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

**JOHN-036**. **THREE ASPECTS OF FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"… many believed on Him. Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him ...."*

*John 8:30, 31*

The Revised Version accurately represents the original by varying the expression in these two clauses, retaining believed on Himin the former, and substituting the simple believed Himin the latter. The variation in two contiguous clauses can scarcely be accidental in so careful a writer as the Apostle John. And the reason and meaning of it are obvious enough on the face of the narrative. His purpose is to distinguish between more and less perfect acceptance of Jesus Christ. The more perfect is the former, they believed on Him; the less perfect is the latter, the simple acceptance of His word on His claim of Messiahship, which is stigmatised as shallow, and proved to be transient by the context.

They were Jewswhich believed, and they continued to be so whilst they were believing. Now, the word Jewin this Gospel always connotes antagonism to Jesus Christ; and as for these persons, how slight and unreliable their adhesion to the Lord is, comes out in the course of the next few verses; and by the end of the chapter they are taking up stones to stone Him. So John would show us that there is a kind of acceptance which may be real, and may be the basis of something much better hereafter, but which, if it does not grow, rots and disappears; and he would draw a broad line of distinction between that and the other mental act, far deeper, more wholesome, more lasting and vital, which he designates as believing on Him. I take these words, then, for consideration, not so much to deal with other thoughts suggested by them, as because they afford me a starting-point for the consideration of the various phases of the act of believing, its blessings and its nature, and its relation to its objects, which are expressed in the New Testament by the various grammatical connections and constructions of this word.

Now, the facts with which I wish to deal may be very briefly stated. There are three ways in which the New Testament represents the act of believing, and its relation to its Object, Christ. These three are, first, the simple one which appears in the text as believed Him. Then there is a second, which appears in two forms, slightly different, but which, for our purpose, may be treated as substantially the same--believing on Him. And then there is a third, which, literally and accurately translated is, believing untoor into Him. That phrase is John's favourite one, and rather unfortunately, though perhaps necessarily, it has been generally rendered by our translators by the less forcible believing in, which gives the idea of repose in, but does not give the idea of motion towards. These three, then, I think, do set forth, if we will ponder them, very large lessons as to the essence of this act of believing, as to the Object upon which it fastens, and as to the blessings which flow from it, which it will be worth our while to consider now. I may cast the whole into the shape of three exhortations: believe Him, believe on Him, believe unto Him.

**I. First, then, believe Christ.**

We accept a man's words when we trust the man. Even if belief, or faith, is represented in the New Testament, as it very rarely is, as having for its object the words of revelation, behind that acceptance of the words lies confidence in the person speaking. And the beginning of all true Christian faith has in it, not merely the intellectual acceptance of certain propositions as true, but a confidence in the veracity of Him by whom they are made known to us--even Jesus Christ our Lord.

I do not need to insist upon that at any length here--it would take me away from my present purpose; but what I do wish to emphasise is, that from the very starting-point, the smallest germ of the most rudimentary and imperfect faith which knits a soul to Jesus Christ has Him for its Object, and is thus distinguished from the mere acceptance of truths which, on other grounds than the authority of the speaker, may legitimately commend themselves to a man.

Then believe Him. Now, that breaks up into two thoughts, which are all that I intend to deduce from it now, although many more might be suggested. The one is this, that the least and the lowest that Jesus Christ asks from us is the entire and unhesitating acceptance of His utterances as final, conclusive, and absolutely true. Whatever more Jesus Christ may be, He is, by His life and words, the Communicator of divine and certain truth. He is a Teacher, though He is a great deal more. And whatever more Christian faith may be--and it is a great deal more--it requires, at least, the frank and full recognition of the authority of every word that comes from His lips. A Christianity without a creed is a dream. Bones without flesh are very dry, no doubt; but what about flesh without bones? An inert, shapeless mass. You will never have a vigorous and true Christian life if it is to be moulded according to the fantastic dream of these latter days, which tells us that we may take Jesus as the Guide of our conduct and need not mind about what He says to us. Believe Meis His requirement. The words of His mouth, and the revelations which He has made in the sweetness of His life, and in all the graciousness of His dealings, are the very unveiling to man of absolute and final and certain truth.

But then, on the other hand, let us remember that, while all this is most clear and distinct in the teaching of Scripture, it carries us but a very short way. We find, in the instance from which we take our starting-point in this sermon, the broad distinction drawn, and practically illustrated in the conduct of the persons concerned, between the simple acceptance of what Christ says, and a true faith that clings to Him for evermore. And the same kind of disparagement of the lower process of merely accepting His word is found more than once in connection with the same phrases. We find, for instance, the two which are connected in our texts used in a previous conversation between our Lord and His antagonists. When He says to them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent, they reply, dragging down His claim to a lower level, What sign showest Thou, that we may see, and believe Thee?He demanded belief on Himself; they answer, We are ready to believe you, on condition that we see something that may make the rendering of our belief a logical necessity for us.

