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

**MARK-067**. **STRONG CRYING AND TEARS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"32.* *And they came to a place which was named Gethsemane: and He saith to His disciples, Sit ye here, while I shall pray. 33. And He taketh with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy; 34. And saith onto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch. 35. And He went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. 36. And He said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; take away this cup from Me: nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt. 37. And He cometh, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, Simon, sleepest thou! couldest not thou watch one hour? 38. Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak. 39. And again He went away, and prayed, and spake the same words. 40. And when He returned, He found them asleep again, (for their eyes were heavy,) neither wist they what to answer Him. 41. And He cometh the third time, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest, it is enough, the hour is come; behold, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42. Rise up, let us go; lo, he that betrayeth Me is at hand."*

*Mark 14:32-42*

The three who saw Christ's agony in Gethsemane were so little affected that they slept. We have to beware of being so little affected that we speculate and seek to analyse rather than to bow adoringly before that mysterious and heart-subduing sight. Let us remember that the place is holy ground. It was meant that we should look on the Christ who prayed with strong crying and tears, else the three sleepers would not have accompanied Him so far; but it was meant that our gaze should be reverent and from a distance, else they would have gone with Him into the shadow of the olives.

Gethsemanemeans an oil-press. It was an enclosed piece of ground, according to Matthew and Mark; a garden, according to John. Jesus, by some means, had access to it, and had oft-times resorted thither with His disciples. To this familiar spot, with its many happy associations, Jesus led the disciples, who would simply expect to pass the night there, as many Passover visitors were accustomed to bivouac in the open air.

The triumphant tone of spirit which animated His assuring words to His disciples, I have overcome the world, changed as they passed through the moonlight down to the valley, and when they reached the garden deep gloom lay upon Him. His agitation is pathetically and most naturally indicated by the conflict of feeling as to companionship. He leaves the other disciples at the entrance, for He would fain be alone in His prayer. Then, a moment after, He bids the three, who had been on the Mount of Transfiguration and with Him at many other special times, accompany Him into the recesses of the garden. But again need of solitude overcomes longing for companionship, and He bids them stay where they were, while He plunges still further into the shadow. How human it is! How well all of us, who have been down into the depths of sorrow, know the drawing of these two opposite longings! Scripture seldom undertakes to tell Christ's emotions. Still seldomer does He speak of them. But at this tremendous hour the veil is lifted by one corner, and He Himself is fain to relieve His bursting heart by pathetic self-revelation, which is in fact an appeal to the three for sympathy, as well as an evidence of His sharing the common need of lightening the burdened spirit by speech. Mark's description of Christ's feelings lays stress first on their beginning, and then on their nature as being astonishment and anguish. A wave of emotion swept over Him, and was in marked contrast with His previous demeanour.

The three had never seen their calm Master so moved. We feel that such agitation is profoundly unlike the serenity of the rest of His life, and especially remarkable if contrasted with the tone of John's account of His discourse in the upper room; and, if we are wise, we shall gaze on that picture drawn for us by Mark with reverent gratitude, and feel that we look at something more sacred than human trembling at the thought of death.

Our Lord's own infinitely touching words heighten the impression of the Evangelist's My soul is exceeding sorrowful, or, as the word literally means, ringed round with sorrow. A dark orb of distress encompassed Him, and there was nowhere a break in the gloom which shut Him in. And this is He who, but an hour before, had bequeathed His joyto His servants, and had bidden them be of good cheer, since He had conquered the world.

Dare we ask what were the elements of that all-enveloping horror of great darkness? Reverently we may. That astonishment and distress no doubt were partly due to the recoil of flesh from death. But if that was their sole cause, Jesus has been surpassed in heroism, not only by many a martyr who drew his strength from Him, but by many a rude soldier and by many a criminal. No! The waters of the baptism with which He was baptized had other sources than that, though it poured a tributary stream into them.

We shall not understand Gethsemane at all, nor will it touch our hearts and wills as it is meant to do, unless, as we look, we say in adoring wonder, The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all. It was the weight of the world's sin which He took on Him by willing identification of Himself with men, that pressed Him to the ground. Nothing else than the atoning character of Christ's sufferings explains so far as it can be explained, the agony which we are permitted to behold afar off.

How nearly that agony was fatal is taught us by His own word unto death, A little more, and He would have died. Can we retain reverence for Jesus as a perfect and pattern man, in view of His paroxysm of anguish in Gethsemane, if we refuse to accept that explanation? Truly was the place named The Olive-press, for in it His whole being was as if in the press, and another turn of the screw would have crushed Him.

