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

**LUKE-038**. **IN THE HOLY MOUNT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"30. And, behold, there talked with Him two men, which were Moses and Elias: 31. Who appeared in glory, and spake of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem."*

*Luke 9:30-31*

The mysterious incident which is commonly called the Transfiguration contained three distinct portions, each having its own special significance and lesson. The first was that supernatural change in the face and garments of our Lord from which the whole incident derives its name. The second was the appearance by His side of these two mighty dead participating in the strange lustre in which He walked, and communing with Him of His death. And the last was the descent of the bright cloud, visible as bright even amidst the blazing sunshine on the lone hillside, and the mysterious attesting Voice that spoke from out of its depths.

I leave untouched altogether the first and the last of these three portions, and desire briefly to fix our attention on this central one. Now it is to be observed that whilst all the three Synoptic Evangelists tell us of the Transfiguration, of the appearance of Moses and Elias, and of the Cloud and the Voice, only Luke knows, or at least records, and therefore alone probably knows, what it was that they spoke of. Peter and James and John, the only human witnesses, were lying dazed and drunken with sleep, whilst Christ's countenance was changed; and during all the earlier portion at all events of His converse with Moses and Elias. And it was only when these were about to depart that the mortals awoke from their slumber. So they probably neither heard the voices nor knew their theme, and it was reserved for this Evangelist to tell us the precious truth that the thing about which Lawgiver, Prophet, and the Greater than both spake in that mysterious communion was none other than the Cross.

I think, then, that if we look at this incident from the point of view which our Evangelist enables us to take, we shall get large and important lessons as to the significance of the death of Jesus Christ, in many aspects, and in reference to very many different persons. I see at least four of these. This incident teaches us what Christ's death was to Himself; what it was in reference to previous revelation; what it was in reference to past generations; and what it may be in reference to His servantsdeath. And upon these four points I desire briefly to touch now.

**I. First, then, I see here teaching as to what the death of the Lord Jesus Christ was in reference to Himself.**

What was it that brought these men--the one who had passed in a whirlwind to heaven, and the other who had been led by a mysterious death to slumber in an unknown grave--what was it that brought these men to stand there upon the side of the slopes of Hermon? It was not to teach Christ of the impending Cross. For, not to touch upon other points, eight days before this mysterious interview He had foretold it in the minutest details to His disciples. It was not for the sake of Peter and James and John, lying coiled in slumber there, that they broke the bands of death, and came back from that bourne from which no traveller returns, but it was for Christ, or for themselves, or perhaps for both, that they stood there.

You remember that in Gethsemane there appeared an angel from heaven strengthening Him. And one of the old devout painters has marvellously embraced the deepest meaning of that vision when he has painted for us the strengthening angel displaying in the heavens the Cross on which He must die, as if the holding of it up before Him as the divine will gave the strength that He needed. And I think in some analogous way we are to regard the mission and message to Jesus of these two men in our text. We know that clear before Him, all His life long, there stood the certainty of the Cross. We know that He came, not merely to teach, to minister, to bless, to guide, but that He came to give His life a ransom for many. But we know, too, that from about this point of time in His life the Cross stood more distinctly, if that may be, before Him; or at all events, that it pressed more upon His vision and upon His spirit. And doubtless after that time when He spoke to the disciples so plainly and clearly of what was coming upon Him, His human nature needed the retirement of the mountain-side and prayer which preceded and occasioned this mysterious incident. Christ shrank from His Cross with sinless, natural, human shrinking of the flesh. That never altered His purpose nor shook His will, but He needed, and He got, strength from the Father, ministered once by an angel from heaven, and ministered, as I suppose, another time by two men who looked at death from the other side, and who spoke to Him of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.

And now it is to be noticed that the words which our Evangelist employs are remarkable, and one of them, at least, is all but unique. The expression translated in my text deceaseis the same Greek word which, untranslated, names the second book of the Old Testament--Exodus. And it literally means neither more nor less than a departure or going out. It is only employed in this one passage and in another one to which I shall have occasion to refer presently, which is evidently based and moulded upon this one, to signify death. And the employment of it, perhaps upon these undying tongues of the sainted dead--or, at all events, in reference to the subject of their colloquy--seems to us to suggest that part of what they had to say to the Master and what they had to hear from Him was that His death was His departure in an altogether unique, solitary, and blessed sense. I came forth from the Father, and I am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father. Not dragged by any necessity, but of His own sovereign will, He passes from earth to the state where He was before. And as He stands there on the mountain with His radiant face and His white robes, this thought as to His death brings to Him comfort and strength, even whilst He thinks of the suffering of the Cross.

