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

**MALACHI-006. A DIALOGUE WITH GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye say, Wherein shall we return?"*

*Malachi 3:7 (R.V.)*

In previous sermons we have considered God's indictment of man's sin met by man's plea of not guilty, and God's threatenings brushed aside by man's question. Here we have the climax of self-revealing and patient love in God's wooing voice to draw the wanderer back, met by man's refusing answer. These three divine utterances taken together cover the whole ground of His speech to us; and, alas! these three human utterances but too truly represent for the most part our answers to Him.

**I. God's invitation to His wandering child.**

The gracious invitation of our text presupposes a state of departure. The child who is tenderly recalled has first gone away. There has been a breach of love. Dependence has been unwelcome, and cast off with the vain hope of a larger freedom in the far-off land; and this is the true charge against us. It is not so much individual acts of sin but the going away in heart and spirit from our Father God which describes the inmost essence of our true condition, and is itself the source of all our acts of sin. Conscience confirms the description. We know that we have departed from Him in mind, having wasted our thoughts on many things and not having had Him in the multitude of them in us. We have departed from Him in heart, having squandered our love and dissipated our desires on many objects, and sought in the multiplicity of many pearls--some of them only paste--a substitute for the all-sufficient simplicity of the One of great price. We have departed from Him in will, having reared up puny inclinations and fleeting passions against His calm and eternal purpose, and so bringing about the shock of a collision as destructive to us as when a torpedo-boat crashes in the dark against a battleship, and, cut in two, sinks.

The gracious invitation of our text follows, I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. Threatenings, and the execution of these in acts of judgment, are no indication of a change in the loving heart of God; and because it is the same, however we have sinned against it and departed from it, there is ever an invitation and a welcome. We may depart from Him, but He never departs from us. Nor does He wait for us to originate the movement of return, but He invites us back. By all His words in His threatenings and in His commandments, as in the acts of His providence, we can hear His call to return. The fathers of our flesh never cease to long for their prodigal child's return; and their patient persistence of hope is but brief and broken when contrasted with the infinite long-suffering of the Father of spirits. We have heard of a mother who for long empty years has nightly set a candle in her cottage window to guide her wandering boy back to her heart; and God has bade us think more loftily of the unchangeableness of His love than that of a woman who may forget, that she should not have compassion upon the son of her womb.

**II. Man's answer to God's invitation.**

It is a refusal which is half-veiled and none the less real. There is no unwillingness to obey professed, but it is concealed under a mask of desiring a little more light as to how a return is to be accomplished. There are not many of us who are rooted enough in evil as to be able to blurt out a curt I will not in answer to His call. Conscience often bars the way to such a plain and unmannerly reply; but there are many who try to cheat God, and who do to some extent cheat themselves, by professing ignorance of the way which would lead them to His heart. Some of us have learned only too well to raise questions about the method of salvation instead of accepting it, and to dabble in theology instead of making sure work of return. Some of us would fain substitute a host of isolated actions, or apparent moral or religious observance, for the return of will and heart to God; and all who in their consciences answer God's call by saying, Wherein shall we return? with such a meaning are playing tricks with themselves, and trying to hoodwink God.

But the question of our text has often a nobler origin, and comes from the depths of a troubled heart. Not seldom does God's loving invitation rouse the dormant conscience to the sense of sin. The man, lying broken at the foot of the cliff down which he has fallen, and seeing the brightness of God far above, has his heart racked with the question: How am I, with lame limbs, to struggle back to the heights above? How shall man be just with God? All the religions of the world, with their offerings and penances and weary toils, are vain attempts to make a way back to the God from whom men have wandered, and that question, Wherein shall we return? is really the meaning of the world's vain seeking and profitless effort.

God has answered man's question; for Christ is at once the way back to God, and the motive which draws us to walk in it. He draws us back by the magnetism of His love and sacrifice. We return to God when we cling to Jesus. He is the highest, the tenderest utterance of the divine voice; and when we yield to His invitation to Himself we return to God. He calls to each of us, Come unto Me, and I will give you rest. What can we reply but, I come; let me never wander from Thee?