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

**PHILIPPIANS-008**. **THE ASCENT OF JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9. Wherefore also God highly exalted Him and gave unto Him the name which is above every name; 10. That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth; 11. And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

*Philippians 2:9-11 (R.V.)*

He that humbleth himself shall be exalted, said Jesus. He is Himself the great example of that law. The Apostle here goes on to complete his picture of the Lord Jesus as our pattern. In previous verses we had the solemn steps of His descent, and the lifelong humility and obedience of the incarnate Son, the man Christ Jesus. Here we have the wondrous ascent which reverses all the former process. Our text describes the reflex motion by which Jesus is borne back to the same level as that from which the descent began.

We have

**I. The act of exaltation which forms the contrast and the parallel to the descent.**

God highly exalted Him. The Apostle coins an emphatic word which doubly expresses elevation, and in its grammatical form shows that it indicates a historical fact. That elevation was a thing once accomplished on this green earth; that is to say it came to pass in the fact of our Lord's ascension when from some fold of the Mount of Olives He was borne upwards and, with blessing hands, was received into the Shechinah cloud, the glory of which hid Him from the upward-gazing eyes.

It is plain that the Him of whom this tremendous assertion is made, must be the same as the He of whom the previous verses spoke, that is, the Incarnate Jesus. It is the manhood which is exalted. His humiliation consisted in His becoming man, but His exaltation does not consist in His laying aside His humanity. It is not a transient but an eternal union into which in the Incarnation it entered with divinity. Henceforward we have to think of Him in all the glory of His heavenly state as man, and as truly and completely in the likeness of men as when He walked with bleeding feet on the flinty road of earthly life. He now bears for ever the form of God and the fashion of a man.

Here I would pause for a moment to point out that the calm tone of this reference to the ascension indicates that it was part of the recognised Christian beliefs, and implies that it had been familiar long before the date of this Epistle, which itself dates from not more than at the most thirty years from the death of Christ. Surely that lapse of time is far too narrow to allow of such a belief having sprung up, and been universally accepted about a dead man, who all the while was lying in a nameless grave.

The descent is presented as His act, but decorum and truth required that the exaltation should be God's act. He humbled Himself, but God exalted Him. True, He sometimes represented Himself as the Agent of His own Resurrection and Ascension, and established a complete parallel between His descent and His ascent, as when He said, I came out from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go unto the Father. He was no less obedient to the Father's will when He ascended up on high, than He was when He came down to earth, and whilst, from one point of view, His Resurrection and Ascension were as truly His own acts as were His birth and His death, from another, He had to pray, And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was. The Titans presumptuously scaled the heavens, according to the old legend, but the Incarnate Lord returned to His own calm home, His habitation from eternity, was exalted thither by God, in token to the universe that the Father approved the Son's descent, and that the work which the Son had done was indeed, as He declared it to be, finished. By exalting Him, the Father not merely reinstated the divine Word in its eternal union with God, but received into the cloud of glory the manhood which the Word had assumed.

**II. The glory of the name of Jesus.**

What is the name which is above every name? It is the name Jesus. It is to be noted that Paul scarcely ever uses that simple appellative. There are, roughly speaking, about two hundred instances in which he names our Lord in his Epistles, and there are only four places, besides this, in which he uses this as his own, and two in which he, as it were, puts it into the mouth of an enemy. Probably then, some special reason led to its occurrence here, and it is not difficult, I think, to see what that reason is. The simple personal name was given indeed with reference to His work, but had been borne by many a Jewish child before Mary called her child Jesus, and the fact that it is this common name which is exalted above every name, brings out still more strongly the thought already dwelt upon, that what is thus exalted is the manhood of our Lord. The name which expressed His true humanity, which showed His full identification with us, which was written over His Cross, which perhaps shaped the taunt He saved others, Himself He cannot save,--that name God has lifted high above all names of council and valour, of wisdom and might, of authority and rule. It is shrined in the hearts of millions who render to it perfect trust, unconditional obedience, absolute loyalty. Its growing power, and the warmth of personal love which it evokes, in centuries and lands so far removed from the theatre of His life, is a unique thing in the world's history. It reigns in heaven.

But Paul is not content with simply asserting the sovereign glory of the name of Jesus. He goes on to set it forth as being what no other name borne by man can be, the ground and object of worship, when he declares, that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. The words are quoted from the second Isaiah, and occur in one of the most solemn and majestic utterances of the monotheism of the Old Testament. And Paul takes these words, undeterred by the declaration which precede them, I Am am God and there is none else, applies them to Jesus, to the manhood of our Lord. Bowing the knee is of course prayer, and in these great words the issue of the work of Jesus is unmistakably set forth, as not only being that He has declared God to men, who through Him are drawn to worship the Father, but that their emotions of love, reverence, worship, are turned to Him, though as the Apostle is careful immediately to note, they are not thereby intercepted from, but directed to, the glory of God the Father. In the eternities before His descent, there was equality with God, and when He returns, it is to the Father, who in Him has become the object of adoration, and round whose throne gather with bended knees all those who in Jesus see the Father.

