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

**JOHN-092**. **IN THAT DAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And in that day ye shall ask Me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full."*

*John 16:23-24*

Our Lord here sums up the prerogatives and privileges of His servants in the day that was about to dawn and to last till He came again. There is nothing absolutely new in the words; substantially the promises contained in them have appeared in former parts of these discourses under somewhat different aspects and connections. But our Lord brings them together here, in this condensed repetition, in order that the scattered rays, being thus focussed, may have more power to illuminate with certitude, and to warm into hope. Ye shall ask Me nothing.... Ask and ye shall receive.... Your joy shall be full. These are the jewels which He sets in a cluster, the juxtaposition making each brighter, and gives to us for a parting keepsake.

Now it is to be noticed that the two askings which are spoken of here are expressed by different words in the Greek. Our English word askmeans two things, either to question or to request; to ask in the sense of interrogating, in order to get information and teaching, or in the sense of beseeching, in order to get gifts. In the former sense the word is employed in the first clause of my text, with distinct reference to the disciplesdesire, a moment or two before, to ask Him a very foolish question; and in the second sense it is employed in the central portion of my text.

So, then, there are three things here as the marks of the Christian life all through the ages: the cessation of the ignorant questions addressed to a present Christ; the satisfaction of desires; and the perfecting of joy. These are the characteristics of a true Christian life. My brother, are they in any degree the characteristics of yours?

**I. Note then, first, the end of questionings.**

In that day ye shall ask Me nothing, and do not you think that when the disciples heard that, they would be tempted to say, Then what in all the world are we to do?To them the thought that He was not to be at their sides any longer, for them to go to with their difficulties, must have seemed despair rather than advance; but in Christ's eyes it was progress. He tells them and us that we gain by losing Him, and are better off than they were, precisely because He does not any longer stand at our sides for us to question. It is better for a boy to puzzle out the meaning of a Latin book by his own brains and the help of a dictionary than it is lazily to use an interlinear translation. And, though we do not always feel it, and are often tempted to think how blessed it would be if we had an infallible Teacher visible here at our sides, it is a great deal better for us that we have not, and it is a step in advance that He has gone away. Many eager and honest Christian souls, hungering after certainty and rest, have cast themselves in these latter days into the arms of an infallible Church. I doubt whether any such questioning mind has found what it sought; and I am sure that it has taken a step downwards, in passing from the spiritual guidance realised by our own honest industry and earnest use of the materials supplied to us in Christ's word, to any external authority which comes to us to save us the trouble of thinking, and to confirm to us truth which we have not made our own by search and effort. We gain by losing the visible Christ; and He was proclaiming progress and not retrogression, when He said: In that day ye shall ask Me no more questions.

For what have we instead? We have two things: a completed revelation, and an inward Teacher.

We have a completed revelation. Great and wonderful and unspeakably precious as were and are the words of Jesus Christ, His deeds are far more. The death of Christ has told us things that Christ before His death could not tell. The resurrection of Christ has cast light upon all the darkest places of man's destiny which Christ, before His resurrection, could not by any words so illuminate. The ascension of Christ has opened doors for thought, for faith, for hope, which were fast closed, notwithstanding all His teachings, until He had burst them asunder and passed to His throne. And the facts which are substituted for the bodily presence of Jesus with His disciples tell us a great deal more than they could ever have drawn from Him by questionings, however persistent and however wisely directed. We have a completed revelation, and therefore we need ask Him nothing.

And we have a divine Spirit that will come to us if we will, and teach us by means of blessing the exercise of our own faculties, and guiding us, not, indeed, into the uniform perception of the intellectual aspects of Christian truth, but into the apprehension and the loving possession, as a power in our lives, of all the truth that we need to mould our characters and to raise us to the likeness of Himself.

Only, brother! let us remember what such a method of teaching demands from us. It needs that we honestly use the revelation that is given us; it needs that we loyally, lovingly, trustfully, submit ourselves to the teaching of that Spirit who will dwell in us; it needs that we bring our lives up to the height of our present knowledge, and make everything that we know a factor in shaping what we do and what we are. If thus we will to do His will, we shall know of the doctrine; if thus we yield ourselves to the divine Spirit, we shall be taught the practical bearings of all essential truth; and if thus we ponder the facts and principles that are enshrined in Christ's life, and the Apostolic commentary on them, as preserved for us in the Scripture, we shall not need to envy those that could go to Him with their questions, for He will come to us with His all-satisfying answers.