Let us lay to heart the rudimentary and incomplete character of a faith which simply accepts the teaching of Jesus Christ, and does no more. The notion that orthodoxy is Christianity, that a man who does not contradict the teaching of the New Testament is thereby a Christian, is a very old and very perilous and very widespread one. There are many of us who have no better claim to be called Christians than this, that we never denied anything that Jesus Christ said, though we are not sufficiently interested in it, I was going to say, even to deny it. This rudimentary faith, which contents itself with the acceptance of the truth revealed, hardens into mere formalism, or liquefies into mere careless indifference as to the very truth that it professes to believe. There is nothing more impotent than creeds which lie dormant in our brains, and have no influence upon our lives. I wonder how many readers of this sermon, who fancy themselves good Christians, do with their creed as the Japanese used to do with their Emperor--keep him in a palace behind bamboo screens, and never let him do anything, whilst all the reality of power was possessed by another man, who did not profess to be a king at all. Do you think you are Christians because you would sign thirty-nine or three hundred and ninety articles of Christianity, if they were offered to you, while there is not one of them that influences either your thinking or your conduct? Do not let us have these sluggish kings, with a mayor of the place to do the real government, but set on the throne of your hearts the principles of your religion, and see to it that all your convictions be translated into practice, and all your practice be informed by your convictions.

This belief in a set of dogmas, on the authority of Jesus Christ, about which dogmas we do not care a rush, and which make no difference upon our lives, is the faith about which James has so many hard things to say; and he ventures upon a parallel that I should not like to venture on unless I were made bold by his example: Thou believest, O vain man! thou doest well: the devils also believe, and--better than you, in that their belief does something for them, they believe--and tremble!But what shall we say about a man who professes himself a disciple, and neither trembles, nor thrills, nor hopes, nor dreads, nor desires, nor does any single thing because of his creed? Believe Jesus, but do not stop there.

**II. Believe on Christ.**

Now, as I have remarked already, and as many of you know, there is a slightly different, twofold form of this phrase in Scripture. I need not trouble you with the minute distinction between the one and the other. Both forms coincide in the important point on which I wish to touch. That representation of believing on Christ carries us away at once from the mere act of acceptance of His word on His authority to the far more manifestly voluntary, moral, and personal act of reliance upon Him. The metaphor is expanded in various ways in Scripture, and instead of offering any thoughts of my own about it, I would simply ask attention to three of the forms in which it is set forth in the Old and in the New Testaments.

The first of them, and the one which we may regard as governing the others, is that found in the words of Isaiah, Behold, I lay in Zion a stone, a sure Foundation; and, as the Apostle Peter comments, He that believeth on Him shall not be confounded. There the thoughts presented are the superposition of the building upon its Foundation, the rest of the soul, and the rearing of the life on the basis of Jesus Christ.

How much that metaphor says to us about Him as the Foundation, in all the aspects in which we can apply that term! He is the Basis of our hope, the Guarantee of our security, the Foundation-stone of our beliefs, the very Ground on which our whole life reposes, the Source of our tranquillity, the Pledge of our peace. All that I think, feel, desire, wish, and do, ought to be rested upon that dear Lord, and builded on Him by simple faith. By patient persistence of effort rearing up the fabric of my life firmly upon Him, and grafting every stone of it--if I might so use the metaphor--into the bedding-stone, which is Christ, I shall be strong, peaceful, and pure.

The storm comes, the waters rise, the winds howl, the hail and the rain sweep away the refuge of lies, and the dwellers in these frail and foundationless houses are hurrying in wild confusion from one peak to another, before the steadily rising tide. But he that builds on that Foundation shall not make haste, as Isaiah has it; shall not need to hurry to shift his quarters before the flood overtake him; shall look out serene upon all the hurtling fury of the wild storm, and the rise of the sullen waters. So, reliance on Christ, and the honest making of Him the Basis, not of our hopes only, but of our thinkings and of our doings, and of our whole being, is the secret of security, and the pledge of peace.

Then there is another form of the same phrase, believing on, in which is suggested not so much the figure of building upon a foundation, as of some feeble man resting upon a strong stay, or clinging to an outstretched and mighty arm. The same metaphor is implied in the word reliance. We lean upon Christ when, forsaking all other props, and realising His sufficiency and sweetness, we rest the whole weight of our weariness and all the impotence of our weakness upon His strong and unwearied arm, and so are saved. All other stays are like that one to which the prophet compares the King of Egypt--the papyrus reed in the Nile stream, on which, if a man leans, it will break into splinters which will go into his flesh, and make a poisoned wound. But if we lean on Christ, we lean on a brazen wall and an iron pillar, and anything is possible sooner than that that stay shall give.

