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

**ROMANS-005**. **THE GOSPEL THE POWER OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."*

*Romans 1:16*

To preach the Gospel in Rome had long been the goal of Paul's hopes. He wished to do in the centre of power what he had done in Athens, the home of wisdom; and with superb confidence, not in himself, but in his message, to try conclusions with the strongest thing in the world. He knew its power well, and was not appalled. The danger was an attraction to his chivalrous spirit. He believed in flying at the head when you are fighting with a serpent, and he knew that influence exerted in Rome would thrill through the Empire. If we would understand the magnificent audacity of these words of my text we must try to listen to them with the ears of a Roman. Here was a poor little insignificant Jew, like hundreds of his countrymen down in the Ghetto, one who had his head full of some fantastic nonsense about a young visionary whom the procurator of Syria had very wisely put an end to a while ago in order to quiet down the turbulent province; and he was going into Rome with the notion that his word would shake the throne of the Caesars. What proud contempt would have curled their lips if they had been told that the travel-stained prisoner, trudging wearily up the Appian Way, had the mightiest thing in the world entrusted to his care! Romans did not believe much in ideas. Their notion of power was sharp swords and iron yokes on the necks of subject peoples. But the history of Christianity, whatever else it has been, has been the history of the supremacy and the revolutionary force of ideas. Thought is mightier than all visible forces. Thought dissolves and reconstructs. Empires and institutions melt before it like the carbon rods in an electric lamp; and the little hillock of Calvary is higher than the Palatine with its regal homes and the Capitoline with its temples: I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation.

Now, dear friends, I have ventured to take these great words for my text, though I know, better than any of you can tell me, how sure my treatment of them is to enfeeble rather than enforce them, because I, for my poor part, feel that there are few things which we, all of us, people and ministers, need more than to catch some of the infection of this courageous confidence, and to be fired with some spark of Paul's enthusiasm for, and glorying in, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I ask you, then, to consider three things: (i) what Paul thought was the Gospel? (ii) what Paul thought the Gospel was? and (iii) what he felt about the Gospel?

**I. What Paul thought was the Gospel?**

He has given to us in his own rapid way a summary statement, abbreviated to the very bone, and reduced to the barest elements, of what he meant by the Gospel. What was the irreducible minimum? The facts of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as you will find written in the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. So, then, to begin with, the Gospel is not a statement of principles, but a record of facts, things that have happened in this world of ours. But the least part of a fact is the visible part of it, and it is of no significance unless it has explanation, and so Paul goes on to bind up with the facts an explanation of them. The mere fact that Jesus, a young Nazarene, was executed is no more a gospel than the other one, that two brigands were crucified beside Him. But the fact that could be seen, plus the explanation which underlies and interprets it, turns the chronicle into a gospel, and the explanation begins with the name of the Sufferer; for if you want to understand His death you must understand who it was that died. His death is a thought pathetic in all aspects, and very precious in many. But when we hear Christ died according to the Scriptures, the whole symbolism of the ancient ritual and all the glowing anticipations of the prophets rise up before us, and that death assumes an altogether different aspect. If we stop with Jesus died, then that death may be a beautiful example of heroism, a sweet, pathetic instance of innocent suffering, a conspicuous example of the world's wages to the world's teachers, but it is little more. If, however, we take Paul's words upon our lips, Brethren, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached ... how that Christ died ... according to the Scriptures, the fact flashes up into solid beauty, and becomes the Gospel of our salvation. And the explanation goes on, How that Christ died for our sins. Now, I may be very blind, but I venture to say that I, for my part, cannot see in what intelligible sense the Death of Christ can be held to have been for, or on behalf of, our sins--that is, that they may be swept away and we delivered from them--unless you admit the atoning nature of His sacrifice for sins. I cannot stop to enlarge, but I venture to say that any narrower interpretation evacuates Paul's words of their deepest significance. The explanation goes on, And that He was buried. Why that trivial detail? Partly because it guarantees the fact of His Death, partly because of its bearing on the evidences of His Resurrection. And that He rose from the dead according to the Scriptures. Great fact, without which Christ is a shattered prop, and ye are yet in your sins.

