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

**JOHN-040**. **THE GIFTS TO THE FLOCK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... By Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."*

*John 10:9*

One does not know whether the width or the depth of this marvellous promise is the more noteworthy. Jesus Christ presents Himself before the whole race of man, and declares Himself able to deal with the needs of every individual in the tremendous whole. If any man--no matter who, where, when.

For all noble and happy life there are at least three things needed: security, sustenance, and a field for the exercise of activity. To provide these is the end of all human society and government. Jesus Christ here says that He can give all these to every one.

The imagery of the sheep and the fold is still, of course, in His mind, and colours the form of the representation. But the substance is the declaration that, to any and every soul, no matter how ringed about with danger, no matter how hampered and hindered in work, no matter how barren of all supply earth may be, He will give these, the primal requisites of life. He shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

Now I only wish to deal with these three aspects of the blessedness of a true Christian life which our Lord holds forth here as accessible to us all: security, the unhindered exercise of activity, and sustenance or provision.

**I. First, then, in and through Christ any man may be saved.**

I take it that the word savedhere is rather used with reference to the imagery of the parable than in its full Christian sense of ultimate and everlasting salvation, and that its meaning in its present connection might perhaps better be set forth by the rendering safethan saved. At the same time, the two ideas pass into one another; and the declaration of my text is that because, step by step, conflict by conflict, in passing danger after danger, external and internal, Jesus Christ, through our union with Him, will keep us safe, at the last we shall reach eternal and everlasting salvation. He will save usby the continual exercise of His protecting power, into His everlasting kingdom. There is none other shelter for men's defenceless heads and naked, soft, unarmed bodies except only the shelter that is found in Him. There are creatures of low grade in the animal world which have the instinct, because their own bodies are so undefended and impotent to resist contact with sharp and penetrating substances, that they take refuge in the abandoned shells of other creatures. You and I have to betake ourselves behind the defences of that strong love and mighty Hand if ever we are to pass through life without fatal harm.

For consider that, even in regard to outward dangers, union with Jesus Christ defends and delivers us. Suppose two men, two Manchester merchants, made bankrupt by the same commercial crisis; or two shipwrecked sailors lashed upon a raft; or two men sitting side by side in a railway carriage and smashed by the same collision. One is a Christian and the other is not. The same blow is altogether different in aspect and actual effect upon the two men. They endure the same thing externally, in body or in fortune. The outward man is similarly affected, but the man is differently affected. The one is crushed, or embittered, or driven to despair, or to drink, or to something or other to soothe the bitterness; the other bows himself with It is the Lord! Let Him do what seemeth Him good.

So the two disasters are utterly different, though in form they may be the same, and he that has entered into the fold by Jesus Christ is safe, not from outward disaster--that would be but a poor thing--but in it. For to the true heart that lives in fellowship with Jesus Christ, Sorrow, though it be dark-robed, is bright-faced, soft-handed, gentle-hearted, an angel of God. By Me if any man enter in, he shall be safe.

And further, in our union with Jesus Christ, by simple faith in Him and loyal submission and obedience, we do receive an impenetrable defence against the true evils, and the only things worth calling dangers. For the only real evil is the peril that we shall lose our confidence and be untrue to our best selves, and depart from the living God. Nothing is evil except that which tempts, and succeeds in tempting, us away from Him. And in regard to all such danger, to cleave to Christ, to realise His presence, to think of Him, to wear His name as an amulet on our hearts, to put the thought of Him between us and temptation as a filter through which the poisonous air shall pass, and be deprived of its virus, is the one secret of safety and victory.

Real gift of power from Jesus Christ, the influx of His strength into our weakness, of some portion of the Spirit of life that was in Him into our deadness, is promised, and the promise is abundantly fulfilled to all men who trust Him when their hour of temptation comes. As the dying martyr, when he looked up into heaven, saw Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of Godready to help, and, as it were, having started from His eternal seat on the Throne in the eagerness of His desire to succour His servant, so we may all see, if we will, that dear Lord ready to succour us, and close by our sides to deliver us from the evil in the evil, its power to tempt. If we could carry that vision into our daily life, and walk in its light, when temptation rings us round, how poor all the inducements to go away from Him would look!

