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

**JOHN-088**. **THE CONVICTING FACT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Of sin, because they believe not on Me; Of righteousness, because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged."*

*John 16:9-11*

Our Lord has just been telling His disciples how He will equip them, as His champions, for their conflict with the world. A divine Spirit is coming to them who will work in them and through them; and by their simple and unlettered testimony will convict, or convince, the mass of ungodly men of error and crime in regard to these three things--sin, righteousness, and judgment.

He now advances to tell them that this threefold conviction which they, as counsel for the prosecution, will establish as against the world at the bar, will be based upon three facts: first, a truth of experience; second, a truth of history; third, a truth of revelation, all three facts having reference to Jesus Christ and His relation to men.

Now these three facts are--the world's unbelief; Christ's ascension and session at the right hand of God; and the judgment of the prince of this world. If we remember that what our Lord is here speaking about is the work of a divine Spirit through the ministration of believing men, then Pentecost with its thousands pricked to the heart, and the Roman ruler who trembled, as the prisoner reasoned of righteousness and judgment to come, are illustrations of the way in which the humble disciples towered above the pride and strength of the world, and from criminals at its bar became its accusers.

These three facts are the staple and the strength of the Christian ministry. These three facts are misapprehended, and have failed to produce their right impression, unless they have driven home to our consciences and understandings the triple conviction of my text. And so I come to you with the simple questions which are all-important for each of us: Have you looked these three facts in the face--unbelief, the ascended Christ, a judged prince of the world, and have you learned their meaning as it bears on your own character and religious life?

**I. The first point here is the rejection of Jesus Christ as the climax of the world's sin.**

Strange words! They are in some respects the most striking instance of that gigantic self-assertion of our Lord, of which we have had occasion to see so many examples in these valedictory discourses. The world is full of all unrighteousness and wickedness, lust and immorality, intemperance, cruelty, hatred; all manner of buzzing evils that stink and sting around us. But Jesus Christ passes them all by and points to a mere negative thing, to an inward thing, to the attitude of men towards Himself; and He says, If you want to know what sin is, look at that!There is the worst of all sins. There is a typical instance of what sin is, in which, as in some anatomical preparation, you may see all its fibres straightened out and made visible. Look at that if you want to know what the world is, and what the world's sin is.

Some of us do not think that it is sin at all; and tell us that man is no more responsible for his belief than he is for the colour of his hair, and suchlike talk. Well, let me put a very plain question: What is it that a man turns away from when he turns away from Jesus Christ? The plainest, the loveliest, the loftiest, the perfectest revelation of God in His beauty and completeness that ever dawned, or ever will dawn upon creation. He rejects that. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from the loveliest human life that ever was, or will be, lived. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from a miracle of self-sacrificing love, which endured the Cross for enemies, and willingly embraced agony and shame and death for the sake of those who inflicted them upon Him. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from hands laden with, and offering him, the most precious and needful blessings that a poor soul on earth can desire or expect.

And if this be true, if unbelief in Jesus Christ be indeed all this that I have sketched out, another question arises, What does such an attitude and act indicate as to the rejector? He stands in the presence of the loveliest revelation of the divine nature and heart, and he sees no light in it. Why, but because he has blinded his eyes and cannot behold? He is incapable of seeing God manifest in the flesh, because he loves the darkness rather than the light. He turns away from the revelation of the loveliest and most self-sacrificing love. Why, but because he bears in himself a heart cased with brass and triple steel of selfishness, against the manifestation of love? He turns away from the offered hands heaped with the blessings that he needs. Why, but because he does not care for the gifts that are offered? Forgiveness, cleansing, purity a heaven which consists in the perfecting of all these, have no attractions for him. The fugitive Israelites in the wilderness said, We do not want your light, tasteless manna. It may do very well for angels, but we have been accustomed to garlic and onions down in Egypt. They smell strong, and there is some taste in them. Give us them. And so some of you say, The offer of pardon is of no use to me, for I am not troubled with my sin. The offer of purity has no attraction to me, for I rather like the dirt and wallowing in it. The offer of a heaven of your sort is but a dreary prospect to me. And so I turn away from the hands that offer precious things. The man who is blind to the God that beams, lambent and loving, upon him in the face of Jesus Christ--the man who has no stirrings of responsive gratitude for the great outpouring of love upon the Cross--the man who does not care for anything that Jesus Christ can give him, surely, in turning away, commits a real sin.

