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

**MATTHEW-007. THE BAPTISM IN FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."*

*Matthew 3:11*

There is no more pathetic figure in Scripture than that of the forerunner of our Lord. Lonely and ascetic, charged to light against all the social order of which he was a part, seeing many of his disciples leave him for another master; then changing the free wilderness for a prison cell, and tortured by morbid doubts; finally murdered as the victim of a profligate woman's hate and a profligate man's perverse sense of honour: he had indeed to bear the burden of the Lord. But perhaps most pathetic of all is the combination in his character of gaunt strength and absolute humility. How he confronts these people whom he had to rebuke, and yet how, in a moment, the flashing eye sinks in lowest self-abasement before Him that cometh after me! How true, amidst many temptations, he was to his own description of himself: I am a voice--nothing more. His sinewy arm was ever pointed to the Lamb of God. It is given to very few to know so clearly their limits, and to still fewer--and these, men who keep very near God--to abide so contentedly within them, and to acquiesce so thankfully in the brightening glories of One whom self-importance and ambition would prompt to take for a rival and an enemy.

The words before us signalise at once John's lofty conception of the worth of his work, and his humble consciousness of its worthlessness as compared with Christ's. I indeed baptize you with water, but He with fire. As is the difference between the two elements, so is the difference between His ministry and mine--the one effecting an outward cleansing, the other being an inward penetrating power, which shall search men through and through, and, burning, shall purge away dross and filth. The text comes in the midst of a triple representation of our Lord's work in its relation to his, each portion of which ends with the refrain, the fire. But these three fires have not the same effects. The first and last destroy, the second cleanses. These are threatenings, but this is altogether a promise. There is a fire that consumes the barren tree and the light chaff that is whirled from the threshing-floor by the wind of His fan; but there is also a fire that, like the genial heat in some greenhouse, makes even the barren tree glow with blossom and loads its branches with precious fruit. His coming may kindle fire that will destroy, but its merciful purpose is to plunge us into that fiery baptism of the Holy Ghost, whereof the result is cleansing and life. Looking at the words before us, then, they lead us to think of that emblem of the Spirit of God, of Christ as bestowing it, and of its effects on us. I venture to offer a few considerations now on each of these points.

**I. The Holy Spirit is fire.**

It would scarcely be necessary to spend any time in illustrating that truth, but for the strange misapprehension of the words of our text which I believe to be not uncommon. People sometimes read them as if the first portion referred to those who trust in Christ, and who therefore receive the blessings of His sanctifying energy, whilst the latter words, on the other hand, were a threatening against unbelievers. Now, whatever may be the meaning of the emblem in the preceding and subsequent clauses, it can have but one meaning in our text itself--and that is, the purifying influence of the Spirit of God. Baptism with the Holy Ghost is not one thing and baptism with fire another, but the former is the reality of which the latter is the symbol.

It may be worth while to dwell briefly on the force of the emblem, which is often misunderstood. Fire, then, all over the world has been taken to represent the divine energy. Even in heathendom, side by side with the worship of light was the worship of fire. Even that cruel Moloch-worship, with all its abominations rested upon the notion that the swift power and ruddy blaze of fire were symbols of glorious attributes. Though the thought was darkened and marred, wrongly apprehended and ferociously worked out in ritual, it was a true thought for all that. And Scripture has from the beginning used it. It would carry us too far to enumerate the instances which might be adduced. But we may quote a few. When the covenant was made between God and Abraham, upon which all the subsequent revelation reposed, the divine presence was represented by a smoking furnace, and a lamp of fire that passed between the divided pieces of the sacrifice. When the great revelation of the divine Name was given to Moses, which prepared for the great deliverance from Egypt, the sign of it was a thorn-bush--one of the many dotted over the desert--burning and unconsumed. Surely the ordinary interpretation, which sees, in that undying flame, an emblem of Israel undestroyed in the furnace of bondage, is less natural than that which sees in it a sign having the same purpose and the same meaning as the deep words, I am that I am. The Name, the revelation proper, is accompanied by the sign which expresses in figure the very same truth--the unwearied power, the undecaying life of the great self-existent God, who wills and does not change, who acts and does not faint, who gives and is none the poorer, who fills the universe and is Himself the same, who burns and is not consumed--the I am. Further, we remember how to Israel the pledge and sacramental seal of God's guardianship and guidance was the pillar which, in the fervid light of the noonday sun, seemed to be but a column of wavering smoke, but which, when the darkness fell, glowed at the heart and blazed across the sleeping camp, a fiery guard. Who among us, says the prophet, shall dwell with everlasting burnings? The answer is a parallel to the description given in one of the Psalms in reply to the question, Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? From which parallelism, as well as from the whole tone of the passage, the conclusion is unavoidable that to Isaiah everlasting burnings was a symbolic designation of God. And, passing by all other references, we remember that our Lord Himself used the same emblem, as John does, with apparently the same meaning, when, yearning for the fulfilment of His work, He said, I am come to send fire on earth--oh that it were already kindled! The day of Pentecost teaches the same lesson by its fiery tongues; and the Seer in Patmos beheld, burning before the throne, the sevenfold lamps of fire which are the seven spirits of God.