There is a power in the remembrance of Jesus to slay every wicked thought; and the things that tempt us most, that most directly appeal to our worst sides, to our sense, our ambition, our pride, our distrust, our self-will, all these lose their power upon us, and are discovered in their emptiness and insignificance, when once this thought flashes across the mind--Jesus Christ is my Defence, and Jesus Christ is my Pattern and my Companion.

Oh, brother! do not trust yourself out amongst the pitfalls and snares of life without Him. If you do, the real evil of all evils will seize you for its own; but keep close to that dear Lord, and then there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. The hidden temptation thou wilt pass by without being harmed; the manifest temptation thou wilt trample under foot. Thou shalt not be afraid for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. Hidden known temptations will be equally powerless; and in the fold into which all pass by faith in Christ thou shalt be safe. And so, kept safe from each danger and in each moment of temptation, the aggregate and sum of the several deliverances will amount to the everlasting salvation which shall be perfected in the heavens.

Only remember the condition, By Me if any man enter in. That is not a thing to be done once for all, but needs perpetual repetition. When we clasp anything in our hands, however tight the initial grasp, unless there is a continual effort of renewed tightening, the muscles become lax, and we have to renew the tension, if we are to keep the grasp. So in our Christian life it is only the continual repetition of the act which our Lord here calls entering in by Himthat will bring to us this continual exemption from, and immunity in, the dangers that beset us.

Keep Christ between you and the storm. Keep on the lee side of the Rock of Ages. Keep behind the breakwater, for there is a wild sea running outside; and your little boat, undecked and with a feeble hand at the helm, will soon be swamped. Keep within the fold, for wolves and lions lie in every bush. Or, in plain English, live moment by moment in the realising of Christ's presence, power, and grace. So, and only so, shall you be safe.

**II. Now, secondly, note, in Jesus Christ any man may find a field for the unrestricted exercise of his activity.**

That metaphor of going in and outis partly explained to us by the image of the flock, which passes into the fold for peaceful repose, and out again, without danger, for exercise and food; and is partly explained by the frequent use, in the Old Testament and in common conversation, of the expression going out and inas the designation of the two-sided activity of human life. The one side is the contemplative life of interior union with God by faith and love; the other, the active life of practical obedience in the field of work which God provides for us. These two are both capable of being raised to their highest power, and of being discharged with the most unrestricted and joyous activity, on condition of our keeping close to Christ, and living by the faith of Him.

Note, then, He shall go in. That comes first, though it interferes with the propriety of the metaphor, since the previous words already contemplate an initial entering in by Me, the Door. That is to say, that, given the union with Jesus Christ by faith, there must then, as the basis of all activity, follow very frequent and deep inward acts of contemplation, of faith, and aspiration, and desire. You must go into the depths of God through Christ. You must go into the depths of your own souls through Him. You must become accustomed to withdraw yourselves from spreading yourselves out over the distractions of any external activity, howsoever imperative, charitable, or necessary, and live alone with Jesus, in the secret place of the Most High. It is through Him that we have access to the mysteries and innermost shrine of the Temple. It is through Him that we draw near to the depths of Deity. It is through Him that we learn the length and breadth and height and depth of the largest and loftiest and noblest truths that concern the spirit. It is through Him that we become familiar with the inmost secrets of our own selves. And only they who habitually live this hidden and sunken life of solitary and secret communion will ever do much in the field of outward work. Christians of this generation are far too much accustomed to live only in the front rooms of the house, that look out upon the street; and they know very little--far too little for their soul's health, and far too little for the freshness of their work and its prosperity--of that inward life of silent contemplation and expectant adoration, by which all strength is fed. Do not keep all your goods in the shop windows, and have nothing on your shelves but dummies, as is the case with far too many of us to-day. Remember that the Lord said first, He shall go in, and unless you do you will not be saved.

