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

**JOHN-020**. **THE LAKE AND THE RIVER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*

*John 3:16*

I venture to say that my text shows us a lake, a river, a pitcher, and a draught. God so loved the world--that is the lake. A lake makes a river for itself--God so loved the world that He gave His ... Son. But the river does not quench any one's thirst unless he has something to lift the water with: God so loved the world that He gave His ... Son, that whosoever believeth on Him. Last comes the draught: shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

**I. The great lake, God's love.**

Before Jesus Christ came into this world no one ever dreamt of saying God loves. Some of the Old Testament psalmists had glimpses of that truth and came pretty near expressing it. But among all the gods many and lords many, there were lustful gods and beautiful gods, and idle gods, and fighting gods and peaceful gods: but not one of whom worshippers said, He loves. Once it was a new and almost incredible message, but we have grown accustomed to it, and it is not strange any more to us. But if we would try to think of what it means, the whole truth would flash up into fresh newness, and all the miseries and sorrows and perplexities of our lives would drift away down the wind, and we should be no more troubled with them. God lovesis the greatest thing that can be said by lips.

God ... loved the world. Now when we speak of loving a number of individuals--the broader the stream, the shallower it is, is it not? The most intense patriot in England does not love her one ten-thousandth part as well as he loves his own little girl. When we think or feel anything about a great multitude of people, it is like looking at a forest. We do not see the trees, we see the whole wood. But that is not how God loves the world. Suppose I said that I loved the people in India, I should not mean by that that I had any feeling about any individual soul of all those dusky millions, but only that I massed them all together; or made what people call a generalisation of them. But that is not the way in which God loves. He loves all because He loves each. And when we say, God so loved the world, we have to break up the mass into its atoms, and to think of each atom as being an object of His love. We all stand out in God's love just as we should do to one another's eyes, if we were on the top of a mountain-ridge with a clear sunset sky behind us. Each little black dot of the long procession would be separately visible. And we all stand out like that, every man of us isolated, and getting as much of the love of God as if there was not another creature in the whole universe but God and ourselves. Have you ever realised that when we say, He loved the world, that really means, as far as each of us is concerned, He loves me? And just as the whole beams of the sun come pouring down into every eye of the crowd that is looking up to it, so the whole love of God pours down, not upon a multitude, an abstraction, a community, but upon every single soul that makes up that community. He loves us all because He loves us each. We shall never get all the good of that thought until we translate it, and lay it upon our hearts. It is all very well to say, Ah yes! God is love, and it is all very well to say He loves the world. But I will tell you what is a great deal better--to say--what Paul said--Who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Now, there is one other suggestion that I would make to you before I go on, and that is that all through the New Testament, but especially in John's Gospel, the worlddoes not only mean men, but sinful men, men separated from God. And the great and blessed truth taught here is that, however I may drag myself away from God, I cannot drive Him away from me, and that however little I may care for Him, or love Him, or think about Him, it does not make one hairs-breadth of difference as to the fact that He loves me. I know, of course, that if a man does not love Him back again, God's love has to take shapes that it would not otherwise take, which may be extremely inconvenient for the man. But though the shape may alter, must alter, the fact remains; and every sinful soul on the earth, including Judas Iscariot--who is said to head the list of crimes--has God's love resting upon him.

**II. The river.**

Now, to go back to my metaphor, the lake makes a river. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

So then, it was not Christ's death that turned God from hating and being angry, but it was God's love that appointed Christ's death. If you will only remember that, a great many of the shallow and popular objections to the great doctrine of the Atonement disappear at once. God so loved ... that He gave. But some people say that when we preach that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that God's wrath might not fall upon men, our teaching is immoral, because it means Christ came, and so God loved. It is the other way about, friend. God so loved ... that He gave.

But now let me carry you back to the Old Testament. Do you remember the story of the father taking his boy who carried the bundle of wood and the fire, and tramping over the mountains till they reached the place where the sacrifice was to be offered? Do you remember the boy's question that brings tears quickly to the reader's eyes: Here is the wood, and here is the fire, where is the lamb? Do you not think it would be hard for the father to steady his voice and say, My son, God will provide the lamb? And do you remember the end of that story? The Angel of the Lord said unto Abraham, Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me, therefore blessing I will bless thee, etc. Remember that one of the Apostles said, using the very same word that is used in Genesis as to Abraham's giving up his son to God, He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up to the death for us all. Does not that point to a mysterious parallel? Somehow or other--we have no right to attempt to say how--somehow or other, God not only sent His Son, as it is said in the next verse to my text, but far more tenderly, wonderfully, pathetically, God gave--gave up His Son, and the sacrifice was enhanced, because it was His only begotten Son.

Ah! dear brethren, do not let us be afraid of following out all that is included in that great word, God ... loved the world. For there is no love which does not delight in giving, and there is no love that does not delight in depriving itself, in some fashion, of what it gives. And I, for my part, believe that Paul's words are to be taken in all their blessed depth and wonderfulness of meaning when he says, He gave up--as well as gave--Him to the death for us all.