There is still another form of the metaphor, in which neither building upon a foundation, nor leaning upon a support which is thought of as below what rests upon it, are suggested, but rather the hanging upon something firm and secure which is above what hangs from it. The same picture is suggested by our word dependence. As a nail fastened in a sure place, said one of the prophets, on Him shall hang all the glory of His Father's house.

Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.

The rope lowered over the cliffs supports the adventurous bird-nester in safety above the murmuring sea. They who clasp Christ's hand outstretched from above, may swing over the deepest, most vacuous abyss, and fear no fall.

So, brother, build on Christ, rely on Him, depend on Him, and it shall not be in vain. But if you will not build on the sure Foundation, do not wonder if the rotten one gives way. If you will not lean on the strong Stay, complain not when the weak one crumbles to dust beneath your weight. And if you choose to swing over the profound depth at the end of a piece of pack-thread, instead of holding on by an adamantine chain wrapped round God's throne, you must be prepared for its breaking and your being smashed to pieces below.

**III. The last exhortation that comes out of this comparative study of these phrases is--Believe into Christ.**

That is a very pregnant and remarkable expression, and it can scarcely, as you see, be rendered into our language without a certain harshness; but still it is worth while to face the harshness for the sake of getting the double signification that is involved in it. For when we speak of believing unto or into Him, we suggest two things, both of which, apparently, were in the minds of the writers of the New Testament. One is motion towards, and the other is repose in, that dear Lord.

So, then, true Christian faith is the flight of the soul towards Christ. Therein is one of the special blessednesses of the Christian life, that it has for its object and aim absolutely infinite and unattainable completeness and glory, so that unwearied freshness, inexhaustible buoyancy, endless progress, are the dower of every spirit that truly trusts in Christ. All other aims and objects are limited, transient, and will be left behind. Every other landmark will sink beneath the horizon, where so many of our landmarks have sunk already, and where they will all disappear when the last moment comes. But we may have, and if we are Christian people we shall have, bright before us, sufficiently certain of being reached to make our efforts hopeful and confident, sufficiently certain of never being reached to make our efforts blessed with endless aspirations, the great light and love of that dear Lord, to yearn after whom is better than to possess all besides, and following hard after whom, even in the very motion there is rest, and in the search there is finding. Religion is the flight of the soul, the aspiration of the whole man after the unattainable Attainable--that I may know Him, and be found in Him.

Oh, how such thoughts ought to shame us who call ourselves Christians! Growth, progress, getting nearer to Christ, yearning ever with a great desire after Him!--do not the words seem irony when applied to most of us? Think of the average type of sluggish contentment with present attainments that marks Christian people--tortoises in their crawling rather than eagles in their flight. And let us take our portion of shame, and remember that the faith which believes Him, and that which believes on Him, both need to be crowned and perfected by that which believes towards Him, of which the motto is, Forgetting the things that are behind, I reach forward to the things that are before.

But there is another side to this last phase of faith. That true believing towards or unto Christ is the rest of the soul in Him. By faith that deep and most real union of the believing soul with Jesus Christ is effected which may be fitly described as our entrance into and abode in Him. The believer is as if incorporated into Him in whom he believes. Indeed, the Apostle ventures to use a more startling expression than incorporation when he says that he that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit. If by faith we press towards, by faith we shall be in, Christ. Faith is at once motion and rest, search and finding, desire and fruition. The felicity of this last form of the phrase is its expression of both these ideas, which are united in fact as in word. A rare construction of the verb to believe, with the simple preposition in, coincides with this part of the meaning of believing unto or into, and need not be separately considered.

With this understanding of its meaning, we see how natural is John's preference for this construction. For surely, if he has anything to tell us, it is that the true Christian life is a life enclosed, as it were, in Jesus Christ. Nor need I remind you how Paul, though he starts from a different point of view, yet coincides with John in this teaching. For, to him, to be in Christis the sum of all blessedness, righteousness, peace, and power. As in an atmosphere, we may dwell in Him. He may be the strong Habitation to which we may continually resort. One of the Old Testament words for trusting means taking refuge, and such a thought is naturally suggested by this New Testament form of expression. I flee unto Thee to hide me. In that Fortress we dwell secure.

To be in Jesus, wedded to Him by the conjunction of will and desire, wedded to Him in the oneness of a believing spirit and in the obedience of a life, to be thus in Christ is the crown and climax of faith, and the condition of all perfection. To be in Christ is life; to be out of Him is death. In Him we have redemption; in Him we have wisdom, truth, peace, righteousness, hope, confidence. To be in Him is to be in heaven. We enter by faith. Faith is not the acceptance merely of His Word, but is the reliance of the soul on Him, the flight of the soul towards Him, the dwelling of the soul in Him. Come, My people, into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee ... until the indignation be overpast.