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

**MALACHI-008. THE LAST WORDS OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."*

*Malachi 4:6*

*"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."*

*Revelation 22:21*

It is of course only an accident that these words close the Old and the New Testaments. In the Hebrew Bible Malachi's prophecies do not stand at the end; but he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and after him there were four centuries of silence. We seem to hear in his words the dying echoes of the rolling thunders of Sinai. They gather up the whole burden of the Law and of the prophets; of the former in their declaration of a coming retribution, of the latter in the hope that that retribution may be averted.

Then, in regard to John's words, of course as they stand they are simply the parting benediction with which he takes leave of his readers; but it is fitting that the Book of which they are the close should seal up the canon, because it stands as the one prophetic book of the New Testament, and so reaches forward into the coming ages, even to the consummation of all things. And just as Christ in His Ascension was taken from them whilst His hands were lifted up in the act of blessing, so it is fitting that the revelation of which He is the centre and the theme should part from us as He did, shedding with its final words the dew of benediction on our upturned heads.

I venture, then, to look at these significant closing words of the two Testaments as conveying the spirit of each, and suggesting some thoughts about the contrast and the harmony and the order that subsist between them.

**I. I ask you, first, to notice the apparent contrast and the real harmony and unity of these two texts.**

Lest I come and smite the land with a curse. That last awful word does not convey, in the original, quite the idea of our English word curse. It refers to a somewhat singular institution in the Mosaic Law according to which things devoted, in a certain sense, to God were deprived of life. And the reference historically is to the judgments that were inflicted upon the nations that occupied the land before the Israelitish invasion, those Canaanites and others who were put under the ban and devoted to utter destruction. So, says my text, Israel, which has stepped into their places, may bring down upon its head the same devastation; and as they were swept off the face of the land that they had polluted with their iniquities, so an apostate and God-forgetting Judah may again experience the same utter destruction falling upon them. If instead of the word curse we were to substitute the word destruction, we should get the true idea of the passage.

And the thought that I want to insist upon is this, that here we have distinctly gathered up the whole spirit of millenniums of divine revelation, all of which declare this one thing, that as certainly as there is a God, every transgression and disobedience receives, and must receive, its just recompense of reward.

That is the spirit of law, for law has nothing to say, except, Do this, and thou shalt live; do not this, and thou shalt die.

And then turn to the other. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. What has become of the thunder? All melted into dewy rain of love and pity and compassion. Grace is love that stoops; grace is love that foregoes its claims, and forgives sins against itself. Grace is love that imparts, and this grace, thus stooping, thus pardoning, thus bestowing, is a universal gift. The Apostolic benediction is the declaration of the divine purpose, and the inmost heart and loftiest meaning of all the words which from the beginning God hath spoken is that His condescending, pardoning, self-bestowing mercy may fall upon all hearts, and gladden every soul.

So there seems to emerge, and there is, a very real and a very significant contrast. I come and smite the earth with a curse sounds strangely unlike The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. And, of course, in this generation there is a strong tendency to dwell upon that contrast and to exaggerate it, and to assert that the more recent has antiquated the more ancient, and that now the day when we have to think of and to dread the curse that smites the earth is past, because the true Light now shineth.

So I ask you to notice that beneath this apparent contrast there is a real harmony, and that these two utterances, though they seem to be so diverse, are quite consistent at bottom, and must both be taken into account if we would grasp the whole truth. For, as a matter of fact, nowhere are there more tender utterances and sweeter revelations of a divine mercy than in that ancient law with its attendant prophets. And as a matter of fact, nowhere, through all the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, are there such solemn words of retribution as dropped from the lips of the Incarnate Love. There is nothing anywhere so dreadful as Christ's own words about what comes, and must come, to sinful men. Is there any depth of darkness in the Old Testament teaching of retribution half as deep, half as black, and as terrible, as the gulf that Christ opens at your feet and mine? Is there anything so awful as the threatenings of Infinite Love?

And the same blending of the widest proclamation of, and the most perfect rejoicing confidence in, the universal and all-forgiving love of God, with the teaching of the sharpest retribution, lies in the writings of this very Apostle about whose words I am speaking. There are nowhere in Scripture more solemn pictures than those in that book of the Apocalypse, of the inevitable consequences of departure from the love and the faith of God, and John, the Apostle of love, is the preacher of judgment as none of the other writers of the New Testament are.

Such is the fact, and there is a necessity for it. There must be this blending; for if you take away from your conception of God the absolute holiness which hates sin, and the rigid righteousness which apportions to all evil its bitter fruits, you have left a maimed God that has not power to love but is nothing but weak, good-natured indulgence. Impunity is not mercy, and punishment is never the negation of perfect love, but rather, if you destroy the one you hopelessly maim the other. The two halves are needed in order to give full emphasis to either. Each note alone is untrue; blended, they make the perfect chord.

