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

**JOHN-091**. **SORROW TURNED INTO JOY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now, therefore, have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."*

*John 16:20-22*

These words, to which we have come in the ordinary course of our exposition, make an appropriate text for Easter Sunday. For their one theme is the joy which began upon that day, and was continued in increasing measure as the possession of Christ's servants after Pentecost. Our Lord promises that the momentary sadness and pain shall be turned into a swift and continual joy. He pledges His word for that, and bids us believe it on His bare word. He illustrates it by that tender and beautiful image which, in the pains and bliss of motherhood, finds an analogy for the pains and bliss of the disciples, inasmuch as, in both cases, pain leads directly to blessedness in which it is forgotten. And He crowns His great promises by explaining to us what is the deepest foundation of our truest gladness, I will see you again, and by declaring that such a joy is independent of all foes and all externals, and your joy no man taketh from you.

There are, then, two or three aspects of the Christian life as a glad life which are set before us in these words, and to which I ask your attention.

**I. There is, first, the promise of a joy which is a transformed sorrow.**

Your sorrow shall be turned into joy, not merely that the one emotion is substituted for the other, but that the one emotion, as it were, becomes the other. This can only mean that that, which was the cause of the one, reverses its action and becomes the cause of the opposite. Of course the historical and immediate fulfilment of these words lies in the double result of Christ's Cross upon His servants. For part of three dreary days it was the occasion of their sorrow, their panic, their despair; and then, all at once, when with a bound the mighty fact of the resurrection dawned upon them, that which had been the occasion for their deep grief, for their apparently hopeless despair, suddenly became the occasion for a rapture beyond their dreams, and a joy which would never pass. The Cross of Christ, which for some few hours was pain, and all but ruin, has ever since been the centre of the deepest gladness and confidence of a thousand generations.

I do not need to remind you, I suppose, of the value, as a piece of evidence of the historical veracity of the Gospel story, of this sudden change and complete revolution in the sentiments and emotions of that handful of disciples. What was it that lifted them out of the pit? What was it that revolutionised in a moment their notions of the Cross and of its bearing upon them? What was it that changed downhearted, despondent, and all but apostate, disciples into heroes and martyrs? It was the one fact which Christendom commemorates to-day: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was the element, added to the dark potion, which changed it all in a moment into golden flashing light. The resurrection was what made the death of Christ no longer the occasion for the dispersion of His disciples, but bound them to Him with a closer bond. And I venture to say that, unless the first disciples were lunatics, there is no explanation of the changes through which they passed in some eight-and-forty hours, except the supernatural and miraculous fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That set a light to the thick column of smoke, and made it blaze up a pillar of fire. That changed sorrow into joy. The same death which, before the resurrection, drew a pall of darkness over the heavens, and draped the earth in mourning, by reason of that resurrection which swept away the cloud and brought out the sunshine, became the source of joy. A dead Christ was the Church's despair; a dead and risen Christ is the Church's triumph, because He is the Christ that died... and is alive for evermore.

But, more generally, let me remind you how this very same principle, which applies directly and historically to the resurrection of our Lord, may be legitimately expanded so as to cover the whole ground of devout men's sorrows and calamities. Sorrow is the first stage, of which the second and completed stage is transformation into joy. Every thundercloud has a rainbow lying in its depths when the sun smites upon it. Our purest and noblest joys are transformed sorrows. The sorrow of contrite hearts becomes the gladness of pardoned children; the sorrow of bereaved, empty hearts may become the gladness of hearts filled with God; and every grief that stoops upon our path may be, and will be, if we keep near that dear Lord, changed into its own opposite, and become the source of blessedness else unattainable. Every stroke of the bright, sharp ploughshare that goes through the fallow ground, and every dark winter's day of pulverising frost and lashing tempest and howling wind, are represented in the broad acres, waving with the golden grain. All your griefs and mine, brother, if we carry them to the Master, will flash up into gladness and be "turned into joy."

