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

**MARK-075**. **PERPETUAL YOUTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment."*

*Mark 16:5*

Many great truths concerning Christ's death, and its worth to higher orders of being, are taught by the presence of that angel form, clad in the whiteness of his own God-given purity, sitting in restful contemplation in the dark house where the body of Jesus had lain. Which things the angels desire to look into. Many precious lessons of consolation and hope, too, lie in the wonderful words which he spake from his Lord and theirs to the weeping waiting women. But to touch upon these ever so slightly would lead us too far from our more immediate purpose.

It strikes one as very remarkable that this superhuman being should be described as a young man. Immortal youth, with all of buoyant energy and fresh power which that attribute suggests, belongs to those beings whom Scripture faintly shows as our elder brethren. No waste decays their strength, no change robs them of forces which have ceased to increase. For them there never comes a period when memory is more than hope. Age cannot wither them. As one of our modern mystics has said, hiding imaginative spiritualism under a crust of hard, dry matter-of-fact, In heaven the oldest angels are the youngest.

What is true of them is true of God's children, who are accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead, for they are equal unto the angels. For believing and loving souls, death too is a birth. All who pass through it to God, shall, in deeper meaning than lay in the words at first, return unto the days of their youth; and when the end comes, and they are clothed with their house from heaven, they shall stand by the throne, like him who sat in the sepulchre, clothed with lustrous light and radiant with unchanging youth.

Such a conception of the condition of the dead in Christ may be followed out in detail into many very elevating and strengthening thoughts. Let me attempt to set forth some of these now.

**I. The life of the faithful dead is eternal progress towards infinite perfection.**

For body and for spirit the life of earth is a definite whole, with distinct stages, which succeed each other in a well-marked order. There are youth, and maturity, and decay--the slow climbing to the narrow summit, a brief moment there in the streaming sunshine, and then a sure and gradual descent into the shadows beneath. The same equable and constant motion urges the orb of our lives from morning to noon, and from noon to evening. The glory of the dawning day, with its golden clouds and its dewy freshness, its new awakened hopes and its unworn vigour, climbs by silent, inevitable stages to the hot noon. But its ardours flame but for a moment; but for a moment does the sun poise itself on the meridian line, and the short shadow point to the pole. The inexorable revolution goes on, and in due time come the mists and dying purples of evening and the blackness of night. The same progress which brings April's perfumes burns them in the censer of the hot summer, and buries summer beneath the falling leaves, and covers its grave with winter's snow.

Everything that grows

Holds in perfection but a little moment.

So the life of man, being under the law of growth, is, in all its parts, subject to the consequent necessity of decline. And very swiftly does the direction change from ascending to descending. At first, and for a little while, the motion of the dancing stream, which broadens as it runs, and bears us past fields each brighter and more enamelled with flowers than the one before it, is joyous; but the slow current becomes awful as we are swept along when we would fain moor and land--and to some of us it comes to be tragic and dreadful at last, as we sit helpless, and see the shore rush past and hear the roar of the falls in our ears, like some poor wretch caught in the glassy smoothness above Niagara, who has flung down the oars, and, clutching the gunwale with idle hands, sits effortless and breathless till the plunge comes. Many a despairing voice has prayed as the sands ran out, and joys fled, Sun, stand thou still on Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon, but in vain. Once the wish was answered; but, for all other fighters, the twelve hours of the day must suffice for victory and for joy. Time devours his own children. The morning hours come to us with full hands and give, the evening hours come with empty hands and take; so that at the last naked shall he return to go as he came. Our earthly life runs through its successive stages, and for it, in body and mind, old age is the child of youth.

But the perfect life of the dead in Christ has but one phase, youth. It is growth without a limit and without decline. To say that they are ever young is the same thing as to say that their being never reaches its climax, that it is ever but entering on its glory; that is, as we have said, that the true conception of their life is that of eternal progress towards infinite perfection.