But then, further, if there have been, and continue to be, this unrestricted exercise through Christ of that sweet and silent life of solitary communion with Him, then there will follow upon that an enlargement of opportunity, and power for outward service such as nothing but emancipation by faith in Him can ever bring. Howsoever, by external circumstances, you and I may be hampered and hindered, however often we may feel that if something outside of us were different, the development of our active powers would be far more satisfactory, and we could do a great deal more in Christ's cause, the true hindrance lies never without, but within; and it is only to be overcome by that plunging into the depths of fellowship with Him. And then, if we carry with us into the field of work, whether it be the commonplace, dusty, tedious, and often repulsive duties of our monotonous business; or whether it be the field of more distinctly unselfish and Christian service--if we carry with us into all places where we go to labour, the sweet thought of His presence, of His example, of His love, and of the smile that may come on His face as the reward of faithful service, then we shall find that external labour, drawing its pattern, its motive, its law, and the power for its discharge, from communion with Him, is no more task-work nor slavery; and even the rough places will be made smooth, and the crooked things will be made straight, and distasteful work will be made at least tolerable, and hard burdens will be lightened, and the things that are seen and temporalwill shimmer into transparency, through which will shine out the things that are unseen and eternal.

Some of us are constitutionally made to prefer the one of these forms of Christian activity; some of us to prefer the other. The tendencies of this generation are far too much to the latter, to the exclusion of the former. It is hard to reconcile the conflicting claims, and I know of no better way to hit the just medium than by trying to keep ourselves always in touch with Jesus Christ, and then outward labour of any sort, whether for the bread that perishes or for His kingdom and righteousness, will never become so absorbing but that in it we may have our hearts in heaven, and the silent hour of communion with Him will never be so prolonged as to neglect outward duties. There was a demoniac boy in the plain, and therefore it was impossible to build tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration. But the disciples that had not climbed the Mount were all impotent to cast out the demoniac boy. We, if we keep near to Jesus Christ, will find that through Him we can go in and out, and in both be pursuing the one uniform purpose of serving and pleasing Him. So shall be fulfilled in our cases the Psalmist's prayer, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of ray life, to behold His beauty, and to inquire in His Temple.

**III. Lastly, in Jesus Christ any man may receive sustenance. They shall find pasture.**

The imagery of the sheep and the fold is still, of course, present to the Master's mind, and shapes the form in which this great promise is set forth.

I need only remind you, in illustration of it, of two facts, one, that in Jesus Christ Himself all the true needs of humanity are met and satisfied. He is the Bread of God that came down from heaven to give life to the world. Do I want an outward object for my intellect? I have it in Him. Does my heart feel with its tendrils, which have no eyes at the ends of them, after something round which it may twine, and not fear that the prop shall ever rot or be cut down or pulled up? Jesus Christ is the home of love in which the dove may fold its wings and be at rest. Do I want (and I do if I am not a fool) an absolute and authoritative command to be laid upon my will; some one whose looks enjoin, whose lightest words are spells? I find absolute authority, with no taint of tyranny, and no degradation to the subject, in that Infinite Will of His. Does my conscience need some strong detergent to be laid upon it which shall take out the stains that are most indurated, inveterate, and ingrained? I find it only in the blood that cleanseth from all sin. Do my aspirations and desires seek for some solid and substantial and unquestionable and imperishable good to which, reaching out, they may be sure that they are not anchoring on cloudland? Christ is our hope. For all this complicated and craving commonwealth that I carry within my soul, there is but one satisfaction, even Jesus Christ Himself. Nothing else nourishes the whole man at once, but in Him are all the constituents that the human system requires for its nutriment and its growth in every part. So in and through Christ we find pasture.

But beyond that, if we are knit to Him by simple and continual faith, love, and obedience, then what is else barrenness becomes full of nourishment, and the unsatisfying gifts of the world become rich and precious. They are nought when they are put first, they are much when they are put second.

I remember when I was in Australia seeing some wretched cattle trying to find grass on a yellow pasture where there was nothing but here and there a brown stalk that crumbled to dust in their mouths as they tried to eat it. That is the world without Jesus Christ. And I saw the same pasture six weeks after, when the rains had come, and the grass was high, rich, juicy, satisfying. That is what the world may be to you, if you will put it second, and seek first that your souls shall be fed on Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will what is else water be turned by His touch and blessing into wine that shall fill the great jars to the brim, and be pronounced by skilled palates to be the good wine. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be. There shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.