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

**PHILIPPIANS-017**. **SAVING KNOWLEDGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, becoming conformed unto His death; if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead."*

*Philippians 3:10-11 (R.V.)*

We have seen how the Apostle was prepared to close his letter at the beginning of this chapter, and how that intention was swept away by the rush of new thoughts. His fervid faith caught fire when he turned to think of what he had lost, and how infinitely more he had gained in Christ. His wealth is so great that it cannot be crowded into the narrow space of one brief sentence, and after all the glowing words which precede our text, he feels that he has not yet adequately set forth either his present possessions or his ultimate aims. So here he continues the theme which might have seemed most fully dealt with in the great thoughts that occupied us in the former sermon, but which still wait to be completed here. They are most closely connected with the former, and the unity of the sentence is but a parallel to the oneness of the idea. The elements of our present text constitute a part of the Apostle's aim in life, and may be dealt with as such.

**I. Paul's life's aim was the knowledge of Christ.**

That sounds an anti-climax after Gain and Be in Him. These phrases seem to express a much more intimate relation than this, but we must note that it is no mere theoretical or intellectual knowledge which is intended. Such knowledge would need no surrender or suffering the loss of all things. We can only buy the knowledge of Christ at such a rate, but we can buy knowledge about Him very much cheaper. Such knowledge would not be worth the price; it lies on the surface of the soul, and does nothing. Many a man amongst us has it, and it is of no use to him. If Paul had undergone all that he had undergone and sacrificed all that he had given up, and for his reward had only gained accurate knowledge about Christ, he had certainly wasted his life and made a bad bargain. But as always, so here, to know means knowledge based upon experience. Did Christ mean that a correct creed was eternal life when He said, This is life eternal to know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent? Did Paul mean the dry light of the understanding when he prayed that the Ephesians might know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, in order to be filled with all the fulness of God? Clearly we have to go much deeper down than that superficial interpretation in order to reach the reality of the New Testament conception of knowledge. It is co-extensive with life, and is built upon inward experience. In a word, it is one aspect of winning Jesus. It is consciousness contemplating its riches, counting its gains. As a man knows the bliss of parental or wedded love only by having it, or as he knows the taste of wine only by drinking it, or the glory of music only by hearing it, and the brightness of the day only by seeing it, so we know Christ only by winning Him. There must first be the perception and possession by sense or emotion, and then the reflection on the possession by understanding. This applies to all religious truth. It must be possessed ere it be fully known. Like the new name written upon the Apocalyptic stone, No one knoweth but he that receiveth it.

The knowledge which was Paul's life's aim was knowledge of a Person: the object determines the nature of the knowledge. The mental act of knowing a proposition or a science or even of knowing about a person by hearing of him is different from that of knowing people when we have lived beside them. We need not be afraid of attaching too familiar a meaning to this word of our text, if we say that it implies personal acquaintance with the Christ whom we know. Of course we come to know Him in the first instance through the medium of statements about Him, and we cannot too strongly insist, in these days of destructive criticism, on the absolute necessity of accepting the Gospel statements as to the life of Jesus as the only possible method of knowing Him. But then, beyond that acceptance of the record must come the application and appropriation of it, and the transmutation of a historical fact into a personal experience. We may take an illustration from any of the Scriptural truths about Jesus:--For instance, Scripture declares Him to be our Redeemer. One man believes Him to be so, welcomes Him into his life as such, and finds Him to be such. Another man believes Him to be so, but never puts His redeeming power to the proof. Is the knowledge of these two rightly called by the same name? That which comes after experience is surely not rightly designated by the same title as that which has no vivification nor verification of such a sort to build on, and is the mere product of the understanding. There is nothing which the great mass of so-called Christians need more than to have forced into their thoughts the difference between these two kinds of knowledge of Christ. There are thousands of them who, if asked, are ready to profess that they know Jesus, but to whom He has never been anything more than a partially understood article of an uncared for creed, and has never been in living contact with their needs, nor known for their strength in weakness, their comforter in sorrow, their life in death, their all in all.