Thus, then, there is a continuous chain of symbolism according to which some aspect of the divine nature, and especially of the Spirit of God, is set forth for us by fire. The question, then, comes to be--what is that aspect? In answer, I would remind you that the attributes and offices of the Spirit of God are never in Scripture represented as being destructive, and are only punitive, in so far as the convictions of sin, which He works in the heart, may be regarded as being punishments. The fire of God's Spirit, at all events, is not a wrathful energy, working pain and death, but a merciful omnipotence, bringing light and joy and peace. The Spirit which is fire is a Spirit which giveth life. So the symbol, in the special reference in the text, has nothing of terror or destruction but is full of hope and bright with promise.

Even in its more general application to the divine nature, the same thing is to a large extent true. The common impression is the reverse of this. The interpretation which most readers unconsciously supply to the passages of Scripture where God is spoken of as flaming fire, is that God's terrible wrath is revealed in them. I am very far from denying that the punitive and destructive side of the divine character is in the symbol, but certainly that is not its exclusive meaning, nor does it seem to me to be its principal one. The emblem is employed over and over again, in connections where it must mean chiefly the blessed and joyous aspect of God's Name to men. It is unquestionably part of the felicity of the symbol that there should be in it this double force--for so is it the fitter to show forth Him who, by the very same attributes, is the life of those who love Him and the death of those who turn from Him. But, still, though it is true that the bright and the awful aspects of that Name are in themselves one, and that their difference arises from the difference of the eyes which behold them, yet we are justified, I think, in saying that this emblem of fire regards mainly the former of these and not the latter. The principal ideas in it seem to be swift energy and penetrating power, which cleanses and transforms. It is fire as the source of light and heat; it is fire, not so much as burning up what it seizes into ashes, but rather as laying hold upon cold dead matter, making it sparkle and blaze, and turning it into the likeness of its own leaping brightness; it is fire as springing heavenwards, and bearing up earthly particles in its shooting spires; it is fire, as least gross of visible things;--in a word, it is fire as life, and not as death, that is the symbol of God. It speaks of the might of His transforming power, the melting, cleansing, vitalising influence of His communicated grace, the warmth of His conquering love. It has, indeed, an under side of possible judgment, punishment, and destruction, but it has a face of blessing, of life-giving, of sanctifying power. And therefore the Baptist spake glad tidings when he said, He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.

**II. Christ plunges us into this divine fire.**

I presume that scarcely any one will deny that our version weakens the force of John's words by translating with water, with the Holy Ghost, instead of in water, in the Holy Ghost. One of the most accurate of recent commentators, Meyer, for instance, in his remarks on this verse, says that the preposition here is to be understood in accordance with the idea of baptism that is immersion, not as expressing the instrument with which, but as meaning "in," and expressing the element in which the immersion takes place. I suppose that very few persons would hesitate to agree with that statement. If it is correct, what a grand idea is conveyed by that metaphor of the completeness of the contact with the Spirit of God into which we are brought! How it represents all our being as flooded with that transforming power! But, apart from the intensity communicated to the promise by such a figure, there is another important matter brought distinctly before us by the words, and that is Christ's personal agency in effecting this saturating of man's coldness with the fire from God. This testimony of John's is in full accord with Christ's claims for Himself, and with the whole tenor of Scripture on the subject. He is the Lord of the Spirit. He is come to scatter that fire on the earth. He brings the ruddy gift from heaven to mortals, carrying it in the bruised reed of His humanity; and, in pursuance of His merciful design, He is bound and suffers for our sakes, but, loosed at last from the bands by which it was not possible that He should be holden, and being by the right hand of God exalted, He hath shed forth this. His mighty work opens the way for the life-giving power of the Spirit to dwell as an habitual principle, and not as a mere occasional gift, among men, sanctifying their characters from the foundation, and not merely, as of old, bestowing special powers for special functions. He claims to send us the Comforter. We know but little of such high themes, but we can clearly see that, while there may be many other reasons for the full bestowment of the Spirit of God having to be preceded by the gift of Christ, one reason must be that the measure of individual and subjective inspiration varies according to the amount of objective revelation. The truth revealed is the condition and the instrument of the Spirit's working. The sharper that sword of the Spirit is, the mightier will be His power. Hence, only when the revelation of God is complete by the message of His Son, His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, was the full, permanent gift of the Spirit possible, not to make new revelations, but to unfold all that lay in the Word spoken once for all, in whom the whole Name of God is contained.