Darkness ringed Him round, but there was a rift in it right overhead. Prayer was His refuge, as it must be ours. The soul that can cry, Abba, Father!does not walk in unbroken night. His example teaches us what our own sorrows should also teach us--to betake ourselves to prayer when the spirit is desolate. In that wonderful prayer we reverently note three things: there is unbroken consciousness of the Father's love; there is the instinctive recoil of flesh and the sensitive nature from the suffering imposed; and there is the absolute submission of the will, which silences the remonstrance of flesh. Whatever the weight laid on Jesus by His bearing of the sins of the world, it did not take from Him the sense of sonship. But, on the other hand, that sense did not take from Him the consciousness that the world's sin lay upon Him. In like manner His cry on the Cross mysteriously blended the sense of communion with God and of abandonment by God. Into these depths we see but a little way, and adoration is better than speculation.

Jesus shrank from this cup, in which so many bitter ingredients besides death were mingled, such as treachery, desertion, mocking, rejection, exposure to the contradiction of sinners. There was no failure of purpose in that recoil, for the cry for exemption was immediately followed by complete submission to the Father's will. No perturbation in the lower nature ever caused His fixed resolve to waver. The needle always pointed to the pole, however the ship might pitch and roll. A prayer in which remove this from meis followed by that yielding neverthelessis always heard. Christ's was heard, for calmness came back, and His flesh was stilled and made ready for the sacrifice.

So He could rejoin the three, in whose sympathy and watchfulness He had trusted--and they all were asleep! Surely that was one ingredient of bitterness in His cup. We wonder at their insensibility; and how they must have wondered at it too, when after years taught them what they had lost, and how faithless they had been! Think of men who could have seen and heard that scene, which has drawn the worshipping regard of the world ever since, missing it all because they fell asleep! They had kept awake long enough to see Him fall on the ground and to hear His prayer, but, worn out by a long day of emotion and sorrow, they slept.

Jesus was probably rapt in prayer for a considerable time, perhaps for a literal hour. He was specially touched by Peter's failure, so sadly contrasted with his confident professions in the upper room; but no word of blame escaped Him. Rather He warned them of swift-coming temptation, which they could only overcome by watchfulness and prayer. It was indeed near, for the soldiers would burst in, before many minutes had passed, polluting the moonlight with their torches and disturbing the quiet night with their shouts. What gracious allowance for their weakness and loving recognition of the disciplesimperfect good lie in His words, which are at once an excuse for their fault and an enforcement of His command to watch and pray! The flesh is weak, and hinders the willing spirit from doing what it wills. It was an apology for the slumber of the three; it is a merciful statement of the condition under which all discipleship has to be carried on. He knoweth our frame. Therefore we all need to watch and pray, since only by such means can weak flesh be strengthened and strong flesh weakened, or the spirit preserved in willingness.

The words were not spoken in reference to Himself, but in a measure were true of Him. His second withdrawal for prayer seems to witness that the victory won by the first supplication was not permanent. Again the anguish swept over His spirit in another foaming breaker, and again He sought solitude, and again He found tranquillity--and again returned to find the disciples asleep. They knew not what to answer Himin extenuation of their renewed dereliction.

Yet a third time the struggle was renewed. And after that, He had no need to return to the seclusion, where He had fought, and now had conclusively conquered by prayer and submission. We too may, by the same means, win partial victories over self, which may be interrupted by uprisings of flesh; but let us persevere. Twice Jesuscalm was broken by recrudescence of horror and shrinking; the third time it came back, to abide through all the trying scenes of the passion, but for that one cry on the Cross, Why hast Thou forsaken Me? So it may be with us.

The last words to the three have given commentators much trouble. Sleep on now, and take your rest, is not so much irony as spoken with a kind of permissive force, and in tones in which merciful reproach was blended with calm resignation. So far as He was concerned, there was no reason for their waking. But they had lost an opportunity, never to return, of helping Him in His hour of deepest agony. He needed them no more. And do not we in like manner often lose the brightest opportunities of service by untimely slumber of soul, and is not the irrevocable pastsaying to many of us, Sleep on now since you can no more do what you have let slip from your drowsy hands? It is enoughis obscure, but probably refers to the disciplessleep, and prepares for the transition to the next words, which summon them to arise, not to help Him by watching, but to meet the traitor. They had slept long enough, He sadly says. That which will effectually end their sleepiness is at hand. How completely our Lord had regained His calm superiority to the horror which had shaken Him is witnessed by that majestic Let us be going. He will go out to meet the traitor, and, after one flash of power, which smote the soldiers to the ground, will yield Himself to the hands of sinners.

The Man who lay prone in anguish beneath the olive-trees comes forth in serene tranquillity, and gives Himself up to the death for us all. His agony was endured for us, and needs for its explanation the fact that it was so. His victory through prayer was for us, that we too might conquer by the same weapons. His voluntary surrender was for us, that by His stripes we might be healed. Surely we shall not sleep, as did these others, but, moved by His sorrows and animated by His victory, watch and pray that we may share in the virtue of His sufferings and imitate the example of His submission.