But, further, notice that my text is also Paul's text for this Epistle, and that it differs from the condensed summary of which I have been speaking only as a bud with its petals closed differs from one with them expanded in their beauty. And now, if you will take the words of my text as being the keynote of this letter, and read over its first eight chapters, what is the Apostle talking about when he in them fulfils his purpose and preaches the Gospel to them that are at Rome also? Here is, in the briefest possible words, his summary--the universality of sin, the awful burden of guilt, the tremendous outlook of penalty, the impossibility of man rescuing himself or living righteously, the Incarnation, and Life, and Death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, the hand of faith grasping the offered blessing, the indwelling in believing souls of the Divine Spirit, and the consequent admission of man into a life of sonship, power, peace, victory, glory, the child's place in the love of the Father from which nothing can separate. These are the teachings which make the staple of this Epistle. These are the explanations of the weighty phrases of my text. These are at least the essential elements of the Gospel according to Paul.

But he was not alone in this construction of his message. We hear a great deal to-day about Pauline Christianity, with the implication, and sometimes with the assertion, that he was the inventor of what, for the sake of using a brief and easily intelligible term, I may call Evangelical Christianity. Now, it is a very illuminating thought for the reading of the New Testament that there are the three sets of teaching, roughly, the Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine, and you cannot find the distinctions between these three in any difference as to the fundamental contents of the Gospel; for if Paul rings out, God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us, Peter declares, Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, and John, from his island solitude, sends across the waters the hymn of praise, Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood. And so the proud declaration of the Apostle, which he dared not have ventured upon in the face of the acrid criticism he had to front unless he had known he was perfectly sure of his ground, is natural and warranted--Therefore, whether it were I or they, so we preach.

We are told that we must go back to the Christ of the Gospels, the historical Christ, and that He spoke nothing concerning all these important points that I have mentioned as being Paul's conception of the Gospel. Back to the Christ of the Gospels by all means, if you will go to the Christ of all the Gospels and of the whole of each Gospel. And if you do, you will go back to the Christ who said, The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. You will go back to the Christ who said, And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me. You will go back to the Christ who said, The bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. You will go back to the Christ who bade His followers hold in everlasting memory, not the tranquil beauty of His life, not the persuasive sweetness of His gracious words, not the might of His miracles of blessing, but the mysterious agonies of His last hours, by which He would have us learn that there lie the secret of His power, the foundation of our hopes, the stimulus of our service.

Now, brethren, I have ventured to dwell so long upon this matter, because it is no use talking about the Gospel unless we understand what we mean by it, and I, for my part, venture to say that that is what Paul meant by it, and that is what I mean by it. I plead for no narrow interpretation of the phrases of my text. I would not that they should be used to check in the smallest degree the diversities of representation which, according to the differences of individual character, must ever prevail in the conceptions which we form and which we preach of this Gospel of Jesus Christ. I want no parrot-like repetition of a certain set of phrases embodied, however great may be their meanings, in every sermon. And I would that the people to whom those truths are true would make more allowance than they sometimes do for the differences to which I have referred, and would show a great deal more sympathy than they often do to those, especially those young men, who, with their faces toward Christ, have not yet grown to the full acceptance of all that is implied in those gracious words. There is room for a whole world of thought in the Gospel of Christ as Paul conceived it, with all the deep foundations of implication and presupposition on which it rests, and with all the, as yet, undiscovered range of conclusions to which it may lead. Remember that the Cross of Christ is the key to the universe, and sends its influence into every region of human thought.

