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

**LUKE-039**. **CHRIST HASTENING TO THE CROSS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And it came to pass, when the time was come that He should be received up, He stedfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem."*

*Luke 9:51*

There are some difficulties, with which I need not trouble you here, as to bringing the section of this Gospel to which these words are the introduction, into its proper chronological place in relation to the narratives; but, putting these on one side for the present, there seems no doubt that the Evangelist's intention here is to represent the beginning of our Lord's last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem--a journey which was protracted and devious, and the narrative of which in this Gospel, as you will perceive, occupies a very large portion of its whole contents.

The picture that is given in my text is that of a clear knowledge of what waited Him, of a steadfast resolve to accomplish the purpose of the divine love, and that resolve not without such a shrinking of some part of His nature that He had to set His face to go to Jerusalem.

The words come into parallelism very strikingly with a great prophecy of the Messiah in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where we read, The Lord God will help me, therefore shall I not be confounded--or, as the words have been rendered, shall not suffer myself to be overcome by mockery--therefore have I set my face like a flint. In the words both of the Prophet and of the Evangelist there is the same idea of a resolved will, as the result of a conscious effort directed to prevent circumstances which tended to draw Him back, from producing their effect. The graphic narrative of the Evangelist Mark adds one more striking point to that picture of high resolve. He tells us, speaking of what appears to be the final epoch in this long journey to the Cross, They were in the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went before them; and they were amazed: and as they followed, they were afraid. What a picture that is, Christ striding along the steep mountain path far in advance--impelled by that same longing which sighs so wonderfully in His words, How am I straitened till it be accomplished,--with solemn determination in the gentle face, and His feet making haste to run in the way of the Father's commandments! And lagging behind, the little group, awed into almost stupor, and shrinking in uncomprehending terror from that light of unconquerable resolve and more than mortal heroism that blazed in His eyes!

If we fix, then, on this picture, and as we are warranted in doing, regard it as giving us a glimpse of the very heart of Christ, I think it may well suggest to us considerations that may tend to make more real to us that sacrifice that He made, more deep to us that love by which He was impelled, and may perhaps tend to make our love more true and our resolve more fixed. He set His face to go to Jerusalem.

**I. First, then, we may take, I think, from these words, the thought of the perfect clearness with which all through Christ's life He foresaw the inevitable and purposed end.**

Here, indeed, the Evangelist leaps over the suffering of the Cross, and thinks only of the time when He shall be lifted up upon the throne; but in that calm and certain prevision which, in His manhood, the Divine Son of God did exercise concerning His own earthly life, between Him and the glory there ever stood the black shadow thrown by Calvary. When He spoke of being lifted up, He ever meant by that pregnant and comprehensive word, at once man's elevation of Him on the accursed tree, and the Father's elevation of Him upon the throne at His right hand! The future was, if I may so say, in His eye so foreshortened that the two things ran into one, and the ambiguous expression did truly connote the one undivided act of prescient consciousness in which He at once recognised the Cross and the throne. And so, when the time was come that He should be received up, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.

Now, there is another thing to be noticed. That vision of the certain end which here fills His mind and impels His conduct, was by no means new with Him. Modern unbelieving commentators and critics upon the Gospels have tried their best to represent Christ's life as, at a certain point in it, being modified by His recognition of the fact that His mission was a failure, and that there was nothing left for Him but martyrdom! I believe that that is as untrue to the facts of the Gospel story upon any interpretation of them, as it is repulsive to the instincts of devout hearts; and without troubling you with thoughts about it I need only refer to two words of His. When was it that He said, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it up? When was it that He said, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up? The one saying was uttered at the very beginning of His public work, and the other in His conversation with Nicodemus. On the testimony of these two sayings, if there were none else, I think there is no option but to believe that from the first there stood clear before Him the necessity and the certainty of the Cross, and that it was no discovery made at a certain point of His course.

And then, remember that we are not to think of Him as, like many an earthly hero and martyr, regarding a violent and bloody death as being the very probable result of faithful boldness, but to believe that He, looking on from the beginning to that end, regarded it always as being laid upon Him by a certain divine necessity, into which necessity He entered with the full submission and acquiescence of His own will, and from the beginning knew that Calvary was the work for which He had come, and that His love would fail of its expression, and the divine purpose would fail of its realisation, and His whole mission would fail of all its meaning, unless He died for men. The martyr looks to the scaffold and says, It stands in my way, and I must either be untrue to conscience or I must go there, and so I will go. Christ said, The Cross is in My path, and on it and from it I shall exercise the influence, to exercise which I have come into the world, and there I shall do the thing which I came forth from the Father to do. He thought of His death not as the end of His work, but as the centre-point of it; not as the termination of His activity, but as its climax, to which all the rest was subordinated, and without which all the rest was nought. He does not die, and so seal a faithful life by an heroic death,--but dies, so bearing and bearing away man's sin. He regarded from the beginning the glory that should follow, and the suffering through which He had to wade to reach it, in one and the same act of prescience, and said, Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of Me.