For what is the goal to which they tend? The likeness of God in Christ--all His wisdom, His love, His holiness. He is all theirs, and His whole perfection is to be transfused into their growing greatness. He is made unto them of God. wisdom, and righteousness, and salvation and redemption, nor can they cease to grow till they have outgrown Jesus and exhausted God. On the one hand is infinite perfection, destined to be imparted to the redeemed spirit. On the other hand is a capability of indefinite assimilation to, by reception of, that infinite perfection. We have no reason to set bounds to the possible expansion of the human spirit. If only there be fitting circumstances and an adequate impulse, it may have an endless growth. Such circumstances and such impulse are given in the loving presence of Christ in glory. Therefore we look for an eternal life which shall never reach a point beyond which no advance is possible. The path of the justin that higher state shineth more and more, and never touches the zenith. Here we float upon a landlocked lake, and on every side soon reach the bounding land; but there we are on a shoreless ocean, and never hear any voice that says, Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther. Christ will be ever before us, the yet unattained end of our desires; Christ will be ever above us, fairer, wiser, holier, than we; after unsummed eternities of advance there will yet stretch before us a shining way that leads to Him. The language, which was often breathed by us on earth in tones of plaintive confession, will be spoken in heaven in gladness, Not as though I had attained, either were perfect, but I follow after, The promise that was spoken by Him in regard to our mortality will be repeated by Him in respect to our celestial being, I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. And as this advance has no natural limit, either in regard to our Pattern or to ourselves, there will be no reverse direction to ensue. Here the one process has its two opposite parts; the same impulse carries up to the summit and forces down from it. But it is not so then. There growth will never merge into decay, nor exacting hours come to recall the gifts, which their free-handed sisters gave.

They who live in Christ, beyond the grave, begin with a relative perfection. They are thereby rendered capable of more complete Christ-likeness. The eye, by gazing into the day, becomes more recipient of more light; the spirit cleaves closer to a Christ more fully apprehended and more deeply loved; the whole being, like a plant reaching up to the sunlight, grows by its yearning towards the light, and by the light towards which it yearns--lifts a stronger stem and spreads a broader leaf, and opens into immortal flowers tinted by the sunlight with its own colours. This blessed and eternal growth towards Him whom we possess, to begin with, and never can exhaust, is the perpetual youth of God's redeemed.

We ought not to think of those whom we have loved and lost as if they had gone, carrying with them declining powers, and still bearing the marks of this inevitable law of stagnation, and then of decay, under which they groaned here. Think of them rather as having, if they sleep in Jesus, reversed all this, as having carried with them, indeed, all the gifts of matured experience and ripened wisdom which the slow years bring, but likewise as having left behind all the weariness of accomplished aims, the monotony of a formed character, the rigidity of limbs that have ceased to grow. Think of them as receiving again from the hands of Christ much of which they were robbed by the lapse of years. Think of them as then crowned with loving-kindness and satisfied with good, so that their youth is renewed like the eagle's. Think of them as again joyous, with the joy of beginning a career, which has no term but the sum of all perfection in the likeness of the infinite God. They rise like the song-bird, aspiring to the heavens, circling round, and ever higher, which singing still doth soar, and soaring ever singeth--up and up through the steadfast blue to the sun! Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall lose the marks of age as they grow in eternity, and they who have stood before the throne the longest shall be likest him who sat in the sepulchre young with immortal strength, radiant with unwithering beauty.