**II. What Paul thought the Gospel was.**

The power of God unto salvation. There was in the background of the Apostle's mind a kind of tacit reference to the antithetical power that he was going up to meet, the power of Rome, and we may trace that in the words of my text. Rome, as I have said, was the embodiment of physical force, with no great faith in ideas. And over against this carnal might Paul lifts the undissembled weakness of the Cross, and declares that it is stronger than man, the power of God unto salvation. Rome is high in force; Athens is higher; the Cross is highest of all, and it comes shrouded in weakness having a poor Man hanging dying there. That is a strange embodiment of divine power. Yes, and because so strange, it is so touching, and so conquering. The power that is draped in weakness is power indeed. Though Rome's power did make for righteousness sometimes, yet its stream of tendency was on the whole a power to destruction and grasped the nations of the earth as some rude hand might do rich clusters of grapes and squeeze them into a formless mass. The tramp of the legionary meant death, and it was true in many respects of them what was afterwards said of later invaders of Europe, that where their horses hoofs had once stamped no grass ever grew. Over against this terrific engine of destruction Paul lifts up the meek forces of love which have for their sole object the salvation of man.

Then we come to another of the keywords about which it is very needful that people should have deeper and wider notions than they often seem to cherish. What is salvation? Negatively, the removal and sweeping away of all evil, physical and moral, as the schools speak. Positively, the inclusion of all good for every part of the composite nature of a man which the man can receive and which God can bestow. And that is the task that the Gospel sets to itself. Now, I need not remind you how, for the execution of such a purpose, it is plain that something else than man's power is absolutely essential. It is only God who can alter my relation to His government. It is only God who can trammel up the inward consequences of my sins and prevent them from scourging me. It is only God who can bestow upon my death a new life, which shall grow up into righteousness and beauty, caught of, and kindred to, His own. But if this be the aim of the Gospel, then its diagnosis of man's sickness is a very much graver one than that which finds favour amongst so many of us now. Salvation is a bigger word than any of the little gospels that we hear clamouring round about us are able to utter. It means something a great deal more than either social or intellectual, or still more, material or political betterment of man's condition. The disease lies so deep, and so great are the destruction and loss partly experienced, and still more awfully impending over every soul of us, that something else than tinkering at the outsides, or dealing, as self-culture does, with man's understanding or, as social gospels do, with man's economical and civic condition, should be brought to bear. Dear brethren, especially you Christian ministers, preach a social Christianity by all means, an applied Christianity, for there does lie in the Gospel of Jesus Christ a key to all the problems that afflict our social condition. But be sure first that there is a Christianity before you talk about applying it. And remember that the process of salvation begins in the deep heart of the individual and transforms him first and foremost. The power is to every one that believeth. It is power in its most universal sweep. Rome's Empire was wellnigh ubiquitous, but, blessed be God, the dove of Christ flies farther than the Roman eagle with beak and claw ready for rapine, and wherever there are men here is a Gospel for them. The limitation is no limitation of its universality. It is no limitation of the claim of a medicine to be a panacea that it will only do good to the man who swallows it. And that is the only limitation of which the Gospel is susceptible, for we have all the same deep needs, the same longings; we are fed by the same bread, we are nourished by the same draughts of water, we breathe the same air, we have the same sins, and, thanks be to God, we have the same Saviour. The power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

Now before I pass from this part of my subject there is only one thing more that I want to say, and that is, that you cannot apply that glowing language about the power of God unto salvation to anything but the Gospel that Paul preached. Forms of Christianity which have lost the significance of the Incarnation and Death of Jesus Christ, and which have struck out or obscured the central facts with which I have been dealing, are not, never were, and, I may presumptuously venture to say, never will be, forces of large account in this world. Here is a clock, beautiful, chased on the back, with a very artistic dial-plate, and works modelled according to the most approved fashion, but, somehow or other, the thing won't go. Perhaps the mainspring is broken. And so it is only the Gospel, as Paul expounds it and expands it in this Epistle, that is the power of God unto salvation. Dear brethren, in the course of a sermon like this, of course, one must lay himself open to the charge of dogmatising. That cannot be helped under the conditions of my space. But let me say as my own solemn conviction--I know that that is not worth much to you, but it is my justification for speaking in such a fashion--let me say as my solemn conviction that you may as well take the keystone out of an arch, with nothing to hold the other stones together or keep them from toppling in hideous ruin on your unfortunate head, as take the doctrine that Paul summed up in that one word out of your conception of Christianity and expect it to work. And be sure of this, that there is only one Name that lords it over the demons of afflicted humanity, and that if a man goes and tries to eject them with any less potent charm than Paul's Gospel, they will turn upon him with Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?'

