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

**MATTHEW-127**. **GETHSAMANE, THE OIL PRESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"36.* *Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. 37. And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. 38. Then saith He unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with Me. 39. And He went a little farther, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt. 40. And He cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with Me one hour! 41. Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. 42. He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done. 43. And He came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. 44. And He left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. 45. Then cometh He to His disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray Me."*

*Matthew 26:36-46*

One shrinks from touching this incomparable picture of unexampled sorrow, for fear lest one's finger-marks should stain it. There is no place here for picturesque description, which tries to mend the gospel stories by dressing them in to-day's fashions, nor for theological systematisers and analysers of the sort that would botanise upon their mother's grave. We must put off our shoes, and feel that we stand on holy ground. Though loving eyes saw something of Christ's agony, He did not let them come beside Him, but withdrew into the shadow of the gnarled olives, as if even the moonbeams must not look too closely on the mystery of such grief. We may go as near as love was allowed to go, but stop where it was stayed, while we reverently and adoringly listen to what the Evangelist tells us of that unspeakable hour.

**I. Mark the exceeding sorrow of the Man of Sorrows.**

Somewhere on the western foot of Olivet lay the garden, named from an oil-press formerly or then in it, which was to be the scene of the holiest and sorest sorrow on which the moon, that has seen so much misery, has ever looked. Truly it was an oil-press, in which the good olivewas crushed by the grip of unparalleled agony, and yielded precious oil, which has been poured into many a wound since then. Eight of the eleven are left at or near the entrance, while He passes deeper into the shadows with the three. They had been witnesses of His prayers once before, on the slopes of Hermon, when He was transfigured before them. They are now to see a no less wonderful revelation of His glory in His filial submission. There is something remarkable in Matthew's expression, He began to be sorrowful,--as if a sudden wave of emotion, breaking over His soul, had swept His human sensibilities before it. The strange word translated by the Revisers sore troubledis of uncertain derivation, and may possibly be simply intended to intensify the idea of sorrow; but more probably it adds another element, which Bishop Lightfoot describes as the confused, restless, half-distracted state which is produced by physical derangement or mental distress. A storm of agitation and bewilderment broke His calm, and forced from His patient lips, little wont to speak of His own emotions, or to seek for sympathy, the unutterably pathetic cry, My soul is exceeding sorrowful--compassed about with sorrow, as the word means--even unto death. No feeble explanation of these words does justice to the abyss of woe into which they let us dimly look. They tell the fact, that, a little more and the body would have sunk under the burden. He knew the limits of human endurance, for all things were made by Him, and, knowing it, He saw that He had grazed the very edge. Out of the darkness He reaches a hand to feel for the grasp of a friend, and piteously asks these humble lovers to stay beside Him, not that they could help Him to bear the weight, but that their presence had some solace in it. His agony must be endured alone, therefore He bade them tarry there; but He desired to have them at hand, therefore He went but a little forward. They could not bear it with Him, but they could watch withHim, and that poor comfort is all He asks. No word came from them. They were, no doubt, awed into silence, as the truest sympathy is used to be, in the presence of a great grief. Is it permitted us to ask what were the fountains of these bitter floods that swept over Christ's sinless soul? Was the mere physical shrinking from death all? If so, we may reverently say that many a maiden and old man, who drew all their fortitude from Jesus, have gone to stake or gibbet for His sake, with a calm which contrasts strangely with His agitation. Gethsemane is robbed of its pathos and nobleness if that be all. But it was not all. Rather it was the least bitter of the components of the cup. What lay before Him was not merely death, but the death which was to atone for a world's sin, and in which, therefore, the whole weight of sin's consequences was concentrated. The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquities of us all; that is the one sufficient explanation of this infinitely solemn and tender scene. Unless we believe that, we shall find it hard to reconcile His agitation in Gethsemane with the perfection of His character as the captain of the noble army of martyrs.