But, still further, the other word which is here employed helps us to understand what our Lord's death was to Him; He should accomplishit as a thing to be fulfilled. And that involves two ideas, the one that Christ in His death was consciously submitting to a gladly accepted divine must, and was accomplishing the purpose of Love which dwelt in the heavens and sent Him, as well as His own purpose of love which would redeem and save. The necessity of the death of Christ if sin is to be put away, if we are ever to have a hope of immortality, the necessity of the death of Christ if the mercy of God is to pour out upon a sinful and rebellious world, the necessity of the death of Christ, if the deep purposes of the divine heart are ever to be realised, and the yearning compassion of the Saviour's soul is ever to reach its purpose--all lie in that great word that His deceasewas by Him to be accomplished. This is the fulfilling of the heart of God, this is the fulfilling of the compassion of the Christ. It is the accomplishment of the divine purpose from eternity.

Still further, the word, as I think, suggests another kind of fulfilment. He was to accomplishHis death. That is to say, every drop of that bitter cup, drop by drop, bitterness by bitterness, pang by pang, desolation by desolation, He was to drink; and He drank it. Every step of that road sown with ploughshares and live coals He was to tread, with bleeding, blistered, slow, unshrinking feet. And He trod it. He accomplished it; hurrying over none of the sorrow, perfunctorily doing none of the tasks. And after the weary moments had ticked themselves away, and the six hours of agony, when the minutes were as drops of blood falling slowly to the ground, were passed, He inverted the cup, and it was empty, and He said It is finished; and He gave up the ghost, having accomplished His decease in Jerusalem.

**II. Further, note in this incident what that death is in regard to previous revelation.**

I need not remind you, I suppose, that we have here the two great representative figures of the past history of Israel--the Lawgiver, who, according to the Old Testament, was not only the medium of declaring the divine will, but the medium of establishing Sacrifice as well as Law, and the Prophet, who, though no written words of his have been preserved, and nothing of a predictive and Messianic character seems to have dropped from His lips, yet stood as the representative and head of the great prophetic order to which so much of the earlier revelation was entrusted. And now here they two stand with Christ on the mountain; and the theme about which they spake with Him there is the theme of which the former revelation had spoken in type and shadow, in stammering words, at sundry times and in divers manners, to the former generations--viz. the coming of the great Sacrifice and the offering of the great Propitiation. All the past of Israel pointed onwards to the Cross, and in that Cross its highest word was transcended, its faintest emblems were explained and expressed, its unsolved problems which it had raised in order that they might be felt to be unsolved, were all answered, and that which had been set forth but in shadow and symbol was given to the world in reality for evermore. In Moses Law and Sacrifice, and in Elijah the prophetic function, met by the side of Christ, and spake of His decease.

Now, dear friends, let me say one word here before I pass on. There is a great deal being said nowadays about the position of the Old Testament, the origin of its ritual, and other critical, and, to some extent, historical, questions. I have no doubt that we have much to learn upon these subjects; but what I would now insist upon is this, that all these subjects, about which people are getting so excited, and some of them so angry, stand, and may be dealt with, altogether apart from this central thought, that the purpose and meaning, the end and object of the whole preliminary and progressive revelation of God from the beginning, are to lead straight up to Jesus Christ and to His Cross. And if we understand that, and feel that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, and that law and sacrifice, commandments and altar, Sinai and Zion, the fiery words that were spoken in the wilderness, and the perpetual burnt-offering that went up in the Temple, had one mission--viz. to prepare the way of the Lord--we have grasped the essential truth as to the Old Revelation; and if we do not understand that, we may be as scholarly and erudite and original as we please, but we miss the one truth which is worth grasping. The relation between the Old revelation and the New is this, that Christ was pointed to by it all, and that in Himself He sums up and surpasses and antiquates, because He fulfils, all the past.