To deepen that experimental knowledge of Jesus is a worthy aim for the whole life, and is a process that may go on indefinitely through it all. To know Him more and more is to have more of heaven in us. To be penetrating ever deeper into His fulness, and finding every day new depths to penetrate is to have a fountain of freshness in our dusty days that will never fail or run dry. There is only one inexhaustible person, and that is Jesus Christ. We have all fulness in our Lord: we have already received all when we received Him. Are we advancing in the experience that is the parent of knowing Him? Do new discoveries meet us every day as if we were explorers in a virgin land? To have this for our aim is enough for satisfaction, for blessedness, and for growth. To know Him is a liberal education.

**II. That knowledge involves knowing the power of His Resurrection.**

The power of His Resurrection is an expression which covers a wide ground. There are several distinct and well-marked powers ascribed to it in Paul's writings. It has a demonstrative force in reference to our Lord's person and work. For He is by it declared to be the Son of God with power. That rising again from the dead, taken in conjunction with the fact that He dieth no more, but is ascended up on high, and in conjunction with His own words concerning Himself and His Resurrection, sets Him forth before the world as the Son of God, and is the solemn divine approval and acceptance of His work.

It has a revealing power in regard to the condition of humanity in death. It is the one fact which establishes immortality, and which not only establishes it, but casts some light on the manner of it. The possibility of personal life after, and therefore, in death, the unbroken continuity of being, the possibility of a resurrection, and a glorifying of this corporeal frame, with all the far-reaching consequences of these truths in the triumph they give over death, in the support and substance they afford to the else-shadowy idea of immortality, in the lofty place which they assign to the bodily frame, and the conception which they give of man's perfection as consisting of body, soul, and spirit--these thoughts have flashed light into all the darkness of the grave, have narrowed to a mere strip of coast-line the boundaries of the kingdom of death, have proclaimed love as the victor in her contest with that shrouded horror. The basis of them all is Christ's Resurrection; its power in this respect is the power to illuminate, to console, to certify, to wrench the sceptre from the hands of death, and to put it in the pierced hands of the Living One that was dead, and is Lord both of the dead and the living.

Further, the Resurrection is treated by Paul as having a power for our justification, in so far as the risen Lord bestows upon us by His risen life the blessings of His righteousness. Paul also represents the Resurrection of Christ as having the power of quickening our Spiritual life. I need not spend time in quoting the many passages where His rising from the dead, and His life after the Resurrection, are treated as the type and pattern of our lives: and are not only regarded as pattern, but are also regarded as the power by which that new life of ours is brought about. It has the power of raising us from the death of sin, and bringing us into a new life of the Spirit. And finally, the Resurrection of Christ is regarded as having the power of raising His servants from the grave to the full possession of His own glorious life, and so it is the power of our final victory over death.

Now I do not know that we are entitled to exclude any of these powers from view. The broad words of the text include them all, but perhaps the two last are mainly meant, and of these chiefly the former.

The risen life of Christ quickens and raises us, and that not merely as a pattern, but as a power. It is only if we are in Him that there is so real a unity of life between Him and us that there enters into us some breath of His own life.

That risen life of the Saviour which we share if we have Him, enters into our nature as leaven into the three measures of meal; transforming and quickening it, gives new directions, tastes, motives, impulses, and power. It bids and inclines us to seek the things that are above, and its great exhortation to the hearts in which it dwells, to fix themselves there, and to forsake the things that are on the earth, is based upon the fact that they have died, and their life is hid with Christ in God. Without that leaven the life that we live is a death, because it is lived in the lusts of the flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. There is no real union with Jesus Christ, of which the direct issue is not a living experience of the power of His Resurrection in bringing us to the likeness of itself in regard to our freedom from the bondage to sin, and to our presenting ourselves unto God as alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God. It is a solemn thought which we all need to press upon our consciences, that the only infallible sign that we have been in any measure quickened together with Christ and raised up with Him is that we have ceased to live in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. The risen life of Jesus may indefinitely increase, and will do so in the measure in which we honestly make it our life's aim to know Him and the power of His Resurrection.