The Apostle still further dwells on the glory of the name as that of the acknowledged Lord. And here we have with significant variation in strong contrast to the previous name of Jesus, the full title Jesus Christ Lord. That is almost as unusual in its completeness as the other in its simplicity, and it comes in here with tremendous energy, reminding us of the great act to which we owe our redemption, and of all the prophecies and hopes which, from of old, had gathered round the persistent hope of the coming Messiah, while the name of Lord proclaims His absolute dominion. The knee is bowed in reverence, the tongue is vocal in confession. That confession is incomplete if either of these three names is falteringly uttered, and still more so, if either of them is wanting. The Jesus whom Christians confess is not merely the man who was born in Bethlehem and known among men as Jesus the carpenter. In these modern days, His manhood has been so emphasised as to obscure His Messiahship and to obliterate His dominion, and alas! there are many who exalt Him by the name that Mary gave Him, who turn away from the name of Jesus as Hebrew old clothes, and from the name of Lord as antiquated superstition. But in all the lowliness and gentleness of Jesus there were not wanting lofty claims to be the Christ of whom prophets and righteous men of old spake, and whose coming many a generation desired to see and died without the sight, and still loftier and more absolute claims to be invested with all power in heaven and earth, and to sit down with the Father on His throne. It is dangerous work to venture to toss aside two of these three names, and to hope that if we pronounce the third of them, Jesus, with appreciation, it will not matter if we do not name Him either Christ or Lord.

If it is true that the manhood of Jesus is thus exalted, how wondrous must be the kindred between the human and the divine, that it should be capable of this, that it should dwell in the everlasting burnings of the Divine Glory and not be consumed! How blessed for us the belief that our Brother wields all the forces of the universe, that the human love which Jesus had when He bent over the sick and comforted the sorrowful, is at the centre. Jesus is Lord, the Lord is Jesus!

The Psalmist was moved to a rapture of thanksgiving when he thought of man as made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honour, but when we think of the Man Jesus sitting at the right hand of God, the Psalmist's words seem pale and poor, and we can repeat them with a deeper meaning and a fuller emphasis, Thou madest Him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands, Thou hast put all things under His feet.

**III. The universal glory of the name.**

By the three classes into which the Apostle divides creation, things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth, he simply intends to declare, that Jesus is the object of all worship, and the words are not to be pressed as containing dogmatic assertions as to the different classes mentioned. But guided by other words of Scripture, we may permissibly think that the things in heaven tell us that the angels who do not need His mediation learn more of God by His work and bow before His throne. We cannot be wrong in believing that the glory of His work stretches far beyond the limits of humanity, and that His kingdom numbers other subjects than those who draw human breath. Other lips than ours say with a great voice, Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

The things on earth are of course men, and the words encourage us to dim hopes about which we cannot dogmatise of a time when all the wayward self-seeking and self-tormenting children of men shall have learned to know and love their best friend, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Things under the earth seems to point to the old thought of Sheol or Hades or a separate state of the dead. The words certainly suggest that those who have gone from us are not unconscious nor cut off from the true life, but are capable of adoration and confession. We cannot but remember the old belief that Jesus in His death descended into Hell, and some of us will not forget Fra Angelico's picture of the open doorway with a demon crushed beneath the fallen portal, and the crowd of eager faces and outstretched hands swarming up the dark passage, to welcome the entering Christ. Whatever we may think of that ancient representation, we may at least be sure that, wherever they are, the dead in Christ praise and reverence and love.

**IV. The glory of the Father in the glory of the name of Jesus.**

Knees bent and tongues confessing the absolute dominion of Jesus Christ could only be offence and sin if He were not one with the Father. But the experience of all the thousands since Paul wrote, whose hearts have been drawn in reverent and worshipping trust to the Son, has verified the assertion, that to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord diverts no worship from God, but swells and deepens the ocean of praise that breaks round the throne. If it is true, and only if it is true, that in the life and death of Jesus all previous revelations of the Father's heart are surpassed, if it is true and only if it is true, as He Himself said, that I and the Father are one, can Paul's words here be anything but an incredible paradox. But unless these great words close and crown the Apostle's glowing vision, it is maimed and imperfect, and Jesus interposes between loving hearts and God. One could almost venture to believe that at the back of Paul's mind, when he wrote these words, was some remembrance of the great prayer, I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou gavest Me to do. When the Son is glorified we glorify the Father, and the words of our text may well be remembered and laid to heart by any who will not recognise the deity of the Son, because it seems to them to dishonour the Father. Their honour is inseparable and their glory one.

There is a sense in which Jesus is our example even in His ascent and exaltation, just as He was in His descent and humiliation. The mind which was in Him is for us the pattern for earthly life, though the deeds in which that mind was expressed, and especially His obedience to the death of the Cross, are so far beyond any self-sacrifice of ours, and are inimitable, unique, and needing no repetition while the world lasts. And as we can imitate His unexampled sacrifice, so we may share His divine glory, and, resting on His own faithful word, may follow the calm motion of His Ascension, assured that where He is there we shall be also, and that the manhood which is exalted in Him is the prophecy that all who love Him will share His glory. The question for us all is, have we in us the mind that was in Christ? and the other question is, what is that name to us? Can we say, Thy mighty name salvation is? If in our deepest hearts we grasp that name, and with unfaltering lips can say that there is none other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved but the name of Jesus, then we shall know that

To us with Thy dear name are given, Pardon, and holiness, and heaven.