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

**LUKE-022**. **JOHN'S DOUBT AND CHRIST'S PRAISE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"18. And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things. 19. And John calling unto him two of his disciples, sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou He that should come? or look we for another? 20. When the men were come unto Him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto Thee, saying, Art Thou He that should come? or look we for another? 21. And in the same hour He cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind He gave sight. 22. Then Jesus, answering, said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. 23. And blessed is be, whosoever shall not be offended in Me. 24. And when the messengers of John were departed, He began to speak unto the people concerning John. What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 25. But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings courts. 26. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. 27. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. 28. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*

*Luke 7:18-28*

We take three stages in this passage--the pathetic message from the prisoner, Christ's double answer to it, and His grand eulogium on John.

**I. The message from the prisoner.**

Had mists of doubt crept over John's clear conviction that Jesus was the Messiah? Some have thought it incredible that the man who had seen the descending dove, and heard the voice proclaiming This is My beloved Son, should ever have wavered. But surely our own experience of the effect of circumstances and moods on our firmest beliefs gives us parallels to John's doubts. A prison would be especially depressing to the desert-loving Baptist; compelled inaction would fret his spirit; he would be tempted to think that, if Jesus were indeed the Bridegroom, he might have spared a thought for the friend of the Bridegroom languishing in Machaerus. Above all, the kind of works that Jesus was doing did not fill the rôle of the Messiah as he had conceived it. Where were the winnowing fan, the axe laid to the roots of the trees, the consuming fire? This gentle friend of publicans and sinners was not what he had expected the One mightier than himself to be.

Probably his disciples went farther in doubting than he did, but his message was the expression of his own hesitations, as is suggested by the answer being directed to him, not to the disciples. It may have also been meant to stir Jesus, if He were indeed Messiah, to take to Himself His great power. But the most natural explanation of it is that John's faith was wavering. The tempest made the good ship stagger. But reeling faith stretched out a hand to Jesus, and sought to steady itself thereby. We shall not come to much harm if we carry our doubts as to Him to be cleared by Himself. John's gloomy prison thoughts may teach us how much our faith may be affected by externals and by changing tempers of mind, and how lenient, therefore, should be our judgments of many whose trust may falter when a strain comes. It may also teach us not to write bitter things against ourselves because of the ups and downs of our religious experience, but yet to seek to resist the impression that circumstances make on it, and to aim at keeping up an equable temperature, both in the summer of prosperity and the winter of sorrow.

**II. The twofold answer.**

Its first part was a repetition of the same kind of miracles, the news of which had evoked John's message; and its second part was simply the command to report these, with one additional fact--that good tidings were preached to the poor. That seemed an unsatisfactory reply, but it meant just this--to send John back to think over these deeds of gracious pity and love as well as of power, and to ask himself whether they were not the fit signs of the Messiah. It is to be noted that the words which Christ bids the disciples speak to their master would recall the prophecies in Isaiah xxxv. 5 and lxi. 1, and so would set John to revise his ideas of what prophecy had painted Messiah as being. The deepest meaning of the answer is that love, pity, healing, are the true signs, not judicial, retributive, destructive energy. John wanted the lightning; Christ told him that the silent sunshine exerts energy, to which the fiercest flash is weak. We need the lesson, for we are tempted to exalt force above love, if not in our thoughts of God, yet in looking at and dealing with men; and we are slow to apprehend the teaching of Bethlehem and Calvary, that the divinest thing in God, and the strongest power among men, is gentle, pitying, self-sacrificing love. Rebuke could not be softer than that which was sent to John in the form of a benediction. To take offence at Jesus, either because He is not what we expect Him to be, or for any other reason, is to shut oneself out from the sum of blessings which to accept Him brings with it.

**III. Christ's eulogium on John.**

How lovingly it was timed! The people had heard John's message and its answer, and might expect some disparaging remarks about his vacillation. But Jesus chooses that very time to lavish unstinted praise on him. That is praise indeed. The remembrance of the Jordan banks, where John had baptized, shapes the first question. The streams of people would not have poured out there to look at the tall reeds swaying in the breeze, nor to listen to a man who was like them. He who would rouse and guide others must have a firm will, and not be moved by any blast that blows. Men will rally round one who has a mind of his own and bravely speaks it, and who has a will of his own, and will not be warped out of his path. The undaunted boldness of John, of whom, as of John Knox, it might be said that he never feared the face of man, was part of the secret of his power. His imprisonment witnessed to it. He was no reed shaken by the wind, but like another prophet, was made an iron pillar, and brazen wallsto the whole house of Israel. But he had more than strength of character, he had noble disregard for worldly ease. Not silken robes, like courtiers', but a girdle of camelshair, not delicate food, but locusts and wild honey, were his. And that was another part of his power, as it must be, in one shape or other, of all who rouse men's consciences, and wake up generations rotting away in self-indulgence. John's fiery words would have had no effect if they had not poured hot from a life that despised luxury and soft ease. If a man is once suspected of having his heart set on material good, his usefulness as a Christian teacher is weakened, if not destroyed. But even these are not all, for Jesus goes on to attest that John was a prophet, and something even more; namely, the forerunner of the Messiah. As, in a royal progress, the nearer the king's chariot the higher the rank, and they who ride just in front of him are the chiefest, so John's proximity in order of time to Jesus distinguished him above those who had heralded him long ages ago. It is always true that, the closer we are to Him, the more truly great we are. The highest dignity is to be His messenger. We must not lose sight of the exalted place which Jesus by implication claims for Himself by such a thought, as well as by the quotation from Malachi, and by the alteration in it of the original Myand Meto Thyand Thee. He does not mean that John was the greatest man that ever lived, as the world counts greatness, but that in the one respect of relation to Him, and consequent nearness to the kingdom, he surpassed all.

The scale employed to determine greatness in this saying is position in regard to the kingdom, and while John is highest of those who (historically) were without it, because (historically) he was nearest to it, the least in it is greater than the greatest without. The spiritual standing of John and the devout men before him is not in question; it is their position towards the manifestation of the kingdom in time that is in view. We rejoice to believe that John and many a saint from early days were subjects of the King, and have been saved into His everlasting kingdom. But Jesus would have us think greatly of the privilege of living in the light of His coming, and of being permitted by faith to enter His kingdom. The lowliest believer knows more, and possesses a fuller life born of the Spirit, than the greatest born of woman, who has not received that new birth from above.