man on the instant of his looking to Jesus Christ.

May in Him have eternal life--union with Christ by faith, that profound incorporation--if I may use the word--into Him, which the New Testament sets forth in all sorts of aspects as the very foundation of the blessings of Christianity; that union is the condition of eternal life. So, dear brethren, we all need that the poison shall be cast out of our veins. We all need that the tendency downwards to a condition which can only be described as death may be arrested, and the motion reversed. We all need that our knowledge shall be vitalised into faith. We all need that the past shall be forgiven, and the power of sin upon us in the present shall be cancelled. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin, because it was shed for the remission of the sins of the many, and is transfused, an untainted principle of life, into our veins. What Jesus said to Nicodemus by night in that quiet chamber in Jerusalem, what He said in effect and act upon the Cross, when uplifted there, is what He says to each of us from the Throne where He is now lifted up: Whosoever believeth shall in Me have eternal life. Take Him at His word, and you will find that it is true.