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

**MARK-001**. **WHAT THE GOSPEL IS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ."*

*Mark 1:1*

My purpose now is to point out some of the various connections in which the New Testament uses that familiar phrase, the gospel, and briefly to gather some of the important thoughts which these suggest. Possibly the process may help to restore freshness to a word so well worn that it slips over our tongues almost unnoticed and excites little thought.

The history of the word in the New Testament books is worth notice. It seldom occurs in those lives of our Lord which now are emphatically so called, and where it does occur, it is the gospel of the Kingdomquite as frequently as the gospelof the King. The word is never used in Luke, and only twice in the Acts of the Apostles, both times in quotations. The Apostle John never employs it, either in his gospelor in his epistles, and in the Apocalypse the word is only once found, and then it may be a question whether it refers to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. John thought of the word which he had to proclaim as the message, the witness, the truth, rather than as the gospel. We search for the expression in vain in the epistles of James, Jude, and to the Hebrews. Thrice it is used by Peter. The great bulk of the instances of its occurrence are in the writings of Paul, who, if not the first to use it, at any rate is the source from which the familiar meaning of the phrase, as describing the sum total of the revelation in Jesus Christ, has flowed.

The various connections in which the word is employed are remarkable and instructive. We can but touch lightly on the more important lessons which they are fitted to teach.

**I. The Gospel is the Gospel of Christ.**

On our Lord's own lips and in the records of His life we find, as has already been noticed, the phrase, the gospel of the kingdom--the good news of the establishment on earth of the rule of God in the hearts and lives of men. The person of the King is not yet defined by it. The diffused dawn floods the sky, and upon them that sit in darkness the greatness of its light shines, before the sun is above the horizon. The message of the Forerunner proclaimed, like a herald's clarion, the coming of the Kingdom, before he could say to a more receptive few, Behold the Lamb of God. The order is first the message of the Kingdom, then the discovery of the King. And so that earlier phrase falls out of use, and when once Christ's life had been lived, and His death died, the gospel is no longer the message of an impersonal revolution in the world's attitude to God's will, but the biography of Him who is at once first subject and monarch of the Kingdom of Heaven, and by whom alone we are brought into it. The standing expression comes to be the gospel of Christ.

It is His, not so much because He is the author, as because He is the subject of it. It is the good news about Christ. He is its contents and great theme. And so we are led up at once to the great central peculiarity of Christianity, namely that it is a record of historical fact, and that all the world's life and blessedness lie in the story of a human life and death. Christ is Christianity. His biography is the good news for every child of man.

Neither a philosophy nor a morality, but a history, is the true good news for men. The world is hungry, and when it cries for bread wise men give it a stone, but God gives it the fare it needs in the bread that comes down from Heaven. Though it be of small account in many people's eyes, like the common barley cakes, the poor man's food, it is what we all need; and humble people, and simple people, and uneducated people, and barbarous people, and dying people, and the little children can all eat and live. They would find little to keep them from starving in anything more ambitious, and would only break their teeth in mumbling the dry bones of philosophies and moralities. But the story of their Brother who has lived and died for them feeds heart and mind and will, fancy and imagination, memory and hope, nourishes the whole nature into health and beauty, and alone deserves to be called good news for men.

All that the world needs lies in that story. Out of it have come peace and gladness to the soul, light for the understanding, cleansing for the conscience, renovation for the will, which can be made strong and free by submission, a resting-place for the heart, and a starting-point and a goal for the loftiest flights of hope. Out of it have come the purifying of family and civic life, the culture of all noble social virtues, the sanctity of the household, and the elevation of the state. The thinker has found the largest problems raised and solved therein. The setting forth of a loftier morality, and the enthusiasm which makes the foulest nature aspire to and reach its heaven-touching heights, are found together there. To it poet and painter, architect and musician, owe their noblest themes. The good news of the world is the story of Christ's life and death. Let us be thankful for its form; let us be thankful for its substance.