Therefore Moses and Elijah came to witness as well as to encourage. Their presence proclaimed that Christ was the meaning of all the past, and the crown of the divine revelation. And they faded away, and Jesus was found alone standing there, as He stands for ever before all generations and all lands, the sole, the perfect, the eternal Revealer of the heart and will of God. God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.

**III. Again, we have here set before us the death of Christ in its relation to past generations.**

I need not dwell upon anything that was mysterious or anomalous in the last moments upon earth of either Moses or Elijah. I do not suppose that there is any reference to the undoubted peculiarities which existed in the case of both. But they came from that dim region where the dead were waiting for the coming of the Saviour, and by some means, we know not how, were clothed with something that was like an immortal body, and capable of entering into this material universe. There they stood, witnesses that Christ's death was of interest to all those sleeping generations in the past. We know not anything, or scarcely anything, of the condition of the sainted dead who died before Christ came. But this is clear, that these two came from the land where silent expectancy had ruled, and came perhaps to carry back to their brethren the tidings that the hour was ready to strike, and that soon amongst them there would stand the Eternal Life.

But, be that as it may, does not that group on the mountain-side teach us this, that the Cross of Jesus Christ had a backward as well as a forward power, and that for all the generations who had died, not having received the promises, but having seen them and saluted them from afar, the influence of that Sacrifice had opened the gates of the Kingdom where they were gathered in hope, even as it opens for us, and all subsequent generations, the gates of the paradise of God?

I know not whether there be truth in the ancient idea that when the Master died He passed into that Hades where were assembled the disembodied spirits of the righteous dead, and led captivity captive, taking them with Him into a loftier Paradise. But this I am sure of, that Christ's Cross has always been the means and channel whereby forgiveness and hope and heaven have been given to men, and that the old dream of the devout painter which he has breathed upon the walls of the convent in Florence is true in spirit whatever it may be in letter, that the Christ who died went down into the dark regions, burst the bars and broke the gates of iron, and crushed the demon porter beneath the shattered portal, and that out of the dark rock-hewn caverns there came streaming the crowds of the sainted dead, with Adam at their head, and many another who had seen His day afar off and been glad, stretching out eager hands to grasp the life-giving hand of the Redeemer that had come to them too.

Moses and Elias were the first-fruits of them that slept, and there were others, when the bodies of the saints rose from the grave and appeared in the Holy City unto many. And their presence, and the presence of these two there, typified for us the great fact that the Cross of Christ is the redemption of pre-Christian as well as of Christian ages; and that He is the Lord both of the dead and of the living.

**IV. And so, lastly, this incident may suggest also what that death of Jesus Christ may be in reference to the deaths of His servants.**

I do not find that thought in the words of our text, but in the reference to them which is made in the second epistle attributed to Peter, who was present at the Transfiguration. There is a very remarkable passage in that Epistle, in the context of which there are distinct verbal allusions to the narrative of the Transfiguration, and in it the writer employs the same word to describe his own death which is employed here. It is the only other instance in Scripture of its use in that sense. And so I draw this simple lesson; that mighty death which was accomplished upon Calvary, which is the crown and summit of all Revelation, beyond which God has nothing that He can say or do to make men sure of His heart and recipients of forgiveness, which was the channel of pardon for all past ages, and the hope of the sainted dead--that death may turn for us our departure into its own likeness. For us, too, all the grimness, all the darkness, all the terror, may pass away, and it may become simply a change of place, and a going home to God. If we believe that Jesus died, we believe that He has thereby smoothed and softened and lessened our death into a sleep in Him.

Nor need we forget the special meaning of the word. If we have set our hopes upon Christ, and, as sinful men and women, have cast the burden of our sins, and the weight of our salvation, on His strong arm, then life will be blessed, and death, when it comes, will be a true Exodus, the going out of the slaves from the land of bondage, and passing through the divided sea, not into a weary wilderness, but into the light of the love and the blessedness of the land where our Brother is King, and where we shall share His reign.

I have been speaking to you of what Christ's death is in many regions of the universe, in many eras of time. My brother, what is Christ's death to you? Can you say, The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me?