**II. The life of the faithful dead recovers and retains the best characteristics of youth.**

Each stage of our earthly course has its own peculiar characteristics, as each zone of the world has its own vegetation and animal life. And, for the most part, these characteristics cannot be anticipated in the preceding stage, nor prolonged into the succeeding. To some small extent they will bear transplanting, and he is nearest a perfect man who carries into each period of his life some trace of the special beauty of that which went before, making the child the father of the man, and carrying deep into old age the simple self-forgetfulness of the child and the energy of the youth. But this can only be partially done by any effort; and even those whose happily constituted temperaments make it comparatively easy for them, do often carry the weakness rather than the strength of the earlier into the later epochs. It is easier to be always childish than to be always childlike. The immaturity and heedlessness of youth bear carriage better than the more precious vintages of that sunny land--its freshness of eye and heart, its openness of mind, its energy of hand. Even when these are in any measure retained--beautiful as they are in old age--they are but too apt to be associated with an absence of the excellences more proper to the later stages of life, and to involve a want of patient judgment, of sagacious discrimination, of rooted affections, of prudent, persistent action. Beautiful indeed it is when the grace of the child and the strength of the young man live on in the fathers, and when the last of life encloses all that was good in all that went before. But miserable it is, and quite as frequent a case, when grey hairs cover a childish brain, and an aged heart throbs with the feverish passion of youthful blood. So for this life it is difficult, and often not well, that youth should be prolonged into manhood and old age.

But the thought is none the less true, that the perfection of our being requires the reappearance and the continuance of all that was good in each successive stage of it in the past. The brightest aspects of youth will return to all who live in Jesus, beyond the grave, and will be theirs for ever. Such a consideration branches out into many happy anticipations, which we can but very cursorily touch on here.

For instance--Youth is the time for hope. The world then lies all before us, fair and untried. We have not learnt our own weakness by many failures, nor the dread possibilities that lie in every future. The past is too brief to occupy us long, and its furthest point too near to be clothed in the airy purple, which draws the eye and stirs the heart. We are conscious of increasing powers which crave for occupation. It seems impossible but that success and joy shall be ours. So we live for a little while in a golden haze; we look down from our peak upon the virgin forests of a new world, that roll away to the shining waters in the west, and then we plunge into their mazes to hew out a path for ourselves, to slay the wild beasts, and to find and conquer rich lands. But soon we discover what hard work the march is, and what monsters lurk in the leafy coverts, and what diseases hover among the marshes, and how short a distance ahead we can see, and how far off it is to the treasure-cities that we dreamed of; and if at last we gain some cleared spot whence we can look forward, our weary eyes are searching at most for a place to rest, and all our hopes have dwindled to hopes of safety and repose. The day brings too much toil to leave us leisure for much anticipation. The journey has had too many failures, too many wounds, too many of our comrades left to die in the forest glades, to allow of our expecting much. We plod on, sometimes ready to faint, sometimes with lighter hearts, but not any more winged by hope as in the golden prime,--unless indeed for those of us who have fixed our hopes on God, and so get through the march better, because, be it rough or smooth, long or short, He moves before us to guide, and all our ways lead to Him. But even for these there comes, before very long, a time when they are weary of hoping for much more here, and when the light of youth fades into common day. Be it so! They will get the faculty and the use of it back again in far nobler fashion, when death has taken them away from all that is transient, and faith has through death given for their possession and their expectation, the certitudes of eternity. It will be worth while to look forward again, when we are again standing at the beginning of a life. It will be possible once more to hope, when disappointments are all past. A boundless future stretching before us, of which we know that it is all blessed, and that we shall reach all its blessedness, will give back to hearts that have long ceased to drink of the delusive cup which earthly hope offered to their lips, the joy of living in a present, made bright by the certain anticipation of a yet brighter future. Losing nothing by our constant progress, and certain to gain all which we foresee, we shall remember and be glad, we shall hope and be confident. With the past unsighed for, and the future sure, we shall have that magic gift, which earth's disappointments dulled, quickened by the sure mercies of the heavens.

Again, youth has mostly a certain keenness of relish for life which vanishes only too soon. There are plenty of our young men and women too, of this day, no doubt, who are as blasé and wearied before they are out of their teens as if they were fifty. So much the sadder for them, so much the worse for the social state which breeds such monsters. For monsters they are: there ought to be in youth a sense of fresh wonder undimmed by familiarity, the absence of satiety, a joy in joyful things because they are new as well as gladsome. The poignancy of these early delights cannot long survive. Custom stales them all, and wraps everything in its robe of ashen grey. We get used to what was once so fresh and wonderful, and do not care very much about anything any more. We smile pitying smiles--sadder than any tears--at boyish enthusiasm, and sometimes plume ourselves on having come to years which bring the philosophic mind; and all the while we know that we have lost a great gift, which here can never come back any more.