But we must not forget that, as Paul, who is so fond of the word, has taught us, the historical fact needs some explanation and commentary to make the history a gospel. He has declared to us the gospel which he preached, and to which he ascribes saving power, and he gives these as its elements, How that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures. There are three facts--death, burial, resurrection. These are the things that any eye could have seen. Are these the gospel? Is there any saving power in them? Not unless you add the commentary for our sins, and according to the Scriptures. That death was a death for us all, by which we are delivered from our sins--that is the main thing; and in subordination to that thought, the other that Christ's death was the accomplishment of prophecies--these make the history a gospel. The bare facts, without the exhibition of their purpose and meaning, are no more a gospel than any other story of a death would be. The facts with any lower explanation of their meaning are no gospel, any more than the story of the death of Socrates or any innocent martyr would be. If you would know the good news that will lift your heavy heart from sorrow and break your chains of sin, that will put music into your life and make your days blaze into brightness as when the sunlight strikes some sullen mountain-side that lay black in shadow, you must take the fact with its meaning, and find your gospel in the life and death of Him who is more than example and more than martyr. How that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, is the gospel of Christ.

**II. The Gospel of Christ is the Gospel of God.**

This form of the expression, though by no means so frequent as the other, is found throughout Paul's epistles, thrice in the earliest--Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:8), once in the great Epistle to the Romans (1:1), once in Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:7), and once in a modified form in the pathetic letter from the dungeon, which the old man addressed to his son Timothy(1 Tim. 1:11). It is also found in the writings of Peter (1 Pet. 4:17). In all these cases the phrase, the gospel of God, may mean the gospel which has God for its author or origin, but it seems rather to mean which has God for its subject.

It was, as we saw, mainly designated as the good news about Jesus Christ, but it is also the good news about God. So in one and the same set of facts we have the history of Jesus and the revelation of God. They are not only the biography of a man, but they are the unveiling of the heart of God. These Scripture writers take it for granted that their readers will understand that paradox, and do not stop to explain how they change the statement of the subject matter of their message, in this extraordinary fashion, between their Master who had lived and died on earth, and the Unseen Almightiness throned above all heavens. How comes that to be?

It is not that the gospel has two subjects, one of which is the matter of one portion, and the other of another. It does not sometimes speak of Christ, and sometimes rise to tell us of God. It is always speaking of both, and when its subject is most exclusively the man Christ Jesus, it is then most chiefly the Father God. How comes that to be? Surely this unconscious shifting of the statement of their theme, which these writers practise as a matter of course, shows us how deeply the conviction had stamped itself on their spirits, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father, and how the point of view from which they had learned to look on all the sweet and wondrous story of their Master's life and death, was that of a revelation of the deepest heart of God.

And so must we look on that whole career, from the cradle to the cross, from Calvary to Olivet, if we are to know its deepest tenderness and catch its gladdest notes. That such a man has lived and died is beautiful, and the portrait will hang for ever as that of the fairest of the children of men. But that in that life and death we have our most authentic knowledge of what God is, and that all the pity and truth, the gentleness and the brotherliness, the tears and the self-surrender, are a revelation to us of God; and that the cross, with its awful sorrow and its painful death, tells us not only how a man gave himself for those whom he loved, but how God loves the world and how tremendous is His law--this is good news of God indeed. We have to look for our truest knowledge of Him not in the majesties of the starry heavens, nor in the depths of our own souls, not in the scattered tokens of His character given by the perplexed order of the world, nor in the intuitions of the wise, but in the life and death of His Son, whose tears are the pity of God as well as the compassion of a man, and in whose life and death the whole world may behold the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and be delivered from all their fears of an angry, and all their doubts of an unknown, God.

