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

**PHILIPPIANS-015**. **THE LOSS OF ALL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Though I myself might have confidence even in the flesh: if any other man thinketh to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more: circumcised the eighth day of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless. Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung."*

*Philippians 3:4-8 (R.V.)*

We have already noted that in the previous verses the Apostle is beginning to prepare for closing his letter, but is carried away into the long digression of which our text forms the beginning. The last words of the former verse open a thought of which his mind is always full. It is as when an excavator strikes his pickaxe unwittingly into a hidden reservoir and the blow is followed by a rush of water, which carries away workmen and tools. Paul has struck into the very deepest thoughts which he has of the Gospel and out they pour. That one antithesis, the loss of all, the gain of Christ, carried in it to him the whole truth of the Christian message. We may well ask ourselves what are the subjects which lie so near our hearts, and so fill our thoughts, that a chance word sets us off on them, and we cannot help talking of them when once we begin.

The text exemplifies another characteristic of Paul's, his constant habit of quoting his own experience as illustrating the truth. His theology is the generalisation of his own experience, and yet that continual autobiographical reference is not egotism, for the light in which he delights to present himself is as the recipient of the great grace of God in pardoning sinners. It is a result of the complete saturation of himself with the Gospel. It was to him no mere body of principles or thoughts, it was the very food and life of his life. And so this characteristic reveals not only his natural fervour of character, but the profound and penetrating hold which the Gospel had on his whole being.

In our text he presents his own experience as the type to which ours must on the whole be conformed. He had gone through an earthquake which had shattered the very foundations of his life. He had come to despise all that he had counted most precious, and to clasp as the only true treasures all that he had despised. With him the revolution had turned his whole life upside down. Though the change cannot be so subversive and violent with us, the forsaking of self-confidence must be as real, and the clinging to Jesus must be as close, if our Christianity is to be fervid and dominant in our lives.

**I. The treasures that were discovered to be worthless.**

We have already had occasion in the previous sermon to refer to Paul's catalogue of things that were gain to him, but we must consider it a little more closely here. We may repeat that it is important for understanding Paul's point of view to note that by flesh he means the whole self considered as independent of God. The antithesis to it is spirit, that is humanity regenerated and vitalised by Divine influence. Flesh, then, is humanity not so vitalised. That is to say, it is self, including both body and emotions, affections, thoughts, and will.

As to the points enumerated, they are those which made the ideal to a Jew, including purity of race, punctilious orthodoxy, flaming zeal, pugnacious antagonism, and blameless morality. With reference to race, the Jewish pride was in circumcision on the eighth day, which was the exclusive privilege of one of pure blood. Proselytes might be circumcised in later life, but one of the stock of Israel only on the eighth day. Saul of Tarsus had in earlier days been proud of his tribal genealogy, which had apparently been carefully preserved in the Gentile home, and had shared ancestral pride in belonging to the once royal tribe, and perhaps in thinking that the blood of the king after whom he was named flowed in his veins. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, which does not mean, as it is usually taken to do, intensely, superlatively Hebrew, but simply is equivalent to myself a Hebrew, and come from pure Hebrew ancestors on both sides. Possibly also the phrase may have reference to purity of language and customs as well as blood. These four items make the first group. Paul still remembers the time when, in the blindness which he shared with his race, he believed that these wholly irrelevant points had to do with a man's acceptance before God. He had once agreed with the Judaisers that circumcision admitted Gentiles into the Jewish community, and so gave them a right to participate in the blessings of the Covenant.

Then follow the items of his more properly religious character, which seem in their three clauses to make a climax. As touching the law a Pharisee, he was of the straitest sect, the champions and representatives of the law. As touching zeal persecuting the Church, it was not only in Judaism that the mark of zeal for a cause has been harassing its opponents. We can almost hear a tone of sad irony as Paul recalls that past, remembering how eagerly he had taken charge of the clothes trusted to his care by the witnesses who stoned Stephen, and how he had breathed threatening and slaughter against the disciples. As touching the righteousness which is in the law found blameless, he is evidently speaking of the obedience of outward actions and of blamelessness in the judgment of men.