However that may be, the main thing for us, dear friends, is this--that Christ gives the Spirit. In and by Jesus, you and I are brought into real contact with this cleansing fire. Without His work, it would never have burned on earth; without our faith in His work it will never purify our souls. The Spirit of God is not a synonym for the moral influence which the principles of Christianity exert on men who believe them; but these principles, the truths revealed in Jesus Christ, are the means by which the Spirit works its noblest work. Our acceptance of these truths, then, our faith in Him whom these truths reveal, is absolutely essential to our possession of that cleansing power. The promise is of that Spirit which they that believe on Him should receive. If we have no faith in Jesus, then, however we may fancy that the gift of God can be ours by other means, the stern answer comes to our fond delusions and mistaken efforts, Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter. Oh! you who are seeking for spiritual elevation, for intellectual enlightenment, for the fire of a noble enthusiasm, for the consecration of pure hearts, anywhere but in Christ your Lord, will you not listen to the majestic and yet lowly voice, which blends in its tones grave and loving rebuke, gentle pity, wonder and sorrow at our blindness, earnest entreaty, and divine authority--If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that speaketh to thee, thou wouldst have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water?

Here are we cold, foul, dark, dead: there is that fire of God able to cleanse, to enlighten, to give life. How is true contact to be effected between our great need and His all-sufficient energy? One voice brings the answer for every Christian soul, I will send the Comforter. Brethren, let us cleave to Him, and in humble faith ask Him to plunge us into that fiery stream which, for all its fire, is yet a river of water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and in fire.

**III. That fiery baptism quickens and cleanses.**

In John's mind, the difference between the two baptisms, his and the Christ's, expresses accurately the difference between the two ministries and their effects. As has been truly and beautifully said, he is conscious of something cold and negative in his own teaching, of which the water of his baptism is a fit representation. His message is divine and true, but it is hard: Repent, do what you ought, wait for the Kingdom and its King. And, when his command has been obeyed, his disciples come up out of Jordan, at the best but superficially cleansed, and needing that the process begun in them should be perfected by mightier powers than any which his message wields. They need more than that outward washing--they need an inward cleansing; they need more than the preaching of repentance and morality--they need a gift of life; they need a new power poured into their souls, the fiery steam of which, as it rolls along, like a lava current through mountain forests, shall seize and burn every growth of evil in their natures. They need not water, but Spirit; not water, but Fire. They need what shall be life to their truest life, and death to all the death within, that separates them from the life of God.

So the two main effects expressed here are these: quickening and cleansing.

Fire gives warmth. We talk about ardent desires, warm hearts, the glow of love, the fire of enthusiasm, and even the flame of life. We draw the contrast with cold natures, which are loveless and unemotional, hard to stir and quicken; we talk about thawing reserve, about an icy torpor, and so on. The same general strain of allusion is undoubtedly to be traced in our text. Whatever more it means, it surely means this, that Christ comes to kindle in men's souls a blaze of enthusiastic, divine love, such as the world never saw, and to set them aflame with fervent earnestness, which shall melt all their icy hardness of heart, and turn cold self-regard into self-forgetting consecration.