There is a double modification of this phrase. We hear of the gospel of the grace of Godand the gospel of the glory of God, which latter expression, rendered in the English version misleadingly the glorious gospel, is given in its true shape in the Revised Version. The great theme of the message is further defined in these two noteworthy forms. It is the tender love of God in exercise to lowly creatures who deserve something else that the gospel is busy in setting forth, a love which flows forth unbought and unmotived save by itself, like some stream from a hidden lake high up among the pure Alpine snows. The story of Christ's work is the story of God's rich, unmerited love, bending down to creatures far beneath, and making a radiant pathway from earth to heaven, like the sevenfold rainbow. It is so, not merely because this mission is the result of God's love, but also because His grace is God's grace, and therefore every act of Christ which speaks His own tenderness is therein an apocalypse of God.

The second of these two expressions, the gospel of the glory of God, leads up to that great thought that the true glory of the divine nature is its tenderness. The lowliness and death of Christ are the glory of God! Not in the awful attributes which separate that inconceivable Nature from us, not in the eternity of His existence, nor in the Infinitude of His Being, not in the Omnipotence of His unwearied arm, nor in fire-eyed Omniscience, but in the pity and graciousness which bend lovingly over us, is the true glory of God. These pompous attributesare but the fringes of the brightness, the living white heart of which is love. God's glory is God's grace, and the purest expression of both is found there, where Jesus hangs dying in the dark, The true throne of God's glory is not builded high in a remote heaven, flashing intolerable brightness and set about with bending principalities and powers, but it is the Cross of Calvary. The story of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, with its humiliation and shame, is the gospel of the grace, and therefore is the gospel of the glory, of God.

**III. The good news of Christ and of God is the gospel of our salvation and peace.**

We read of the gospel of your salvation(Eph. 1:13), and in the same letter (6:15) of the gospel of peace. In these expressions we pass from the consideration of the author or of the subject matter of the good news to that of its purpose and issue. It is meant to bring to men, and it does in fact bring to all who accept it, those wide and complex blessings described by those two great words.

That good news about Christ and God brings to a man salvation, if he believes it. To know and feel that I have a loving Father who has so cared for me and all my brethren that He has sent His Son to live and die for me, is surely enough to deliver me from all the bonds and death of sin, and to quicken me into humble consecration to His service. And such emancipation from the burden and misery of sin, from the gnawing consciousness of evil and the weakening sense of guilt, from the dominion of wrong tastes and habits, and from the despair of ever shaking them off which is only too well grounded in the experience of the past, is the beginning of salvation for each of us. That great keyword of the New Testament covers the whole field of positive and negative good which man can need or God can give. Negatively it includes the removal of every evil, whether of the nature of sorrow or of sin, under which men can groan. Positively it includes the endowment with all good, whether of the nature of joy or of purity, which men can hope for or receive. It is past, present, and future, for every heart that accepts the word of the truth of the gospel--past, inasmuch as the first effect of even the most incomplete acceptance is to put us in a new position and attitude towards the law of God, and to plant the germs of all holiness and joy in our souls; present, inasmuch as salvation is a growing possession and a continuous process running on all through our lives, if we be true to ourselves and our calling; future, inasmuch as its completion waits to be unveiled in another order of things, where perfect purity and perfect consecration shall issue in perfect joy. And all this ennobling and enriching of human nature is produced by that good news about the grace and glory of God and of Christ, if we will only listen to it, and let it work its work on our souls.

Substantially the same set of facts is included under that other expression, the gospel of peace. The Hebrew use of the word peaceas a kind of shorthand for all good is probably to be remembered. But even in the narrower sense of the word, how great are the blessings set forth by it! All inward serenity and outward calm, the tranquillity of a soul free from the agitations of emotion and the storms of passions and the tumults of desire, as well as the security of a life guarded from the assaults of foes and girded about with an impregnable barrier which nothing can destroy and no enemy overleap, are ours, if we take the good news about God to our heart. They are ours in the measure in which we take it. Clearly such truths as those which the gospel brings have a plain tendency to give peace. They give peace with God, with the world, and with ourselves. They lead to trust, and trust is peace. They lead to union with God, and that is peace. They lead to submission, and that is peace. They lead to consecration, and that is peace. They lead to indifference to fleeting joys and treasures, and that is peace. They give to heart and mind and will an all-sufficient and infinite object, and that is peace. They deliver us from ourselves, and that is peace. They fill the past, the present, and the future with the loving Father's presence, and brighten life and death with the Saviour's footsteps--and so to live is calm, and to die is to lay ourselves down in peace and sleep, quiet by His side, like a child by its mother. The good news about God and Christ is the good news of our salvation and of our peace.