And now, do you not think that we are able in some measure to estimate the greatness of that little word so? God so loved--so deeply, so holily, so perfectly--that He gave His only begotten Son; and the gift of that Son is, as it were, the river by which the love of God comes to every soul in the world.

Now there are a great many people who would like to put the middle part of this great text of ours into a parenthesis. They say that we should bring the first words and the last words of this text together, and never mind all that lies between. People who do not like the doctrine of the Cross would say, God so loved the world that He gave ... everlasting life; and there an end. If there is a God, and if He loves the world, why cannot He save the world without more ado? There is no need for these interposed clauses. God so loved the world that everybody will go to heaven--that is the gospel of a great many of you; and it is the gospel of a great many wise and learned people. But it is not John's Gospel, and it is not Christ's Gospel. The beginning and the end of the text cannot be buckled up together in that rough-and-ready fashion. They have to be linked by a chain; and there are two links in the chain: God forges the one, and we have to forge the other. God so loved the world that He gave--then He has done His work. That whosoever believeth--that is your work. And it is in vain that God forges His link, unless you will forge yours and link it up to His. God so loved the world, that is step number one in the process; that He gave, that is step number two; and then there comes another that--that whosoever believeth, that is step number three; and they are all needed before you come to number four, which is the landing-place and not a step--should not perish, but have everlasting life.

**III. The pitcher.**

I come to what I called the pitcher, with which we draw the water for our own use--that whosoever believeth. You perhaps say, Yes, I believe. I accept every word of the Gospel, I quite believe that Jesus Christ died, as a matter of history; and I quite believe that He died for men's sins. And what then? Is that what Jesus Christ meant by believing? To believe about Him is not to believe on Him; and unless you believe on Him you will get no good out of Him. There is the lake, and the river must flow past the shanties in the clearing in the forest, if the men there are to drink. But it may flow past their doors, as broad as the Mississippi, and as deep as the ocean; but they will perish with thirst, unless they dip in their hands, like Gideon's men, and carry the water to their own lips. Dear friend, what you have to do--and your soul's salvation, and your peace and joy and nobleness in this life and in the next depend absolutely upon it--is simply to trust in Jesus Christ and His death for your sins.

I sometimes wish we had never heard that word faith. For as soon as we begin to talk about faith, people begin to think that we are away up in some theological region far above everyday life. Suppose we try to bring it down a little nearer to our businesses and bosoms, and instead of using a word that is kept sacred for employment in religious matters, and saying faith, we say trust. That is what you give to your wives and husbands, is it not? And that is exactly what you have to give to Jesus Christ, simply to lay hold of Him as a man lays hold of the heart that loves him, and leans his whole weight upon it. Lean hard on Him, hang on Him, or, to take the other metaphor that is one of the Old Testament words for trust, flee for refugeto Him. Fancy a man with the avenger of blood at his back, and the point of the pursuer's spear almost pricking his spine--don't you think he would make for the City of Refuge with some speed? That is what you have to do. He that believeth, and by trust lays hold of the Hand that holds him up, will never fall; and he that does not lay hold of that Hand will never stand, to say nothing of rising. And so by these two links God's love of the world is connected with the salvation of the world.

**IV. The draught.**

Finally, we have here the draught of living water. Did you ever think why our text puts should not perishfirst? Is it not because, unless we put our trust in Him, we shall certainly perish, and because, therefore, that certainty of perishing must be averted before we can have everlasting life?

Now I am not going to enlarge on these two solemn expressions, perishingand everlasting life. I only say this: men do not need to wait until they die before they perish. There are men and women here now who are dead--dead while they live, and when they come to die, the perishing, which is condemnation and ruin, will only be the making visible, in another condition of life, of what is the fact to-day. Dear brethren, you do not need to die in order to perish in your sins, and, blessed be God, you can have everlasting life before you die. You can have it now, and there is only one way to have it, and that is to lay hold of Him who is the Life. And when you have Jesus Christ in your heart, whom you will be sure to have if you trust Him, then you will have life--life eternal, here and now, and death will only make manifest the eternal life which you had while you were alive here, and will perfect it in fashions that we do not yet know anything about.

Only remember, as I have been trying to show you, the order that runs through this text. Remember the order of these last words, and that we must first of all be delivered from eternal and utter death, before we can be invested with the eternal and absolute life.

Now, dear brethren, I dare say I have never spoken to the great majority of you before; it is quite possible I may never speak to any of you again. I have asked God to help me to speak so as that souls should be drawn to the Saviour. And I beseech you now, as my last word, that you would listen, not to me, but to Him. For it is He that says to us, God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, that whosoever--whosoever, a blank cheque, like the M. or N. of the Prayer-book, or the A. B. of a schedule; you can put your own name in it--that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have--here, now--everlasting life.