And I think, dear friends, if we carried with us more distinctly than we do that one simple thought, that in all the human joys, in all the apparently self-forgetting tenderness, of that Lord who had a heart for every sorrow and an ear for every complaint, and a hand open as day and full of melting charity for every need--that in every moment of that life, in the boyhood, in the dawning manhood, in the maturity of His growing human powers--there was always present one black shadow, towards which He ever went straight with the consent of His will and with the clearest eye, we should understand something more of how His life as well as His death was a sacrifice for us sinful men!

We honour and love men who crush down their own sorrows in order to help their fellows. We wonder with almost reverence when we see some martyr, in sight of the faggots, pause to do a kindness to some weeping heart in the crowd, or to speak a cheering word. We admire the leisure and calm of spirit which he displays. But all these pale, and the very comparison may become an insult, before that heart which ever discerned Calvary, and never let the sight hinder one deed of kindness, nor silence one gracious word, nor check one throb of sympathy.

**II. Still further, the words before us lead to a second consideration, which I have just suggested in my last sentence--Our Lord's perfect willingness for the sacrifice which He saw before Him.**

We have here brought into the narrowest compass, and most clearly set forth, the great standing puzzle of all thought, which can only be solved by action. On the one side there is the distinctest knowledge of a divine purpose that will be executed; on the other side there is the distinctest consciousness that at each step towards the execution of it He is constrained by no foreign and imposed necessity, but is going to the Cross by His own will. The Son of Man must be lifted up. It became Him to make the Captain of salvation perfect through sufferings. It behoved Him to be made in all points like His brethren. The Eternal Will of the Father, the purpose purposed before the foundation of the world, the solemn prophecies from the beginning of time, constituted the necessity, and involved the certainty, of His death on the Cross. But are we, therefore, to think that Jesus Christ was led along the path that ended there, by a force which overbore and paralysed His human will? Was not His life, and especially His death, obedience? Was there not, therefore, in Him, as in us all, the human will that could cheerfully submit; and must there not, then, have been, at each step towards the certain end, a fresh act of submission and acceptance of the will of the Father that had sent Him?

Clear knowledge of the end as divinely appointed and certain; yes, one might say, and if so, there could have been no voluntariness in treading the path that leads to it. Voluntariness in treading the path that leads to it, and if so, there could have been no divine ordination of the end. Not so! When human thought comes, if I may so say, full butt against a stark, staring contradiction like that, it is no proof that either of the propositions is false. It is only like the sign-boards that the iceman puts upon the thin ice, dangerous!a warning that that is not a place for us to tread. We have to keep a firm hold of what is certified to us, on either side, by its appropriate evidence, and leave the reconciliation, if it can ever be given to finite beings, to a higher wisdom, and, perchance, to another world!

But that is a digression from my more immediate purpose, which is simply to bring before our minds, as clearly as I can, that perfect, continuous, ever-repeated willingness, expressing itself in a chain of constant acts that touch one upon the other, which Christ manifested to embrace the Cross, and to accomplish what was at once the purpose of the Father's will and the purpose of His own.

And it may be worth while, just for a moment, to touch lightly upon some of the many points which bring out so clearly in these Gospel narratives the wholly and purely voluntary character of Christ's death.

Take, for instance, the very journey which I am speaking of now. Christ went up to Jerusalem, says my text. What did He go there for? He went, as you will see, if you look at the previous circumstance,--He went in order, if I might use such a word, to precipitate the collision, and to make His Crucifixion certain. He was under the ban of the Sanhedrim; but perfectly safe as long as He had stopped up among the hills of Galilee. He was as unsafe when He went up to Jerusalem as John Huss when he went to the Council of Constance with the Emperor's safe-conduct in his belt; or as a condemned heretic would have been in the old days, if he had gone and stood in that little dingy square outside the palace of the Inquisition at Rome, and there, below the obelisk, preached his heresies! Christ had been condemned in the council of the nation; but there were plenty of hiding-places among the Galilean hills, and the frontier was close at hand, and it needed a long arm to reach from Jerusalem all the way across Samaria to the far north. Knowing that, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and, if I might use the expression, went straight into the lion's mouth. Why? Because He chose to die.