But what if that eager freshness of delight may yet be ours once again? What if the eternal youth of the heavens means, amongst other things, that there are pleasures which always satisfy but never cloy? What if, in perpetual advance, we find and keep for ever that ever new gladness, which here we vainly seek in perpetual distraction? What if constant new influxes of divine blessedness, and constant new visions of God, keep in constant exercise that sense of wonder, which makes so great a part of the power of youth? What if, after all that we have learned and all that we have received, we still have to say, It doth not yet appear what we shall be? Then, I think, in very profound and blessed sense, heaven would be perpetual youth.

I need not pause to speak of other characteristics of that period of life--such as its enthusiasm, its life by impulse rather than by reason, its buoyant energy and delight in action. All these gifts, so little cared for when possessed, so often misused, so irrevocably gone with a few brief years, so bitterly bewailed, will surely be found again, where God keeps all the treasures that He gives and we let fall. For transient enthusiasm, heaven will give us back a fervour of love like that of the seraphs, that have burned before His throne unconsumed and undecaying for unknown ages. For a life of instinctive impulse, we shall titan receive a life in which impulse is ever parallel with the highest law, and, doing only what we would, we shall do only what we ought. For energy which wanes as the years wax, and delight in action which is soon worn down into mechanical routine of toil, there will be bestowed strength akin to His who fainteth not, neither is weary. All of which maturity and old age robbed us is given back in nobler form. All the limitation and weakness which they brought, the coldness, the monotony, the torpor, the weariness, will drop away. But we shall keep all the precious things which they brought us. None of the calm wisdom, the ripened knowledge, the full-summed experience, the powers of service acquired in life's long apprenticeship, will be taken from us.

All will be changed indeed. All will be cleansed of the impurity which attaches to all. All will be accepted and crowned, not by reason of its goodness, but by reason of Christ's sacrifice, which is the channel of God's mercy. Though in themselves unworthy, and having nothing fit for the heavens, yet the souls that trust in Jesus, the Lord of Life, shall bear into their glory the characters which by His grace they wrought out here on earth, transfigured and perfected, but still the same. And to make up that full-summed completeness, will be given to them at once the perfection of all the various stages through which they passed on earth. The perfect man in the heavens will include the graces of childhood, the energies of youth, the steadfastness of manhood, the calmness of old age; as on some tropical trees, blooming in more fertile soil and quickened by a hotter sun than ours, you may see at once bud, blossom, and fruit--the expectancy of spring, and the maturing promise of summer, and the fulfilled fruition of autumn--hanging together on the unexhausted bough.

**III. The faithful dead shall live in a body that cannot grow old.**

Scripture assures us, I believe, that the dead in Christ are now in full, conscious enjoyment of His presence, and of all the blessedness that to dwell in Christ can bring to a spirit. All, then, which we have been saying applies to the present condition of those who sleep in Jesus. As concerning toil and trouble they take rest in sleep, as concerning contact with an outer world they slumber untroubled by its noise; but as concerning their communion with their Lord they, like us, whether we wake or sleep, live together with Him. But we know too, from Scripture, that the dead in Christ wait for the resurrection of the body, without which they cannot be perfected, nor restored to full activity of outward life in connection with an external creation.

The lesson which we venture to draw from this text enforces the familiar teaching of Scripture as to that body of glory--that it cannot decay, nor grow old. In this respect, too, eternal youth may be ours. Here we have a bodily organisation which, like all other living bodies, goes through its appointed series of changes, wastes in effort, and so needs reparation by food and rest, dies in growing, and finally waxes old and dissolves. In such a house, a man cannot be ever young. The dim eye and shaking hand, the wrinkled face and thin grey hairs cannot but age the spirit, since they weaken its instruments.