**II. Note the prayer of filial submission.**

Matthew does not tell us of the sweat falling audibly and heavily, and sounding to the three like slow blood-drops from a wound, nor of the strengthening angel, but he gives us the prostrate form, and the threefold prayer, renewed as each moment of calm, won by it, was again broken in upon by a fresh wave of emotion. Thrice He had to leave the disciples, and came back, a calm conqueror; and twice the enemy rallied and returned to the assault, and was at last driven finally from the field by the power of prayer and submission. The three Synoptics differ in their report of our Lord's words, but all mean the same thing in substance; and it is obvious that much more must have been spoken than they report. Possibly what we have is only the fragments that reached the three before they fell asleep. In any case, Jesus was absent from them on each occasion long enough to allow of their doing so.

Three elements are distinguishable in our Lord's prayer. There is, first, the sense of Sonship, which underlies all, and was never more clear than at that awful moment. Then there is the recoil from the cup, which natural instinct could not but feel, though sinlessly. The flesh shrank from the Cross, which else had been no suffering; and if no suffering, then had been no atonement. His manhood would not have been like ours, nor His sorrows our pattern, if He had not thus drawn back, in His sensitive humanity, from the awful prospect now so near. But natural instinct is one thing, and the controlling will another. However currents may have tossed the vessel, the firm hand at the helm never suffered them to change her course. The will, which in this prayer He seems so strangely to separate from the Father's, even in the act of submission, was the will which wishes, not that which resolves. His fixed purpose to die for the world's sin never wavered. The shrinking does not reach the point of absolutely and unconditionally asking that the cup might pass. Even in the act of uttering the wish, it is limited by that if it be possible, which can only mean--possible, in view of the great purpose for which He came. That is to be accomplished, at any cost; and unless it can be accomplished though the cup be withdrawn, He does not even wish, much less will, that it should be withdrawn. So, the third element in the prayer is the utter resignation to the Father's will, in which submission He found peace, as we do.

He prayed His way to perfect calm, which is ever the companion of perfect self-surrender to God. They who cease from their own works do enter into rest. All the agitations which had come storming in massed battalions against Him are defeated by it. They have failed to shake His purpose, they now fail even to disturb His peace. So, victorious from the dreadful conflict, and at leisure of heart to care for others, He can go back to the disciples. But even whilst seeking to help them, a fresh wave of suffering breaks in on His calm, and once again He leaves them to renew the struggle. The instinctive shrinking reasserts itself, and, though overcome, is not eradicated. But the second prayer is yet more rooted in acquiescence than the first. It shows that He had not lost what He had won by the former; for it, as it were, builds on that first supplication, and accepts as answer to its contingent petition the consciousness, accompanying the calm, that it was not possible for the cup to pass from Him. The sense of Sonship underlies the complete resignation of the second prayer as of the first. It has no wish but God's will, and is the voluntary offering of Himself. Here He is both Priest and Sacrifice, and offers the victim with this prayer of consecration. So once more He triumphs, because once more, and yet more completely, He submits, and accepts the Cross. For Him, as for us, the Cross accepted ceases to be a pain, and the cup is no more bitter when we are content to drink it. Once more in fainter fashion the enemy came on, casting again his spent arrows, and beaten back by the same weapon. The words were the same, because no others could have expressed more perfectly the submission which was the heart of His prayers and the condition of His victory.

Christ's prayer, then, was not for the passing of the cup, but that the will of God might be done in and by Him, and He was heard in that He feared, not by being exempted from the Cross, but by being strengthened through submission for submission. So His agony is the pattern of all true prayer, which must ever deal with our wishes, as He did with His instinctive shrinking,--present them wrapped in an if it be possible, and followed by a nevertheless. The meaning of prayer is not to force our wills on God's, but to bend our wills to His; and that prayer is really answered of which the issue is our calm readiness for all that He lays upon us.