**II. And now, let me ask you to look with me at another point, and that is, the relation of the grace to the punishment.**

Is it not love which proclaims judgment? Are not the words of my first text, if you take them all, merciful, however they wear a surface of threatening? Lest I come. Then He speaks that He may not come, and declares the issue of sin in order that that issue may never need to be experienced by us that listen to Him. Brethren! both in regard to the Bible and in regard to human ministrations of the Gospel, it is all-important, as it seems to me at present, to insist that it is the cruellest kindness to keep back the threatenings for fear of darkening the grace; and that, on the other hand, it is the truest tenderness to warn and to proclaim them. It is love that threatens; tis mercy to tell us that the wrath will come.

And just as one relation between the grace and the retribution is that the proclamation of the retribution is the work of the grace, so there is another relation--the grace is manifested in bearing the punishment, and in bearing it away by bearing it. Oh! there is no adequate measure of what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is except the measure of the smiting destruction from which He frees us. It is because every transgression receives its just recompense of reward, because the wages of sin is death, because God cannot but hate and punish the evil, that we get our truest standard of what Christ's love is to every soul of us. For on Him have met all the converging rays of the divine retribution, and burnt the penal fire into His very heart. He has come between every one of us, if we will, and that certain incidence of retribution for our evil, taking upon Himself the whole burden of our sin and of our guilt, and bearing that awful death which consists not in the mere dissolution of the tie between soul and body, but in the separation of the conscious spirit from God, in order that we may stand peaceful, serene, untouched, when the hail and the fire of the divine judgment are falling from the heavens and running along the earth. The grace depends for all our conceptions of its glory, its tenderness, and its depth, on our estimate of the wrath from which it delivers.

So, dear brethren, remember, if you tamper with the one you destroy the other; if there be no fearful judgment from which men need to be delivered, Christ has borne nothing for us that entitles Him to demand our hearts; and all the ascriptions of praise and adoration to Him, and all the surrender of loving hearts, in utter self-abandonment, to Him that has borne the curse for us, fade and are silent. If you strike out the truth of Christ's bearing the results of sin from your theology, you do not thereby exalt, but you fatally lower the love; and in the interests of the loftiest conceptions of a divine loving-kindness and mercy that ever have blessed the world, I beseech you, be on your guard against all teachings that diminish the sinfulness of sin, and that ask again the question which first of all came from lips that do not commend it to us--Hath God said? or advance to the assertion--Ye shall not surely die. If I come to smite the earth with a curse ceases to be a truth to you, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will fade away for you likewise.

**III. Now, still further, let me ask you to consider, lastly, the alternative which these texts open for us.**

I believe that the order in which they stand in Scripture is the order in which men generally come to believe them, and to feel them. I am old-fashioned enough and narrow enough to believe in conversion; and to believe further that, as a rule, the course through which the soul passes from darkness into light is the course which divine revelation took: first, the unveiling of sin and its issues, and then the glad leaping up of the trustful heart to the conception of redeeming grace.

But what I seek briefly to suggest now is, not only the order of manifestation as brought out in these words, but also the alternative which they present to us, one branch or other of which every soul of you will have to experience. You must have either the destruction or the grace. And, more wonderful still, the same coming of the same Lord will be to one man the destruction, and to another the manifestation and reception of His perfect grace. As it was in the Lord's first coming, He is set for the rise and the fall of many in Israel. The same heat softens some substances and bakes others into hardness. A bit of wax and a bit of clay put into the same fire--one becomes liquefied and the other solidified. The same light is joy to one eye and torture to another. The same pillar of cloud was light to the hosts of Israel, and darkness and dismay to the armies of Egypt. The same Gospel is a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death, by the giving forth of the same influences killing the one and reviving the other; the same Christ is a Stone to build upon or a Stone of stumbling; and when He cometh at the last, Prince, King, Judge, to you and me, His coming shall be prepared as the morning; and ye shall have a song as when one cometh with a pipe to the mountain of the Lord; or else it shall be a day of darkness and not of light. He comes to me, to you; He comes to smite or He comes to glorify.

Oh, brethren! do not believe that God's threatenings are wind and words; do not let teachings that sap the very foundations of morality and eat all the power out of the Gospel persuade you that the solemn words, The soul that sinneth it shall die, are not simple verity.

And then, my brethren, oh! then, do you turn yourselves to that dear Lord whose grace is magnified in this most chiefly, that He hath borne our sins and carried our sorrows; and taking Him for your Saviour, your King, your Shield, your All, when He cometh it will be life to you; and the grace that He imparts will be heaven for ever more.