**III. What Paul felt about this Gospel.**

His restrained expression, I am not ashamed, is the stronger for its very moderation. It witnesses to the fixed purpose of his heart and attitude of his mind, whilst it suggests that he was well aware of all the temptations in Rome to being ashamed of it there. Think of what was arrayed against him--venerable religion, systematised philosophies, bitter hatred and prejudice, material power and wealth. These were the brazen armour of Goliath, and this little David went cheerily down into the valley with five pebble stones in a leathern wallet, and was quite sure how it was going to end. And it ended as he expected. His Gospel shook the kingdom of the Roman, and cast it in another mould.

And there are temptations, plenty of them, for us, dear friends, to-day, to bate our confidence. The drift of what calls itself influential opinion is anti-supernatural, and we all are conscious of the presence of that element all round about us. It tells with special force upon our younger men, but it affects us all. In this day, when a large portion of the periodical press, which does the thinking for most of us, looks askance at these truths, and when, on the principle that in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is the king, popular novelists become our theological tutors, and when every new publishing season brings out a new conclusive destruction of Christianity, which supersedes last season's equally complete destruction, it is hard for some of us to keep our flags flying. The ice round about us will either bring down the temperature, or, if it stimulates us to put more fuel on the fire, perhaps the fire may melt it. And so the more we feel ourselves encompassed by these temptations, the louder is the call to Christian men to cast themselves back on the central verities, and to draw at first hand from them the inspiration which shall be their safety. And how is that to be done? Well, there are many ways by which thoughtful, and cultivated, students may do it. But may I venture to deal here rather with ways which all Christian people have open before them? And I am bold to say that the way to be sure of the power of God unto salvation is to submit ourselves continually to its cleansing and renewing influence. This certitude, brethren, may be contributed to by books of apologetics, and by other sources of investigation and study which I should be sorry indeed to be supposed in any degree to depreciate. But the true way to get it is, by deep communion with the living God, to realise the personality of Jesus Christ as present with us, our Friend, our Saviour, our Sanctifier by His Holy Spirit. Why, Paul's Gospel was, I was going to say, altogether--that would be an exaggeration--but it was to a very large extent simply the generalisation of his own experience. That is what all of us will find to be the Gospel that we have to preach. We speak that we do know and testify that we have seen. And it was because this man could say so assuredly--because the depths of his own conscience and the witness within him bore testimony to it--He loved me and gave Himself for me, that he could also say, The power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. Go down into the depths, brother and friend; cry to Him out of the depths. Then you will feel His strong, gentle grip lifting you to the heights, and that will give power that nothing else will, and you will be able to say, I have heard Him myself, and I know that this is the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

But there is yet another source of certitude open to us all, and that is the history of the centuries. Our modern sceptics, attacking the truth of Christianity mostly from the physical side, are strangely blind to the worth of history. It is a limitation of faculty that besets them in a good many directions, but it does not work anywhere more fatally than it does in their attitude towards the Gospel. After all, Jesus Christ spoke the ultimate word when He said, By their fruits ye shall know them. And it is so, because just as what is morally wrong cannot be politically right, so what is intellectually false cannot be morally good. Truth, goodness, beauty, they are but three names for various aspects of one thing, and if it be that the difference between B.C. and A.D. has come from a Gospel which is not the truth of God, then all I can say is, that the richest vintage that ever the world saw, and the noblest wine of which it ever drank, did grow upon a thorn. I know that the Christian Church has sinfully and tragically failed to present Christ adequately to the world. But for all that, Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord; and nobler manners and purer laws have come in the wake of this Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as I look round about upon what Christianity has done in the world, I venture to say, Show us any system of religion or of no religion that has done that or anything the least like it, and then we will discuss with you the other evidences of the Gospel.