And, then, take another circumstance. If you will look carefully at the Scripture narrative, you will find that from about this point in His life onwards there comes a distinct change in one very important respect. Before this He shunned publicity; after this He courted it. Before this, when He spoke in veiled words of His sufferings, He said to His disciples, Tell no man till the Son of man be risen from the dead. Hereafter though there are frequent prophecies of His sufferings, there is no repetition of that prohibition. He goes up to Jerusalem, and His triumphal entry adds fuel to the fire. His language at the last moment appeals to the publicity of His final visit to that city--Was I not daily with you in the Temple and ye laid no hands upon Me?Everything that He could do He does to draw attention to Himself--everything, that is to say, within the limits of the divine decorum, which was ever observed in His life, of whom it was written long, long ago, He shall not strive, nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets. There is, then, a most unmistakable change to be felt by any who will carefully read the narratives in their bearing upon this one point--a resolve to draw the eyes of the enemy upon Himself.

And to the same purpose, did you ever notice how calmly, with full self-consciousness, distinctly understanding what He is doing, distinctly knowing to what it will lead, He makes His words ever heavier and heavier, and more and more sharply pointed with denunciations, as the last loving wrestle between Himself and the scribes and Pharisees draws near to its bloody close? Instead of softening He hardens His tones--if I dare use the word, where all is the result of love--at any rate He keeps no terms; but as the danger increases His words become plainer and sterner, and approach as near as ever His words could do to bitterness and rebuke. It was then, whilst passionate hate was raging round Him, and eager eyes were gleaming revenge, that He poured out His sevenfold woes upon the hypocrites, the blind guides, the fools, the whited sepulchres, the serpents, the generation of vipers, whom He sees filling up the measure of their fathers in shedding His righteous blood.

And again, the question recurs--Why? And again, besides other reasons, which I have not time to touch upon here, the answer, as it seems to me, must unmistakably be, Because He willed to die, and He willed to die because He loved us.

The same lesson is taught, too, by that remarkable incident preserved for us by the Gospel of John, of the strange power which accompanied His avowal of Himself to the rude soldiers who had come to seize Him, and which struck them to the ground in terror and impotence. One flash comes forth to tell of the sleeping lightning that He will not use, and then having revealed the might that could have delivered Him from their puny arms, He returns to His attitude of self-surrender for our sakes, with those wonderful words which tell how He gave up Himself that we might be free, If ye seek Me, let these go their way. The scene is a parable of the whole work of Jesus; it reveals His power to have shaken off every hand laid upon Him, His voluntary submission to His else impotent murderers, and the love which moved Him to the surrender.

Other illustrations of the same sort I must leave untouched at present, and only remind you of the remarkable peculiarity of the language in which all the Evangelists describe the supreme moment when Christ passed from His sufferings. When He had cried with a loud voice, He yielded up the ghost,--He sent away the spirit--He breathed out(His spirit), He gave up the ghost. In simple truth, He committed His spiritinto the Father's hand. And I believe that it is an accurate and fair comment to say, that that is no mere euphemism for death, but carries with it the thought that He was active in that moment; that the nails and the spear and the Cross did not kill Christ, but that Christ willed to die! And though it is true on the one side, as far as men's hatred and purpose are concerned. Whom with wicked hands ye have crucified and slain; on the other side, as far as the deepest verity of the fact is concerned, it is still more true, I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.

But at all events, whatever you may think of such an exposition as that, the great principle which my text illustrates for us at an earlier stage is, at least, irrefragably established--that our dear Lord, when He died, died, because He willed to do so. He was man and therefore He could die; but He was not man in such fashion as that He must die. In His bodily frame was the possibility, not the necessity, of death. And that being so, the very fact of His death is the most signal proof that He is Lord of death as well as of life. He dies not because He must, He dies not because of faintness and pain and wounds. These and they who inflicted them had no power at all over Him. He chooses to die; and He wills it because He wills to fulfil the eternal purpose of divine love, which is His purpose, and to bring life to the world. His hour of weakness was His hour of strength. They lifted Him on a cross, and it became a throne. In the moment when death seemed to conquer Him, He was really using it that He might abolish it. When He gave tip the ghost, He showed Himself Lord of death as marvellously and as gloriously as when He burst its bands and rose from the grave; for this grisly shadow, too, was His servant, and He says to him, Come, and he cometh; do this, and he doeth it. Thou didst overcome the sharpness of deathwhen Thou didst willingly bow Thy head to it, and didst die not because Thou must, but because Thou wouldest.

