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

**ROMANS-006**. **WORLD-WIDE SIN AND WORLD-WIDE REDEMPTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. Now we know, that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 21. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; 22. Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference: 23. For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God: 24. Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; 25. Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; 26. To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness; that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."*

*Romans 3:19-26*

Let us note in general terms the large truths which this passage contains. We may mass these under four heads:

**I. Paul's view of the purpose of the law.**

He has been quoting a mosaic of Old Testament passages from the Psalms and Isaiah. He regards these as part of the law, which term, therefore, in his view, here includes the whole previous revelation, considered as making known God's will as to man's conduct. Every word of God, whether promise, or doctrine, or specific command, has in it some element bearing on conduct. God reveals nothing only in order that we may know, but all that, knowing, we may do and be what is pleasing in His sight. All His words are law.

But Paul sets forth another view of its purpose here; namely, to drive home to men's consciences the conviction of sin. That is not the only purpose, for God reveals duty primarily in order that men may do it, and His law is meant to be obeyed. But, failing obedience, this second purpose comes into action, and His law is a swift witness against sin. The more clearly we know our duty, the more poignant will be our consciousness of failure. The light which shines to show the path of right, shines to show our deviations from it. And that conviction of sin, which it was the very purpose of all the previous Revelation to produce, is a merciful gift; for, as the Apostle implies, it is the prerequisite to the faith which saves.

As a matter of fact, there was a far profounder and more inward conviction of sin among the Jews than in any heathen nation. Contrast the wailings of many a psalm with the tone in Greek or Roman literature. No doubt there is a law written on men's hearts which evokes a lower measure of the same consciousness of sin. There are prayers among the Assyrian and Babylonian tablets which might almost stand beside the Fifty-first Psalm; but, on the whole, the deep sense of sin was the product of the revealed law. The best use of our consciousness of what we ought to be, is when it rouses conscience to feel the discordance with it of what we are, and so drives us to Christ. Law, whether in the Old Testament, or as written in our hearts by their very make, is the slave whose task is to bring us to Christ, who will give us power to keep God's commandments.

Another purpose of the law is stated in verse 21, as being to bear witness, in conjunction with the prophets, to a future more perfect revelation of God's righteousness. Much of the law was symbolic and prophetic. The ideal it set forth could not always remain unfulfilled. The whole attitude of that system was one of forward-looking expectancy. There is much danger lest, in modern investigations as to the authorship, date, and genesis of the Old Testament revelation, its central characteristic should be lost sight of; namely, its pointing onwards to a more perfect revelation which should supersede it.

**II. Paul's view of universal sinfulness.**

He states that twice in this passage (vs. 20 to 24), and it underlies his view of the purpose of law. In verse 20 he asserts that by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified, and in verses 23 and 24 he advances from that negative statement to the positive assertion that all have sinned. The impossibility of justification by the works of the law may be shown from two considerations: one, that, as a matter of fact, no flesh has ever done them all with absolute completeness and purity; and, second, that, even if they had ever been so done, they would not have availed to secure acquittal at a tribunal where motive counts for more than deed. The former is the main point with Paul.

In verse 23 the same fact of universal experience is contemplated as both positive sin and negative falling short of the glory (which here seems to mean, as in John 5:44, 12:43, approbation from God). There is no distinction, but all varieties of condition, character, attainment, are alike in this, that the fatal taint is upon them all. We have, all of us, one human heart. We are alike in physical necessities, in primal instincts, and, most tragically of all, in the common experience of sinfulness.

Paul does not mean to bring all varieties of character down to one dead level, but he does mean to assert that none is free from the taint. A man need only be honest in self-examination to endorse the statement, so far as he himself is concerned. The Gospel would be better understood if the fact of universal sinfulness were more deeply felt. Its superiority to all schemes for making everybody happy by rearrangements of property, or increase of culture, would be seen through; and the only cure for human misery would be discerned to be what cures universal sinfulness.

**III. So we have next Paul's view of the remedy for man's sin.**

That is stated in general terms in verses 21, 22. Into a world of sinful men comes streaming the light of a righteousness of God. That expression is here used to mean a moral state of conformity with God's will, imparted by God. The great, joyful message, which Paul felt himself sent to proclaim, is that the true way to reach the state of conformity which law requires, and which the unsophisticated, universal conscience acknowledges not to have been reached, is the way of faith.

The message is so familiar to us that we may easily fail to realise its essential greatness and wonderfulness when first proclaimed. That God should give righteousness, that it should be of God, not only as coming from Him, but as, in some real way, being kindred with His own perfection; that it should be brought to men by Jesus Christ, as ancient legends told that a beneficent Titan brought from heaven, in a hollow cane, the gift of fire; and that it should become ours by the simple process of trusting in Jesus Christ, are truths which custom has largely robbed of their wonderfulness. Let us meditate more on them till they regain, by our own experience of their power, some of the celestial light which belongs to them.

Observe that in verse 22 the universality of the redemption which is in Christ is deduced from the universality of sin. The remedy must reach as far as the disease. If there is no difference in regard to sin, there can be none in regard to the sweep of redemption. The doleful universality of the covering spread over all nations, has corresponding to it the blessed universality of the light which is sent forth to flood them all. Sin's empire cannot stretch farther than Christ's kingdom.

**IV. Paul's view of what makes the Gospel the remedy.**

In verses 21 and 22 it was stated generally that Christ was the channel, and faith the condition, of righteousness. The personal object of faith was declared, but not the special thing in Christ which was to be trusted in. That is fully set forth in verses 24-26. We cannot attempt to discuss the great words in these verses, each of which would want a volume. But we may note that justified here means to be accounted or declared righteous, as a judicial act; and that justification is traced in its ultimate source to God's grace,--His own loving disposition--which bends to unworthy and lowly creatures, and is regarded as having for the medium of its bestowal the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. That is the channel through which grace comes from God.

Redemption implies captivity, liberation, and a price paid. The metaphor of slaves set free by ransom is exchanged in verse 25 for a sacrificial reference. A propitiatory sacrifice averts punishment from the offerer. The death of the victim procures the life of the worshipper. So, a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice is offered by Christ's blood, or death. That sacrifice is the ransom-price through which our captivity is ended, and our liberty assured. As His redemption is the channel through which God's grace comes to men, so faith is the condition through which (ver. 25) we make that grace ours.

Note, then, that Paul does not merely point to Jesus Christ as Saviour, but to His death as the saving power. We are to have faith in Jesus Christ (ver. 22). But that is not a complete statement. It must be faith in His propitiation, if it is to bring us into living contact with His redemption. A gospel which says much of Christ, but little of His Cross, or which dilates on the beauty of His life, but stammers when it begins to speak of the sacrifice in His death, is not Paul's Gospel, and it will have little power to deal with the universal sickness of sin.

The last verses of the passage set forth another purpose attained by Christ's sacrifice; namely, the vindication of God's righteousness in forbearing to inflict punishment on sins committed before the advent of Jesus. That Cross rayed out its power in all directions--to the heights of the heavens; to the depths of Hades (Col. 1:20); to the ages that were to come, and to those that were past. The suspension of punishment through all generations, from the beginning till that day when the Cross was reared on Calvary, was due to that Cross having been present to the divine mind from the beginning. The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted, or left unpunished. There would be a blot on God's government, not because it was so severe, but because it was so forbearing, unless His justice was vindicated, and the fatal consequences of sin shown in the sacrifice of Christ. God could not have shown Himself just, in view either of age-long forbearance, or of now justifying the sinner, unless the Cross had shown that He was not immorally indulgent toward sin.