**III. Note the sad and gentle remonstrance with the drowsy three.**

The sleep of the disciples, and of these disciples, and of all three, and such an overpowering sleep, remains even after Luke's explanation, "for sorrow," a psychological riddle(Meyer). It is singularly parallel with the sleep of the same three at the Transfiguration--an event which presents the opposite pole of our Lord's experiences, and yields so many antithetical parallels to Gethsemane. No doubt the tension of emotion, which had lasted for many hours, had worn them out; but, if weariness had weighed down their eyelids, love should have kept them open. Such sleep of such disciples may have been a riddle, but it was also a crime, and augured imperfect sympathy. Gentle surprise and the pain of disappointed love are audible in the question, addressed to Peter especially, as he had promised so much, but meant for all. This was all that Jesus got in answer to His yearning for sympathy. I looked for some to take pity, but there was none. Those who loved Him most lay curled in dead slumber within earshot of His prayers. If ever a soul tasted the desolation of utter loneliness, that suppliant beneath the olives tasted it. But how little of the pain escapes His lips! The words but hint at the slightness of their task compared with His, at the brevity of the strain on their love, and at the companionship which ought to have made sleep impossible. May we not see in Christ's remonstrance a word for all? For us, too, the task of keeping awake in the enchanted ground is light, measured against His, and the time is short, and we have Him to keep us company in the watch, and every motive of grateful love should make it easy; but, alas, how many of us sleep a drugged and heavy slumber!

The gentle remonstrance soon passes over into counsel as gentle. Watchfulness and prayer are inseparable. The one discerns dangers, the other arms against them. Watchfulness keeps us prayerful, and prayerfulness keeps us watchful. To watch without praying is presumption, to pray without watching is hypocrisy. The eye that sees clearly the facts of life will turn upwards from its scanning of the snares and traps, and will not look in vain. These two are the indispensable conditions of victorious encountering of temptation. Fortified by them, we shall not enter intoit, though we encounter it. The outward trial will remain, but its power to lead us astray will vanish. It will still be danger or sorrow, but it will not be temptation; and we shall pass through it, as a sunbeam through foul air, untainted, and keeping heaven's radiance. That is a lesson for a wider circle than the sleepy three.

It is followed by words which would need a volume to expound in all their depth and width of application, but which are primarily a reason for the preceding counsel, as well as a loving apology for the disciplessleep. Christ is always glad to give us credit for even imperfect good; His eye, which sees deeper than ours, sees more lovingly, and is not hindered from marking the willing spirit by recognising weak flesh. But these words are not to be made a pillow for indolent acquiescence in the limitations which the flesh imposes on the spirit. He may take merciful count of these, and so may we, in judging others, but it is fatal to plead them at the bar of our own consciences. Rather they should be a spur to our watchfulness and to our prayer. We need these because the flesh is weak, still more because, in its weakness toward good, it is strong to evil. Such exercise will give governing power to the spirit, and enable it to impose its will on the reluctant flesh. If we watch and pray, the conflict between these two elements in the renewed nature will tend to unity and peace by the supremacy of the spirit; if we do not, it will tend to cease by the unquestioned tyranny of the flesh. In one or other direction our lives are tending.

Strange that such words had no effect. But so it was, and so deep was the apostlessleep that Christ left them undisturbed the second time. The relapse is worse than the original disease. Sleep broken and resumed is more torpid and fatal than if it had not been interrupted. We do not know how long it lasted, though the whole period in the garden must have been measured by hours; but at last it was broken by the enigmatical last words of our Lord. The explanation of the direct opposition between the consecutive sentences, by taking the Sleep on nowas ironical, jars on one's reverence. Surely irony is out of keeping with the spirit of Christ then. Rather He bids them sleep on, since the hour is come, in sad recognition that the need for their watchful sympathy is past, and with it the opportunity for their proved affection. It is said with a tone of contemplative melancholy, and is almost equivalent to too late, too late. The memorable sermon of F. W. Robertson, on this text, rightly grasps the spirit of the first clause, when it dwells with such power on the thought of the irrevocable pastof wasted opportunities and neglected duty. But the sudden transition to the sharp, short command and broken sentences of the last verse is to be accounted for by the sudden appearance of the flashing lights of the band led by Judas, somewhere near at hand, in the valley. The mood of pensive reflection gives place to rapid decision. He summons them to arise, not for flight, but that He may go out to meet the traitor. Escape would have been easy. There was time to reach some sheltering fold of the hill in the darkness; but the prayer beneath the silver-grey olives had not been in vain, and these last words in Gethsemane throb with the Son's willingness to yield Himself up, and to empty to its dregs the cup which the Father had given Him.