Here, then, our text touches upon one of the very profoundest characteristics of Christianity considered as a power in human life. The contrast between it and all other religions and systems of ethics lies, amongst other things, in the stress which it lays upon love and on the earnestness which comes from love; whereas these are scarcely regarded as elements in virtue according to the world, and have certainly no place at all in the world's notion of temperate religion. Christ gives fervour by giving His Spirit. Christ gives fervour by bringing the warmth of His own love to bear upon our hearts through the Spirit, and that kindles ours. Where His great work for men is believed and trusted in, there, and there only, is there excited an intensity of consequent affection to Him which glows throughout the life. It is not enough to say that Christianity is singular among religious and moral systems in exalting fervour into a virtue. Its peculiarity lies deeper--in its method of producing that fervour. It is kindled by that Spirit using as His means the truth of the dying love of Christ. The secret of the Gospel is not solved by saying that Christ excites love in our souls. The question yet remains--how? There is but one answer to that. He loved us to the death. That truth laid on hearts by the Spirit, who takes of Christ's and shows them to us, and that truth alone, makes fire burst from their coldness.

Here is the power that produces that inner fervour without which virtue is a name and religion a yoke. Here is the contrast, not only to John's baptism, but to all worldly religion, to all formalism and decent deadness of external propriety. Here is the consecration of enthusiasm--not a lurid, sullen heat of ignorant fanaticism, but a living glow of an enkindled nature, which flames because kindled by the inextinguishable blaze of His love who gave Himself for us. He shall baptize you in fire.

Then, dear brethren, if we profess to have come into personal contact with Jesus Christ, here is a sharp test for us, and a solemn rebuke to much of our lives. For a Christian to be cold is sin. Our coldness can only come from our neglecting to stir up the gift that is in us. People reproach us with extravagant emotion: let us confess that we have never deserved that reproach half as much as we ought. The world's ideal of religion is decorous coldness--has not the world's ideal been our practice? We are afraid to be fervent, but our true danger is icy torpor. We sit frost-bitten and almost dead among the snows, and all the while the gracious sunshine is pouring down, that is able to melt the white death that covers us, and to free us from the bonds that hold us prisoned in their benumbing clasp.

No evil is more marked among the Christian Churches of this day than precisely the absence of this spirit of burning. There is plenty of liberality and effort, there is much interest in religious questions, there is genial tolerance and wide culture, there is a high standard of morality, and, on the whole, a tolerable adherence to it--but there is little love, and little fervour. I have somewhat against thee, that thou hast left thy first love.

Where is that Spirit which was poured out on Pentecost? Where are the cloven tongues of fire, where the flame which Christ died to light up? Has it burned down to grey ashes, or, like some house-fire, lit and left untended, has it gone out after a little ineffectual crackling among the lighter pieces of wood and paper, without ever reaching the solid mass of obstinate coal? Where? The question is not difficult to answer. His promise remains faithful. He does send the Spirit, who is fire. But our sin, our negligence, our eager absorption with worldly cares, and our withdrawal of mind and heart from the patient contemplation of His truth, have gone far to quench the Spirit. Is it not so? Are our souls on fire with the love of God, aglow with the ardour caught from Christ's love? Does that love which fills our hearts coruscate and flame in our lives, making us lights in the darkness, as some firebrand caught up from the hearth will serve for a torch and blaze out into the night? He shall baptize with fire.

O Thou that earnest from above,

The pure celestial fire to impart,

Kindle a flame of sacred love

On the mean altar of my heart.