**IV. The good news about Christ and God is the gospel.**

By far the most frequent form in which the word gospel occurs is that of the simple use of the noun with the definite article. This message is emphatically the good news. It is the tidings which men most of all want. It stands alone; there is no other like it. If this be not the glad tidings of great joy for the world, then there are none.

Let no false liberality lead us to lose sight of the exclusive claims which are made in this phrase for the set of facts the narrative of which constitutes the gospel. The life and death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, His resurrection and continuous life for the saving of the world--these are the truths, without which there can be no gospel. They may be apprehended in different ways, set forth in different perspective, proclaimed in different dialects, explained in different fashion, associated with different accompaniments, drawn out into different consequences, and yet, through all diversity of tones, the message may be one. Sounded on a ram's horn or a silver trumpet, it may be the same saving and joy-bringing proclamation, and it will be, if Christ and His life and death are plainly set forth as the beginning and ending of all. But if there be an omission of that mighty name, or if a Christ be proclaimed without a Cross, a salvation without a Saviour, or a Saviour without a Sacrifice, all the adornments of genius and sincerity will not prevent such a half gospel from falling flat. Its preachers have never been able, and never will be able, to touch the general heart or to bring good cheer to men. They have always had to complain, We have piped unto you and ye have not danced. They cannot get people to be glad over such a message. Only when you speak of a Christ who has died for our sins, will you cause the heavy heart of the world to sing for joy. Only that old, old message is the good news which men want.

There is no second gospel. Men who preach a message of a different kind, as Paul tells us, are preaching what is not really another gospel. There cannot be two messages. There is but one genuine; all others are counterfeits. For us it is all-important that we should be no less narrow than the truth, and no more liberal than he was to whom the message how that Jesus died for our sinswas the only thing worth calling the gospel. Our own salvation depends on our firm grasp of that one message, and for some of us, the clear decisiveness with which our lips ring it out determines whether we shall be blessings or curses to our generation. There is a Babel of voices now preaching other messages which promise good tidings of good. Let us cleave with all our hearts to Christ alone, and let our tongues not falter in proclaiming, Neither is there salvation in any other. The gospel of the Christ who died for our sins, is the gospel.

And what we have for ourselves to do with it is told us in that pregnant phrase of the apostle's, my gospel, and our gospel; meaning not merely the message which he was charged to proclaim, but the good news which he and his brethren had made their own. So we have to make it ours. It is of no use to us, unless we do. It is not enough that it echoes all around us, like music borne upon the wind. It is not enough that we hear it, as men do some sweet melody, while their thoughts are busy on other things. It is not enough that we believe it, as we do other histories in which we have no concern. What more is needed? Another expression of the apostle's gives the answer. He speaks of the faith of the gospel, that is the trust which that glad message evokes, and by which it is laid hold of.

Make it yours by trusting your whole self to the Christ of whom it tells you. The reliance of heart and will on Jesus who has died for me, makes it my gospel. There is one God, one Christ, one gospel which tells us of them, and one faith by which we lay hold upon the gospel, and upon the loving Father and the ever-helpful Saviour of whom it tells. Let us make that great word our own by simple faith, and then as cold water to our thirsty soul, so will be that good news from a far country, the country where the Father's house is, and to which He has sent the Elder Brother to bring back us prodigal children.