Ah! but you say experience does not verify these promises. Look at a divided Christendom; look at my own difficulties of knowing what I am to believe and to think. Well, as for a divided Christendom, saintly souls are all of one Church, and however they may formulate the intellectual aspects of their creed, when they come to pray, they say the same things. Roman Catholic and Protestant, and Quaker and Churchman, and Calvinist and Arminian, and Greek and Latin Christians--all contribute to the hymn-book of every sect; and we all sing their songs. So the divisions are like the surface cracks on a dry field, and a few inches down there is continuity. As for the difficulty of knowing what I am to believe and think about controverted questions, no doubt there will remain many gaps in the circle of our knowledge; no doubt there will be much left obscure and unanswered; but if we will keep ourselves near the Master, and use honestly and diligently the helps that He gives us--the outward help in the Word, and the inward help in His teaching Spirit--we shall not walk in darkness, but shall have light enough given to be to us the Light of Life.

Brother, keep close to Christ, and Christ--present though absent-- will teach you.

**II. Secondly, satisfied desires.**

This second great promise of my text, introduced again by the solemn affirmation, Verily, verily, I say unto you, substantially appeared in a former part of these discourses with a very significant difference. Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name that will I do. If ye shall ask anything in My name I will do it. There Christ presented Himself as the Answerer of the petitions, because His more immediate purpose was to set forth His going to the Father as His elevation to a yet loftier position. Here, on the other hand, He sets forth the Father as the Answerer of the petitions, because His purpose is to point away from undue dependence on His own corporeal presence. But the fact that He thus, as occasion requires, substitutes the one form of speech for the other, and indifferently represents the same actions as being done by Himself and by the Father in heaven, carries with it large teachings which I do not dwell upon now. Only I would ask you to consider how much is involved in that fact, that, as a matter of course, and without explanation of the difference, our Lord alternates the two forms, and sometimes says, I will do it, and sometimes says, The Father will do it. Does it not point to that great and blessed truth, Whatsoever thing the Father doeth, that also doeth the Son likewise?

But passing from that, let me ask you to note very carefully the limitation, which is here given to the broad universality of the declaration that desires shall be satisfied. If ye shall ask anything in My name; there is the definition of Christian prayer. And what does it mean? Is a prayer, which from the beginning to the end is reeking with self-will, hallowed because we say, as a kind of charm at the end of it, For Christ's sake. Amen? Is that praying in Christ's name? Surely not! What is the nameof Christ? His whole revealed character. So these disciples could not pray in His name hitherto, because His character was not all revealed. Therefore, to pray in His name is to pray, recognising what He is, as revealed in His life and death and resurrection and ascension, and to base all our dependence of acceptance of our prayers upon that revealed character. Is that all? Are any kind of wishes, which are presented in dependence upon Christ as our only Hope and Channel of divine blessing, certain to be fulfilled? Certainly not. To pray in My namemeans yet more than that. It means not only to pray in dependence upon Christ as our only Ground of hope and Source of acceptance and God's only Channel of blessing, but it means exactly what the same phrase means when it is applied to us. If I say that I am doing something in your name, that means on your behalf, as your representative, as your organ, and to express your mind and will. And if we pray in Christ's name, that implies, not only our dependence upon His merit and work, but also the harmony of our wills with His will, and that our requests are not merely the hot products of our own selfishness, but are the calm issues of communion with Him. Thus to pray requires the suppression of self. Heathen prayer, if there be such a thing, is the violent effort to make God will what I wish. Christian prayer is the submissive effort to make my wish what God wills, and that is to pray in Christ's name.

My brother! do we construct our prayers thus? Do we try to bring our desires into harmony with Him, before we venture to express them? Do we go to His footstool to pour out petulant, blind, passionate, un-sanctified wishes after questionable and contingent good, or do we wait until He fills our spirits with longings after what it must be His desire to give, and then breathe out those desires caught from His own heart, and echoing His own will? Ah! The discipline that is wanted to make men pray in Christ's name is little understood by multitudes amongst us.