**II. Still further, another aspect here of the glad life of the true Christian is, that it is a joy founded upon the consciousness that Christ's eye is upon us.**

I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice. In other parts of these closing discourses the form of the promise is the converse of this, as for instance--Yet a little while, and ye shall see Me. Here Christ lays hold of the thought by the other handle, and says, I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice. Now these two forms of putting the same mutual relationship, of course, agree, in that they both of them suggest, as the true foundation of the blessedness which they promise, the fact of communion with a present Lord. But they differ from one another in colouring, and in the emphasis which they place upon the two parts of that communion. Ye shall see Mefixes attention upon us and our perception of Him. I will see youfixes attention rather upon Him and His beholding of us. Ye shall see Mespeaks of our going out after Him and being satisfied in Him. I will see youspeaks of His perfect knowledge, of His loving care, of His tender, compassionate, complacent, ever-watchful eye resting upon us, in order that He may communicate to us all needful good.

And so it requires a loving heart on our part, in order to find joy in such a promise. His eyes are as a flame of fire, and He sees all men; but unless our hearts cleave to Him and we know ourselves to be knit to Him by the tender bond of love from Him, accepted and treasured in our souls, then I will see you againis a threat and not a promise. It depends upon the relation which we bear to Him, whether it is blessedness or misery to think that He whose flaming eye reads all men's sins and pierces through all hypocrisies and veils has it fixed upon us. The sevenfold utterance of His words to the Asiatic churches-the last recorded words of Jesus Christ-begins with I know thy works. It was no joy to the lukewarm professors at Laodicea, nor to the church at Ephesus which had lost the freshness of its early love, that the Master knew them; but to the faithful souls in Philadelphia, and to the few in Sardis, who had not defiled their garments, it was blessedness and life to feel that they walked in the sunshine of His face.

Is there any joy to us in the thought that the Lord Christ sees us? Oh! if our hearts are really His, if our lives are as truly built on Him as our profession of being Christians alleges that they are, then all that we need for the satisfaction of our nature, for the supply of our various necessities, or as an armour against temptation, and an amulet against sorrow, will be given to us, in the belief that His eye is fixed upon us. There is the foundation of the truest joy for men. There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart more than in the time when their corn and their wine abound. One look towards Christ will more than repay and abolish earth's sorrow. One look from Christ will fill our hearts with sunshine. All tears are dried on eyes that meet His. Loving hearts find their heaven in looking into one another's faces, and if Christ be our love, our deepest and purest joys will be found in His glance and our answering gaze.

If one could anyhow take a bit of the Arctic world and float it down into the tropics, the ice would all melt, and the white dreariness would disappear, and a new splendour of colour and of light would clothe the ground, and an unwonted vegetation would spring up where barrenness had been. And if you and I will only float our lives southward beneath the direct vertical rays of that great Sun of Righteousness, then all the dreary winter and ice of our sorrows will melt, and joy will spring. Brother! the Christian life is a glad life, because Christ, the infinite and incarnate Lover of our souls, looks upon the heart that loves and trusts Him.

**III. Still further, note how our Lord here sets forth His disciples joy as beyond the reach of violence and independent of externals.**

No man taketh it from you. Of course, that refers primarily to the opposition and actual hostility of the persecuting world, which that handful of frightened men were very soon to face; and our Lord assures them here that, whatsoever the power of the devil working through the world may be able to filch away from them, it cannot filch away the joy that He gives. But we may extend the meaning beyond that reference.

Much of our joy, of course, depends upon our fellows, and disappears when they fade away from our sight and we struggle along in a solitude, made the more dreary because of remembered companionship. And much of our joy depends upon the goodwill and help of our fellows, and they can snatch away all that so depends. They can hedge up our road and make it uncomfortable and sad for us in many ways, but no man but myself can put a roof over my head to shut me out from God and Christ; and as long as I have a clear sky overhead, it matters very little how high may be the walls that foes or hostile circumstances pile around me, and how close they may press upon me. And much of our joy necessarily depends upon and fluctuates with external circumstances of a hundred different kinds, as we all only too well know. But we do not need to have all our joy fed from these surface springs. We may dig deeper down if we like. If we are Christians, we have, like some beleaguered garrison in a fortress, a well in the courtyard that nobody can get at, and which never can run dry. Your joy no man taketh from you.