If the redeemed of the Lord are to be always young in spirit, they must have a body which knows no weariness, which needs no repose, which has no necessity of dying impressed upon it. And such a body Scripture plainly tells us will belong to those who are Christ's, at His coming. Our present acquaintance with the conditions of life makes that great promise seem impossible to many learned men amongst us. And I know not that anything but acquaintance with the sure word of God and with a risen Lord will make that seeming impossibility again a great promise for us. If we believe it at all, I think we must believe it because the resurrection of Jesus Christ says so, and because the Scriptures put it into articulate words as the promise of His resurrection. Ye do err, said Christ long ago, to those who denied a resurrection, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. Then knowledge of the Scriptures leads to belief in the resurrection of the dead, and the remembrance of our ignorance of the power of God disposes of all the doubts which are raised on the supposition that His present works are the pattern of His future ones, or the limits of His unexhausted energy.

We are content then to fall back on Scripture words, and to believe in the resurrection of the dead simply because it is, as we believe, told us from God.

For all who accept the message, this hope shines clear, of a building of God imperishable and solid, when contrasted with the tent in which we dwell here--of a body raised in incorruption, clothed with immortality, and so, as in many another phrase, declared to be exempt from decay, and therefore vigorous with unchanging youth. How that comes we cannot tell. Whether because that body of glory has no proclivity to mutation and decay, or whether the perpetual volition and power of God counteract such tendency and give, as the Book of Revelation says, to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God--matters not at all. The truth of the promise remains, though we have no means of knowing more than the fact, that we shall receive a body, fashioned like His who dieth no more. There shall be no weariness nor consequent need for repose-- they rest not day nor night. There shall be no faintness nor consequent craving for sustenance--they shall hunger no more neither thirst any more. There shall be no disease--the inhabitant thereof shall no more say, I am sick, neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels.

And if all this is true, that glorious and undecaying body will then be the equal and fit instrument of the perfected spirit, not, as it is now, the adequate instrument only of the natural life. The deepest emotions then will be capable of expression, nor as now, like some rushing tide, choke the floodgates through whose narrow aperture they try to press, and be all tossed into foam in the attempt. We shall then seem what we are, as we shall also be what we ought. All outward things will then be fully and clearly communicated to the spirit, for that glorious body will be a perfect instrument of knowledge. All that we desire to do we shall then do, nor be longer tortured with tremulous hands which can never draw the perfect circle that we plan, and stammering lips that will not obey the heart, and throbbing brain that will ache when we would have it clear. The ever-young spirit will have for true yokefellow a body that cannot tire, nor grow old, nor die.

The aged saints of God shall rise then in youthful beauty. More than the long-vanished comeliness shall on that day rest on faces that were here haggard with anxiety, and pinched with penury and years. There will be no more palsied hands, no more scattered grey hairs, no more dim and horny eyes, no more stiffened muscles and slow throbbing hearts. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown in decaying old age, it is raised in immortal youth. His servants shall stand in that day among the young-eyed cherubim, and be like them for ever. So we may think of the dead in Christ.

But do not forget that Christian faith may largely do for us here what God's grace and power will do for us in heaven, and that even now we may possess much of this great gift of perpetual youth. If we live for Christ by faith in Him, then may we carry with us all our days the energy, the hope, the joy of the morning tide, and be children in evil while men in understanding. With unworn and fresh heart we may bring forth fruit in old age, and have the crocus in the autumnal fields as well as in the spring-time of our lives. So blessed, we may pass to a peaceful end, because we hold His hand who makes the path smooth and the heart quiet. Trust yourselves, my brethren, to the immortal love and perfect work of the Divine Saviour, and by His dear might your days will advance by peaceful stages, whereof each gathers up and carries forward the blessings of all that went before, to a death which shall be a birth. Its chill waters will be as a fountain of youth from which you will rise, beautiful and strong, to begin an immortality of growing power. A Christian life on earth solves partly, a Christian life in heaven solves completely, the problem of perpetual youth. For those who die in His faith and fear, better is the end than the beginning, and the day of one's death than the day of one's birth. Christ keeps the good wine until the close of the feast.

Such is Thy banquet, dearest Lord;

O give us grace, to cast

Our lot with Thine, to trust Thy word,

And keep our best till last.