So we get a living picture of Paul and of his confidence before he was a Christian. All these grounds for pride and self-satisfaction were like triple armour round the heart of the young Pharisee, who rode out of Jerusalem on the road to Damascus. How little he thought that they would all have been pierced and have dropped from him before he got there! The grounds of his confidence are antiquated in form, but in substance are modern. At bottom the things in which Paul's flesh trusted are exactly the same as those in which many of us trust. Even his pride of race continues to influence some of us. We have got the length of separating between our nationality and our acceptance with God, but we have still a kind of feeling that God's Englishmen, as Milton called them, have a place of their own, which is, if not a ground of confidence before God, at any rate a ground for carrying ourselves with very considerable complacency before men. It is not unheard of that people should rely, if not on circumcision on the eighth day, on an outward rite which seems to connect them with a visible Church. Strict orthodoxy takes the place among us which Pharisaism held in Paul's mind before he was a Christian, and it is easier to prove our zeal by pugnacity against heretics, than by fervour of devotion. The modern analogue of Paul's, touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless, is I have done my best, I have lived a decent life. My religion is to do good to other people. All such talk, which used to be a vague sentiment or excuse, is now put forward in definite theoretical substitution for the Christian Truth, and finds numerous teachers and acceptors. But how short a way all such grounds of confidence go to satisfy a soul that has once seen the vision that blazed in on Paul's mind on the road to Damascus!

**II. The discovery of their worthlessness.**

These have I counted loss for Christ. There is a possibility of exaggeration in interpreting Paul's words. The things that were gain to him were in themselves better than their opposites. It is better to to be blameless than to have a life all stained with foulness and reeking with sins. But these gains were losses, disadvantages, in so far as they led him to build upon them, and trust in them as solid wealth. The earthquake that shattered his life had two shocks: the first turned upside down his estimate of the value of his gains, the second robbed him of them. He first saw them to be worthless, and then, so far as others judgment went, he was stripped of them. Actively he counted them loss, passively he suffered the loss of all things. His estimate came, and was followed by the practical outcome of his brethren's excommunication.

What changed his estimate? In our text he answers the question in two forms: first he gives the simple, all-sufficient monosyllabic reason for his whole life--for Christ, and then he enlarges that motive into the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. The former carries us back straight to the vision which revolutionised Paul's life, and made him abjure all which he had trusted, and adore what he had abhorred. The latter dwells a little more upon the subjective process which followed on the vision, but the two are substantially the same, and we need only note the solemn fulness of the name of Jesus Christ, and the intense motion of submission and of personal appropriation contained in the designation, my Lord. It was not when he found his way blinded into Damascus that he had learned that knowledge, or could apprehend its excellency. The words are enriched and enlarged by later experiences. The sacrifice of his earlier gains had been made before the excellency of the knowledge had been discerned. It was no mere intellectual perception which could be imparted in words, or by eyesight, but here as always Paul by knowledge means experience which comes from possession and acquaintance, and which therefore gleams ever before us as we move, and is capable of endless increase, in the measure in which we are true to the estimate of gains and losses to which our initial vision of Him has led us. At first we may not know that that knowledge excels all others, but as we grow in acquaintance with Jesus, and in experience of Him, we shall be sure that it transcends all others, because He does and we possess Him.

The revolutionising motive may be conceived of in two ways. We have to abandon the lower gains in order to gain Christ, or to abandon these because we have gained Him. Both are true. The discernment of Christ as the one ground of confidence is ever followed by the casting away of all others. Self-distrust is a part of faith. When we feel our feet upon the rock, the crumbling sands on which we stood are left to be broken up by the sea. They who have seen the Apollo Belvedere will set little store by plaster of Paris casts. In all our lives there come times when the glimpse of some loftier ideal shows up our ordinary as hollow and poor and low. And when once Christ is seen, as Scripture shows Him, our former self appears poor and crumbles away.

We are not to suppose that the act of renunciation must be completed before a second act of possession is begun. That is the error of many ascetic books. The two go together, and abandonment in order to win merges into abandonment because we have won. The strongest power to make renunciation possible is the expulsive power of a new affection. When the heart is filled with love to Christ there is no sense of loss, but only of exceeding gain, in casting away all things for Him.

**III. The continuous repetition of the discovery.**

Paul compares his present self with his former Christian self, and with a vehement Yea, verily, affirms his former judgment, and reiterates it in still more emphatic terms. It is often easy to depreciate the treasures which we possess. They sometimes grow in value as they slip from our hands. It is not usual for a man who has suffered the loss of all things to follow their disappearance by counting them but dung. The constant repetition through the whole Christian course of the depreciatory estimate of grounds of confidence is plainly necessary. There are subtle temptations to the opposite course. It is hard to keep perfectly clear of all building on our own blamelessness or on our connection with the Christian Church, and we have need ever to renew the estimate which was once so epoch-making, and which cast down all our imaginations and high things. If we do not carefully watch ourselves, the whispering tempter that was silenced will recover his breath again, and be once more ready to drop into our ears his poisonous suggestions. We have to take pains and give earnest heed to the initial, revolutionary estimate, and to see that it is worked out habitually in our daily lives. It is a good exchange when we count all but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.