Notice how certain such prayer is of being answered. Of course, if it is in harmony with the will of God, it is sure not to be offered in vain. Our Revised Version makes a slight alteration in the order of the words in the first clause of this promise by reading, If ye ask anything of the Father He will give it you in My name. God's gifts come down through the same channel through which our prayer goes up. We ask in the name of Christ, and get our answers in the name of Christ.

But, whether that be the true collocation of ideas or not, mark the plain principle here, that only desires which are in harmony with the divine will are sure of being satisfied. What is a bad thing for a child cannot be a good thing for a man. What is a foolish and wicked thing for a father down here to do cannot be a kind and a wise thing for the Father in the heavens to do. If you wish to spoil your child you say, What do you want, my dear? tell me and you shall have it. And if God were saying anything like that to us, through the lips of Jesus Christ His Son, in the text, it would be no blessing, but a curse. He knows a great deal better what is good for us; and so He says: Bring your wishes into line with My purpose, and then you will get them; Delight thyself in the Lord, and He will give thee the desires of thine heart. If you want God most you will be sure to get Him; if your heart's desires are after Him, your heart's desires will be satisfied. The young lions do roar and suffer hunger. That is the world's way of getting good; fighting and striving and snarling, and forcibly seeking to grasp, and there is hunger after all. There is a better way than that. Instead of striving and struggling to snatch and to keep a perishable and questionable portion, let us wait upon God and quiet our hearts, stilling them into the temper of communion and conformity with Him, and we shall not ask in vain.

He who prays in Christ's name must pray Christ's prayer, Not My will, but Thine be done. And then, though many wishes may be unanswered, and many weak petitions unfulfilled, and many desires unsatisfied, the essential spirit of the prayer will be answered, and, His will being done in us and on us, our wishes will acquiesce in it and desire nothing besides. To him who can thus pray in Christ's name in the deepest sense, and after Christ's pattern, every door in God's treasure-house flies open, and he may take as much of the treasure as he desires. The Master bends lovingly over such a soul, and looks him in the eyes, and with outstretched hand says, What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.

**III. Lastly, the perfect joy which follows upon these two.**

That your joy may be fulfilled. Again we have a recurrence of a promise that has appeared in another connection in an earlier part of this discourse; but the connection here is worthy of notice. The promise is of joy that comes from the satisfaction of meek desires in unison with Christ's will. Is it possible then, that, amidst all the ups and downs, the changes and the sorrows of this fluctuating, tempest-tossed life of ours we may have a deep and stable joy? That your joy may be full, says my text, or fulfilled, like some jewelled, golden cup charged to the very brim with rich and quickening wine, so that there is no room for a drop more. Can it be that ever, in this world, men shall be happy up to the very limits of their capacity? Was anybody ever so blessed that he could not be more so? Was your cup ever so full that there was no room for another drop in it? Jesus Christ says that it may be so, and He tells us how it may be so. Bring your desires into harmony with God's, and you will have none unsatisfied amongst them; and so you will be blessed to the full; and though sorrow comes, as of course it will come, still you may be blessed. There is no contradiction between the presence of this deep, central joy and a surface and circumference of sorrow. Rather we need the surrounding sorrow, to concentrate, and so to intensify, the central joy in God. There are some flowers which only blow in the night; and white blossoms are visible with startling plainness in the twilight, when all the flaunting purples and reds are hid. We do not know the depth, the preciousness, the power of the joy of the Lord, until we have felt it shining in our hearts in the midst of the thick darkness of earthly sorrow, and bringing life into the very death of our human delights. It may be ours on the conditions that my text describes.

My dear friends! there are only two courses before us. Either we must have a life with superficial, transitory, incomplete gladness, and an aching centre of vacuity and pain, or we may have a life which, in its outward aspects and superficial appearance, has much about it that is sad and trying, but down in the heart of it is calm and joyful. Which of the two do you deem best, a superficial gladness and a rooted sorrow, or a superficial sorrow and a central joy? Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness. But, on the other hand, the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.