I do not deny, of course, that there may be intellectual difficulties cropping up in connection with the acceptance of the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, but as, on the one hand, I am free to admit that many a man may be putting a true trust in Christ which is joined with a very hesitant grasp of some of the things which, to me, are the very essence and heart of the Gospel; so, on the other side, I would have you remember that there is necessarily a moral quality in our attitude to all moral and religious truth; and that sin does not cease to be sin because its doer is a thinker or has systematised his rejection into a creed. Though it is not for us to measure motives and to peer into hearts, at the bottom there lies what Christ Himself put His finger on: Ye will not come to me that ye might have life.

Then, still further, let me remind you that our Lord here presents this fact of man's unbelief as being an instance in which we may see what the real nature of sin is. To use learned language, it is a typicalsin. In all other acts of sin you get the poison manipulated into various forms, associated with other elements, disguised more or less. But here, because it is purely an inward act having relation to Jesus Christ, and to God manifested in Him, and not done at the bidding of the animal nature, or of any of the other strong temptations and impulses which hurry men into gross and coarse forms of manifest transgression, you get sin in its essence. Belief in Christ is the surrender of myself. Sin is living to myself rather than to God. And there you touch the bottom. All those different kinds of sin, however unlike they may be to one another--the lust of the sensualist, the craft of the cheat, the lie of the deceitful, the passion of the unregulated man, the avarice of the miser--all of them have this one common root, a diseased and bloated regard to self. The definition of sin is,--living to myself and making myself my own centre. The definition of faith is,--making Christ my centre and living for Him. Therefore, if you want to know what is the sinfulness of sin, there it is. And if I may use such a word in such a connection, it is all packed away in its purest form in the act of rejecting that Lord.

Brother, it is no exaggeration to say that, when you have summoned up before you the ugliest forms of man's sins that you can fancy, this one overtops them all, because it presents in the simplest form the mother-tincture of all sins, which, variously coloured and perfumed and combined, makes the evil of them all. A heap of rotting, poisonous matter is offensive to many senses, but the colourless, scentless, tasteless drop has the poison in its most virulent form, and is not a bit less virulent, though it has been learnedly distilled and christened with a scientific name, and put into a dainty jewelled flask. This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. I lay that upon the hearts and consciences of some of my present hearers as the key to their rejection or disregard of Christ and His salvation.

**II. Now, secondly, notice the ascension of Jesus Christ as the pledge and the channel of the world's righteousness--Because I go to the Father, and ye see Me no more.**

He speaks as if the process of departure were already commenced. It had three stages--death, resurrection, ascension; but these three are all parts of the one departure. And so He says: Because, in the future, when ye go forth to preach in My name, I shall be there with the Father, having finished the work for which He sent Me; therefore you will convince the world of righteousness.

Now let me put that briefly in two forms. First of all, the fact of an ascended Christ is the guarantee and proof of His own complete fulfilment of the ideal of a righteous man. Or to put it into simpler words, suppose Jesus Christ is dead; suppose that He never rose from the grave; suppose that His bones mouldered in some sepulchre; suppose that there had been no ascension--would it be possible to believe that He was other than an ordinary man? And would it be possible to believe that, however beautiful these familiar records of His life, and however lovely the character which they reveal, there was really in Him no sin at all? A dead Christ means a Christ who, like the rest of us, had His limitations and His faults. But, on the other hand, if it be true that He sprang from the grave because it was not possible that He should be holden of it, and because in His nature there was no proclivity to death, since there had been no indulgence in sin; and if it be true that He ascended up on high because that was His native sphere, and He rose to it as naturally as the water in the valley will rise to the height of the hill from which it has descended, then we can see that God has set His seal upon that life by that resurrection and ascension; and as we gaze on Him swept up heavenward by His own calm power, a light falls backward upon all His earthly life, upon His claims to purity, and to union with the Father, and we say, Surely this was a perfectly righteous Man.