**III. Still further, let me remind you how, in the language of this verse, there is also taught us that there was in Christ a natural human shrinking from the Cross.**

The steadfast and resolved will held its own, overcoming the natural human reluctance. He set His face. People are afraid to talk--and the instinct, the reverent instinct, is right, however we may differ from the application of it--people are afraid to talk, as if there was any shrinking in Christ from the Cross. I believe there was. Was the agony in Gethsemane a reality or a shadow, when He said, O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass?What did that prayer mean, if there was not something in His nature that recoiled from the agony and mysterious horror of these awful hours? Let us take heed lest in our reverence we destroy the very notion on which our hope rests--that of Christ as suffering. For that one word involves all that I say--Did Christ suffer or did He not? If He suffered, then human nature shrank from it. The two ideas are correlative, you cannot part them--suffering and reluctance, a perfectly innocent, natural, inevitable, human instinct, inseparable from corporeity, that makes men recoil from pain. He endured the Cross, says the Book--if there was not reluctance what was there to endure? Despising the shame--if there was not something from which He shrank, what was there to despise? He set His face--if there was not something in Him that hung back, what need was there for the hardening of the countenance? If Christ has suffered, then His flesh and blood quivered beforehand with the pangs and shrank from these, and He would have been spared the cup. Such instinctive recoil is not evil, it is not rebellion, it is not unwillingness to submit to the Father's will. His whole being clave to that, and never swerved from it for one moment. But still, because the path was darkened by mysterious blackness, and led to a Cross, therefore He, even He, who did always the things that pleased the Father, and ever delighted to do His will, needed to set His faceto go up to the mountain of sacrifice.

And now, if you will take along with that the other thought that I suggested at the beginning of these remarks, and remember that this shrinking must have been as continuous as the vision, and that this overcoming of it must have been as persistent and permanent as the resolve, I think we get a point of view from which to regard that life of Christ's--full of pathos, full of tender appeals to our hearts and to our thankfulness.

All along that consecrated road He walked, and each step represented a separate act of will, and each separate act of will represented a triumph over the reluctance of flesh and blood. As we may say, every time that He planted His foot on the flinty path the blood flowed. Every step was a pain like that of a man enduring the ordeal and walking on burning iron or sharp steel.

The old taunt of His enemies, as they stood beneath His Cross, might have been yielded to--If Thou be the Son of God, come down and we will believe. I ask why did not He? I know that, to those who think less loftily of Christ than we who believe Him to be the Son of God, the words sound absurd--but I for one believe that the only thing that kept Him there, the only answer to that question is--Because He loved me with an everlasting love, and died to redeem me. Because of that love, He came to earth; because of that love, He tabernacled among us; because of that love, He gazed all His life long on the Cross of shame; because of that love, He trod unfaltering, with eager haste and solemn resolve, the rough and painful road; because of that love, He listened not to the voice that at the beginning tempted Him to win the world for Himself by an easier path; because of that love, He listened not--though He could have done so--to the voices that at the end taunted Him with their proffered allegiance if He would come down from the Cross; because of that love, He gave up His spirit. And through all the weariness and contumely and pain, that love held His will fixed to its purpose, and bore Him over every hindrance that barred His path. Many waters quench it not. That love is stronger than death; mightier than all opposing powers; deep and great beyond all thought or thankfulness. It silences all praise. It beggars all recompense. To believe it is life. To feel it is heaven.

But one more remark I would make on this whole subject. We are far too much accustomed to think of our Saviour as presenting only the gentle graces of human nature. He presents those that belong to the strong side of our nature just as much. In Him are all power, manly energy, resolved consecration; everything which men call heroism is there. He steadfastly set His face. And everything which men call tenderest love, most dewy pity, most marvellous and transcendent patience, is all there too. The type of manhood and the type of womanhood are both and equally in Jesus Christ; and He is the Man, whole, entire, perfect, with all power breathed forth in all gentleness, with all gentleness made steadfast and mighty by His strength. And he said unto me, Behold the lion of the tribe of Judah. And I beheld, and lo, a lamb!--the blended symbols of kingly might, and lowly meekness, power in love, and love in power. The supremest act of resolved consecration and heroic self-immolation that ever was done upon earth--an act which we degrade by paralleling it with any other--was done at the bidding of love that pitied us. As we look up at that Cross we know not whether is more wonderfully set forth the pitying love of Christ's most tender heart, or the majestic energy of Christ's resolved will. The blended rays pour out, dear brethren, and reach to each of us. Do not look to that great sacrifice with idle wonder. Bend upon it no eye of mere curiosity. Beware of theorising merely about what it reveals and what it does. Turn not away from it carelessly as a twice-told tale. But look, believing that all that divine and human love pours out its treasure upon you, that all that firmness of resolved consecration and willing surrender to the death of the Cross was for you. Look, believing that you had then, and have now, a place in His heart, and in His sacrifice. Look, remembering that it was because He would save you, that Himself He could not save.

And as, from afar, we look on that great sight, let His love melt our hearts to an answering fervour, and His fixed will give us, too, strength to delight in obedience, to set our faces like a flint. Let the power of His sacrifice, and the influence of His example which that sacrifice commends to our loving copy, and the grace of His Spirit whom He, since that sacrifice, pours upon men, so mould us that we, too, like Him, may quit us like men, be strong, and all our strength and all our deedsbe wielded and done in charity.