In closing these words, may I venture relying on the melancholy privilege of seniority, to drop for a minute or two into a tone of advice? I would say, do not be frightened out of your confidence either by the premature paean of victory from the opposite camp, or by timid voices in our own ranks. And that you may not be so frightened, be sure to keep clear in your mind the distinction between the things that can be shaken and the kingdom that cannot be moved. It is bad strategy to defend an elongated line. It is cowardice to treat the capture of an outpost as involving the evacuation of the key of the position. It is a mistake, to which many good Christian people are sorely tempted in this day, to assert such a connection between the eternal Gospel and our deductions from the principles of that Gospel as that the refutation of the one must be the overthrow of the other. And if it turns out to be so in any case, a large part of the blame lies upon those good and mistaken people who insist that everything must be held or all must be abandoned. The burning questions of this day about the genuineness of the books of Scripture, inspiration, inerrancy, and the like, are not so associated with this word, God so loved the world ... that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life, as that the discovery of errors in the Second Book of Chronicles shakes the foundations of the Christian certitude. In a day like this truth must change its vesture. Who believes that the Dissenting Churches of England are the highest, perfect embodiment of the Kingdom of God? And who believes that any creed of man's making has in it all and has in it only the everlasting Gospel? So do not be frightened, and do not think that when the things that can be shaken are removed, the things that cannot be shaken are at all less likely to remain. Depend upon it, the Gospel, whose outline I have imperfectly tried to set before you now, will last as long as men on earth know they are sinners and need a Saviour. Did you ever see some mean buildings that have by degrees been gathered round the sides of some majestic cathedral, and do you suppose that the sweeping away of those shanties would touch the solemn majesty of the medieval glories of the building that rises above them? Take them away if need be, and it, in its proportion, beauty, strength, and heavenward aspiration, will stand more glorious for the sweeping away. Preach positive truth. Do not preach doubts. You remember Mr. Kingsley's book Yeast. Its title was its condemnation. Yeast is not meant to be drunk; it is meant to be kept in the dark till the process of fermentation goes on and it works itself clear, and then you may bring it out. Do not be always arguing with the enemy. It is a great deal better to preach the truth. Remember what Jesus said: Let them alone, they are blind leaders of the blind, they will fall into the ditch. It is not given to every one of us to conduct controversial arguments in the pulpit. There are some much wiser and abler brethren amongst us than you or I who can do it. Let us be contented with, not the humbler but the more glorious, office of telling what we have known, leaving it, as it will do, to prove itself. You remember what the old woman, who had been favoured by her pastor with an elaborate sermon to demonstrate the existence of God, said when he had finished; Well, I believe there is a God, for all the gentleman says.

As one who sees the lengthening shadows falling over the darkening field, may I say one word to my junior brethren, with all whose struggles and doubts and difficulties I, for one, do most tenderly sympathise? I beseech them--though, alas! the advice condemns the giver of it as he looks back over long years of his ministry--to be faithful to the Gospel how that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. Dear young friends, if you only go where Paul went, and catch the inspiration that he caught there, your path will be clear. It was in contact with Christ, whose passion for soul-winning brought Him from heaven, that Paul learned his passion for soul-winning. And if you and I are touched with the divine enthusiasm, and have that aim clear before us, we shall soon find out that there is only one power, one name given under heaven among men whereby we can accomplish what we desire--the name of Jesus Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, and also maketh intercession for us. If our aim is clear before us it will prescribe our methods, and if the inspiration of our ministry is, I determine not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified, then, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear, they shall know that there hath been a Prophet among them.

[Sermon preached before the Baptist Union.]