Then there is another thought expressed by this symbol, namely, that this baptism gives cleansing as well as warmth, or rather gives cleansing by warmth. Fire purifies. That Spirit, which is fire, produces holiness in heart and character, by this most chiefly among all His manifold operations, that He excites the flame of love to God, which burns our souls clear with its white fervours. This is the Christian method of making men good,--first, know His love, then believe it, then love Him back again, and then let that genial heat permeate all your life, and it will woo forth everywhere blossoms of beauty and fruits of holiness, that shall clothe the pastures of the wilderness with gladness. Did you ever see a blast-furnace? How long would it take a man, think you, with hammer and chisel, or by chemical means, to get the bits of ore out from the stony matrix? But fling them into the great cylinder, and pile the fire and let the strong draught roar through the burning mass, and by evening you can run off a golden stream of pure and fluid metal, from which all the dross and rubbish is parted, which has been charmed out of all its sullen hardness, and will take the shape of any mould into which you like to run it. The fire has conquered, has melted, has purified. So with us. Love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us, love that answers to Christ's, love that is fixed upon Him who is pure and separate from sinners, will purify us and sever us from our sins. Nothing else will. All other cleansing is superficial, like the water of John's baptism. Moralities and the externals of religion will wash away the foulness which lies on the surface, but stains that have sunk deep into the very substance of the soul, and have dyed every thread in warp and woof to its centre, are not to be got rid of so. The awful words which our great dramatist puts into the mouth of the queenly murderess are heavy with the weight of most solemn truth. After all vain attempts to cleanse away the stains, we, like her, have to say, There's the smell of the blood still--will these hands ne'er be clean? No, never; unless there be something mightier, more inward in its power, than the water with which we can wash them, some better gospel than Repent and reform. God be thanked, there is a mightier detergent than all these--even that divine Spirit which Christ gives, and that divine forgiveness which Christ brings. There, and there alone, dear brethren, we can lose all the guilt of our faultful past, and receive a new and better life which will mould our future into growing likeness to His great purity. Oh do not resist that merciful searching fire, which is ready to penetrate our very bones and marrow, and burn up the seeds of death which lurk in the inmost intents of the heart! Let Him plunge you into that gracious baptism, as we put some poor piece of foul clay into the fire, and like it, as you glow you will whiten, and all the spots will melt away before the conquering tongues of the cleansing flame. In that furnace, heated seven times hotter than any earthly power could achieve, they who walk live by the presence of the Son of Man, and nothing is consumed but the bonds that held them. His Spirit is fire, and that Spirit of fire is, therefore, the Spirit of holiness.

But take one warning word in conclusion. The alternative for every man is to be baptized in the fire or to be consumed by it. The symbol of which we have been speaking sets forth the double thought of purifying and destruction. Nothing which we have said as to the former in the least weakens the completing truth that there is in it an under side of possible terror. One of the felicities of the emblem is its capacity to set forth this twofold idea. There is that in the divine nature which the Bible calls wrath, the necessary displeasure and aversion of holy love from sin and wrong-doers. There is in the divine procedure even now and here, the manifestation of that aversion in punishment. The light of Israel becomes a flaming fire.

I have no panorama of hell to exhibit, and I would speak with all reticence on matters so awful; but this much, at any rate, is clear, that the very same revelation of God, thankfully accepted and submitted to, is the medium of cleansing and the source of joyful life, and, rejected, becomes the source of sorrow and the occasion of death. Every man sees that aspect of God's face which he has made himself fit to see. Every gift of God is to men either a savour of life unto life, or a savour of death unto death. Most chiefly is this so in regard to Christ and His gospel, who, though He came not to judge but to save, yet by reason of that very universal purpose of salvation, becomes a judge in the act of saving, and a condemnation to those in whom, by their own faults, that purpose is not fulfilled.

The same pillar of fire which gladdened the ranks of Israel as they camped by the Red Sea, shone baleful and terrible to the Egyptian hosts. The same Ark of the Covenant whose presence blessed the house of Obed-edom, and hallowed Zion, and saved Jerusalem, smote the Philistines, and struck down their bestial gods. Christ and His gospel even here hurt the men whom they do not save.

And we have only to carry that process onwards into another world, and suppose it made more energetic there, as it will be, to feel dimly in how awful a sense it may be that the same fire which gives life may be the occasion of death--and how profound a truth lies in the words--

What maketh Heaven, that maketh Hell.

Yes, verily; to be salted with fire or to be consumed by it, to be baptized in it or to be cast into it, is the choice offered to us all; to thee, my brother, and to me. Israel made its choice, and in seventy years, the Roman standards on Zion and the flames leaping round the Temple, interpreted John's words in one of their halves, while the growing energy of the fire that was lit on Pentecost fulfilled them in the other. Many a nation and Church has made its choice since then. You have to make yours. The fire shall try every man's work, of what sort it is. Shall our work be gold, and silver, and precious stones which shall gleam and flash in the light, or wood, hay, and stubble which shall writhe for a moment in the blaze and perish? Our God is a consuming fire. Shall that be the ground of my confidence that I shall one day be pure from all my sins, or shall it be the parent of my ghastliest fear that I may be, like the chaff, destroyed by contact with a holy love rejected, with a Saviour disbelieved, with a Spirit grieved and quenched? Choose which.