**III. The experience of the power of Christ's Resurrection is inseparable from the fellowship of His sufferings.**

We must not suppose that Paul's solemn and awful words here trench in the smallest degree on the solitary unapproachableness of Christ's death. He would have answered, as in fact he does answer, the appeal of the prophetic sufferer, Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow with the strongest negative. No other human lips have ever tasted, or can ever taste, a cup of such bitterness as He drained for us all, and no other human lips have ever been so exquisitely sensitive to the bitterness which they have drunk. The identification of Himself with a sinful world, the depth and closeness of His community of feeling with all sorrow, the consciousness of the glory which He had left, and the perpetual sense of the hostility into which He had come, set Christ's sufferings by themselves as surely as the effects that flow from them declare that they need no repetition, and cannot be degraded by any parallel whilst the world lasts.

But yet His Death, like His Resurrection, is set forth in Scripture as being a type and power of ours. We have to die to the world by the power of the Cross. If we truly trust in His sacrifice there will operate upon us motives which separate and detach us from our old selves and the old world. A fundamental, ethical, and spiritual change is effected on us through faith. We were dead in sin, we are dead to sin. We have to blend the two thoughts of the Christian life as being a daily dying and a continual resurrection in order to get the whole truth of the double aspect of it.

It may be a question whether the Apostle is here referring to outward or inward and ethical sorrows, but perhaps we should not do justice to the thought unless we extend it to cover both of these. Certainly if his theology was but the generalising of his experience, he had ample material in his daily life for knowing the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. One of his most frequently recurring and most cherished thoughts is, that to suffer for Christ is to suffer with Christ, and in it he found and teaches us to find strength to endure, and patience to outlast any sorrows that may swoop upon us like birds of prey because we are Christians. Happy shall we be if Christ's sufferings are ours, because it is our union with Him and our likeness to Him, not to ourselves, our sins, or our worldliness, that is their occasion. There is an old legend that Peter was crucified head downwards, because he felt himself unworthy to be as his Master. We may well feel that nothing which we can ever bear for Him is worthy to be compared with what He has borne for us, and be the more overwhelmed with the greatness of the condescension, and the humility of the love which reckon our light affliction, which is but for a moment, along with the heavy weight which He bore, and the blessed issue of which outlasts time and enriches eternity.

But there is another sense in which it is a worthy aim of our lives that our sufferings may be felt to be fellowship with His. That is a blessed sorrow which brings us closer to our Lord. That is a wholesome sorrow of which the issue is an intenser faith in Him, a fuller experience of His sufficiency. The storm blows us well when it blows us to His breast, and sorrow enriches us, whatever it may take away, which gives us fuller and more assured possession of Jesus.

But when we are living in fellowship with Jesus, that union works in two directions, and while on the one hand we may then humbly venture to feel that our sufferings for Him are sufferings with Him, we may thankfully feel, too, that in all our affliction He is afflicted. If His sufferings are ours we may be sure that ours are His. And how different they all become when we are certain of His sympathy! It is possible that we may have a kind of common consciousness with our Lord, if our whole hearts and wills are kept in close touch with Him, so that in our experience there may be a repetition in a higher form of that strange experience alleged to be familiar in hypnotism, where the bitter in one mouth is tasted in another.

So, what we ought to make our aim is that in our lives our growing knowledge of Christ should lead to the two results, so inexorably intertwined, of daily death and daily resurrection, and that we may be kept faithful to Him so that our outward sufferings may be caused by our union with Him, and not by our own faithlessness, and may be discerned by us to be fellowship with His. Then we shall also feel that He bears ours with us, and sorrow itself will be calmed and beautified into a silent bliss, as the chill peaks when the morning strikes them glow with tender pink, and seem soft and warm, though they are grim rock and ice-cold snow. Then some faint echo of His history who was acquainted with grief may be audible in our outward lives and we, too, may have our Gethsemane and our Calvary. It may not be presumption in us to say We are able when He asks Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? nor terror to hear Him prophesy Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of, for we shall remember joint-heirs in Christ, if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together.