And further let me remind you that with the supernatural facts of our Lord's resurrection and ascension stands or falls the possibility of His communicating any of His righteousness to us sinful men. If there be no such possibility, what does Jesus Christ's beauty of character matter to me? Nothing! I shall have to stumble on as best I can, sometimes ashamed and rebuked, sometimes stimulated and sometimes reduced to despair, by looking at the record of His life. If He be lying dead in a forgotten grave, and hath not ascended up on high, then there can come from His history and past nothing other in kind, though, perhaps, a little more in degree, than comes from the history and the past of the beautiful and white souls that have sometimes lived in the world. He is a saint like them, He is a teacher like them, He is a prophet like some of them, and we have but to try our best to copy that marble purity and white righteousness. But if He hath ascended up on high, and sits there, wielding the forces of the universe, as we believe He does, then to Him belongs the divine prerogative of imparting His nature and His character to them that love Him. Then His righteousness is not a solitary, uncommunicative perfectness for Himself, but like a sun in the heavens, which streams out vivifying and enlightening rays to all that seek His face. If it be true that Christ has risen, then it is also true that you and I, convicted of sin, and learning our weakness and our faults, may come to Him, and by the exercise of that simple and yet omnipotent act of faith, may ally our incompleteness with His perfectness, our sin with His righteousness, our emptiness with His fullness, and may have all the grace and the beauty of Jesus Christ passing over into us to be the Spirit of life in us, making us free from the law of sin and death. If Christ be risen, His righteousness may be the world's; if Christ be not risen, His righteousness is useless to any but to Himself.

My brother, wed yourself to that dear Lord by faith in Him, and His righteousness will become yours, and you will be found in Him without spot and blameless, clothed with white raiment like His own, and sharing in the Throne which belongs to the righteous Christ.

**III. Lastly, notice the judgment of the world's prince as the prophecy of the judgment of the world.**

We are here upon ground which is only made known to us by the revelation of Scripture. We began with a fact of man's experience; we passed on to a fact of history; now we have a fact certified to us only on Christ's authority.

The world has a prince. That ill-omened and chaotic agglomeration of diverse forms of evil has yet a kind of anarchic order in it, and, like the fabled serpent's locks on the Gorgon head, they intertwine and sting one another, and yet they are a unity. We hear very little about the prince of the worldin Scripture. Mercifully the existence of such a being is not plainly revealed until the fact of Christ's victory over him is revealed. But however ludicrous mediaeval and vulgar superstitions may have made the notion, and however incredible the tremendous figure painted by the great Puritan poet has proved to be, there is nothing ridiculous, and nothing that we have the right to say is incredible, in the plain declarations that came from Christ's lips over and over again, that the world, the aggregate of ungodly men, has a prince.

And then my text tells us that that prince is judged. The Cross did that, as Jesus Christ over and over again indicates, sometimes in plain words, as Now is the judgment of this world, Now is the prince of this world cast out; sometimes in metaphor, as I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven, First bind the strong man and then spoil his house. We do not know how far-reaching the influences of the Cross may be, and what they may have done in those dark regions, but we know that since that Cross, the power of evil in the world has been broken in its centre, that God has been disclosed, that new forces have been lodged in the heart of humanity, which only need to be developed in order to overcome the evil. We know that since that auspicious day when He spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly and leading them in triumph, even when He was nailed upon the Cross, the history of the world has been the judgment of the world. Hoary iniquities have toppled into the ceaseless washing sea of divine love which has struck against their bases. Ancient evils have vanished, and more are on the point of vanishing. A loftier morality, a higher notion of righteousness, a deeper conception of sin, new hopes for the world and for men, have dawned upon mankind; and the prince of the world is led bound, as it were, at the victorious chariot wheels. The central fortress has been captured, and the rest is an affair of outposts.

My text has for its last word this--the prince's judgment prophesies the world's future judgment. The process which began when Jesus Christ died has for its consummation the divine condemnation of all the evil that still afflicts humanity, and its deprivation of authority and power to injure. A final judgment will come, and that it will is manifested by the fact that Christ, when He came in the form of a servant and died upon the Cross, judged the prince. When He comes in the form of a King on the great White Throne He will judge the world which He has delivered from its prince.

That thought, my brother, ought to be a hope to us all. Are you glad when you think that there is a day of judgment coming? Does your heart leap up when you realise the fact that the righteousness, which is in the heavens, is sure to conquer and coerce and secure under the hatches the sin that is riding rampant through the world? It was a joy and a hope to men who did not know half as much of the divine love and the divine righteousness as we do. They called upon the rocks and the hills to rejoice, and the trees of the forest to clap their hands before the Lord, for He cometh to judge the world. Does your heart throb a glad Amen to that?

It ought to be a hope; it is a fear; and there are some of us who do not like to have the conviction driven home to us, that the end of the strife between sin and righteousness is that Jesus Christ shall judge the world and take unto Himself His eternal kingdom.

But, my friends, hope or fear, it is a fact, as certain in the future, as the Cross is sure in the past, or the Throne in the present. Let me ask you this question, the question which Christ has sent all His servants to ask--Have you loathed your sin? have you opened your heart to Christ's righteousness? If you have, when men's hearts are failing them for fear, and they call on the rocks and the hills to cover them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the Throne, you will have a song as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.