As long as we have Christ, we cannot be desolate. If He and I were alone in the universe, or, paradoxical as it may sound, if He and I were alone, and the universe were not, I should have all that I needed and my joy would be full, if I loved Him as I ought to do.

So, my brother! let us see to it that we dig deep enough for the foundation of our blessedness, and that it is on Christ and nothing less infinite, less eternal, less unchangeable, that we repose for the inward blessedness which nothing outside of us can touch. That is the blessedness which we may all possess, For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate usfrom the eye and the heart of the risen Christ who lives for us. But remember, though externals have no power to rob us of our joy, they have a very formidable power to interfere with the cultivation of that faith, which is the essential condition of our joy. They cannot force us away from Christ, but they may tempt us away. The sunshine did for the traveller in the old fable what the storm could not do; and the world may cause you to think so much about it that you forget your Master. Its joys may compel Him to hide His face, and may so fill your eyes that you do not care to look at His face; and so the sweet bond may be broken, and the consciousness of a living, loving Jesus may fade, and become filmy and unsubstantial, and occasional and interrupted. Do you see to it that what the world cannot do by violence and directly, it does not do by its harlot kisses and its false promises, tempting you away from the paths where alone you can meet your Master.

**IV. Lastly, note that this life of joy, which our Lord here speaks of, is made certain by the promise of a faithful Christ.**

Verily, verily, I say unto you,--He was accustomed to use that impressive and solemn formula, when He was about to speak words beyond the reach of human wisdom to discover, or of prime importance for men to accept and believe. He tells these men, who had nothing but His bare word to rely upon, that the astonishing thing which He is going to promise them will certainly come to pass. He would encourage them to rest an unfaltering confidence, for the brief parenthesis of sorrow, upon His faithful promise of joy. He puts His own character, so to speak, in pawn. His words are precisely equivalent in meaning to the solemn Old Testament words which are represented as being the oath of God, As I live saith the Lord, You may be as sure of this thing as you are of My divine existence, for all My divine Being is pledged to you to bring it about. Verily, verily, I say unto you, You may be as sure of this thing as you are of Me, for all that I am is pledged to fulfil the words of My lips.

So Christ puts His whole truthfulness at stake, as it were; and if any man who has ever loved Jesus Christ and trusted Him aright has not found this joy unspeakable and full of glory, then Jesus Christ has said the thing that is not.

Then why is it that so many professing Christians have such joyless lives as they have? Simply because they do not keep the conditions. If we will love Him so as to set our hearts upon Him, if we will desire Him as our chief good, if we will keep our eyes fixed upon Him, then, as sure as He is living and is the Truth, He will flood our hearts with blessedness, and His joy will pour into our souls as the flashing tide rushes into some muddy and melancholy harbour, and sets everything dancing that was lying stranded on the slime. If, my brother, you, a professing Christian, know but little of this joy, why, then, it is your fault, and not His. The joyless lives of so many who say that they are His disciples cast no shadow of suspicion upon His veracity, but they do cast a very deep shadow of doubt upon their profession of faith in Him.

Is your religion joyful? Is your joy religious? The two questions go together. And if we cannot answer these questions in the light of God's eye as we ought to do, let these great promises and my text prick us into holier living, into more consistent Christian character, and a closer walk with our Master and Lord.

The out-and-out Christian is a joyful Christian. The half-and-half Christian is the kind of Christian that a great many of you are--little acquainted with the joy of the Lord. Why should we live half way up the hill and swathed in mists, when we might have an unclouded sky and a visible sun over our heads, if we would only climb higher and walk in the light of His face?