**IV. The end attained.**

The Christian life as here manifested is even in its highest forms manifestly incomplete. It is a reflected light, and like the reflected light in the heavens, advances by imperceptible degrees to fill the whole silver round. It may be e'en in its imperfections beautiful, but it assuredly has a ragged edge. The hypothetical form of the last words of our text does not so much imply a doubt of the possibility of attaining the result as the recognition of the indispensable condition of effort on the part of him who attains it. That effort forthcoming, the attainment is certain.

The Revised Version makes a slight correction which involves a great matter, in reading the resurrection from the dead. It is necessary to insist on this change in rendering, not because it implies that only saints are raised, but because Paul is thinking of that first resurrection of which the New Testament habitually speaks. The dead in Christ shall rise first as he himself declared in his earliest epistle, and the seer in the Apocalypse shed a benediction on him that hath part in the first resurrection. Our knowledge of that solemn future is so fragmentary that we cannot venture to draw dogmatic inferences from the little that has been declared to us, but we cannot forget the distinct words of Jesus in which He not only plainly declares a universal resurrection, but as plainly proclaims that it falls into two parts, one a resurrection of life, and one a resurrection of judgment. The former may well be the final aim of a Christian life: the latter is a fate which one would think no sane man would deliberately provoke. Each carries in its name its dominant characteristic, the one full of attractiveness, the other partially unveiling depths of shame and punitive retributions which might appal the stoutest heart.

This resurrection of life is the last result of the power of Christ's Resurrection received into and working on the human spirit. It is plain enough that if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in us there is no term to its operations until our mortal bodies also are quickened by His Spirit that dwelleth in us. The ethical and spiritual resurrection in the present life finds its completion in the bodily resurrection in the future. It cannot be that the transformation wrought in a human life shall be complete until it has flowed outwards into and permeated the whole of manhood, body, soul, and spirit. The three measures of meal have each to be influenced before the whole is leavened. If we duly consider the elements necessary to a perfect realisation of the divine ideal of humanity, we shall discern that redemption must have a gospel to bring to the body as well as to the spirit. Whatever has been devastated by sin must be healed by Jesus. It is not necessary to suppose that the body which dies is the body which rises again, rather the Apostle's far-reaching series of antitheses between that which is sown and that which is raised leads us to think that the natural body, which has passed through corruption, and the particles of which have been gathered into many different combinations, does not become the spiritual body. The person who dies is the person who lives through death, and who assumes the body of the resurrection, and it is the person, not the elements which make up the personality, who is spoken of as risen from the dead. The vesture may be different, but the wearer is the same.

So that resurrection from the dead is the end of a supernatural life begun here and destined to culminate hereafter. It is the last step in the manifestation of our being in Christ, and so is being prepared for here by every step in advance in gaining Jesus. It should ever be before every Christian soul that participation in Christ hereafter is conditioned by its progress in likeness to Him here. The Resurrection from the dead is not a gift which can be bestowed apart from a man's moral state. If he dies having had no knowledge by experience of the power of Christ's Resurrection, there is nothing in the fact of death to give him that knowledge, and it is impossible to bring any means to bear on him by which he will attain unto the resurrection from the dead. If God could give that gift irrespective of a man's relations to Jesus, He would give it to all. Let us ask ourselves, then, is it not worth making the dominant aim of our lives the same as that of Paul's? How stands our account then? Are we not wise traders presenting a good balance-sheet when we show entered on the one side the loss of all things, and on the other the gaining of Christ, and the attaining the resurrection from the dead, the perfect transformation of body, soul, and spirit, into the perfect likeness of the perfect Lord? Does the other balance-sheet show the man as equally solvent who enters on one side the gain of a world, and on the other a Christless life, to be followed by a resurrection in which is no joy, no advance, no life, but which is a resurrection of judgment? May we all be found in Him, and attain to the resurrection from the dead!