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

**ROMANS-012**. **WHAT PROVES GOD'S LOVE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

*Romans 5:8*

We have seen in previous sermons on the preceding context that the Apostle has been tracing various lines of sequence, all of which converge upon Christian hope. The last of these pointed to the fact that the love of God, poured into a heart like oil into a lamp, brightened that flame; and having thus mentioned the great Christian revelation of God as love, Paul at once passes to emphasise the historical fact on which the conviction of that love rests, and goes on to say that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us, for when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. Then there rises before him the thought of how transcendent and unparalleled a love is that which pours its whole preciousness on unworthy and unresponsive hearts. He thinks to himself--We are all ungodly; without strength--yet, He died for us. Would any man do that? No! for, says he, it will be a hard thing to find any one ready to die for a righteous man--a man rigidly just and upright, and because rigidly just, a trifle hard, and therefore not likely to touch a heart to sacrifice; and even for a good man, in whom austere righteousness has been softened and made attractive, and become graciousness and beneficence, well! it is just within the limits of possibility that somebody might be found even to die for a man that had laid such a strong hand upon his affections. But God commendeth His love in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Now, when Paul says commend, he uses a very significant word which is employed in two ways in the New Testament. It sometimes means to establish, or to prove, or to make certain. But prove is a cold word, and the expression also means to recommend, to set forth in such a way as to appeal to the heart, and God does both in that great act. He establishes the fact, and He, as it were, sweeps it into a man's heart, on the bosom of that full tide of self-sacrifice.

So there are two or three points that arise from these words, on which I desire to dwell now--to lay them upon our hearts, and not only upon our understandings. For it is a poor thing to prove the love of God, and we need that not only shall we be sure of it, but that we shall be softened by it. So now let me ask you to look with me, first, at this question--

**I. What Paul thought Jesus Christ died for.**

Died for us. Now that expression plainly implies two things: first, that Christ died of His own accord, and being impelled by a great motive, beneficence; and, second, that that voluntary death, somehow or other, is for our behoof and advantage. The word in the original, for, does not define in what way that death ministers to our advantage, but it does assert that for those Roman Christians who had never seen Jesus Christ, and by consequence for you and me nineteen centuries off the Cross, there is benefit in the fact of that death. Now, suppose we quote an incident in the story of missionary martyrdom. There was a young lady, whom some of us knew and loved, in a Chinese mission station, who, with the rest of the missionary band, was flying. Her life was safe. She looked back, and saw a Chinese boy that her heart twined round, in danger. She returned to save him; they laid hold of her and flung her into the burning house, and her charred remains have never been found. That was a death for another, but Jesus died for us in a deeper sense than that. Take another case. A man sets himself to some great cause, not his own, and he sees that in order to bless humanity, either by the proclamation of some truth, or by the origination of some great movement, or in some other way, if he is to carry out his purpose, he must give his life. He does so, and dies a martyr. What he aimed at could only be done by the sacrifice of his life. The death was a means to his end, and he died for his fellows. That is not the depth of the sense in which Paul meant that Jesus Christ died for us. It was not that He was true to His message, and, like many another martyr, died. There is only one way, as it seems to me, in which any beneficial relation can be established between the Death of Christ and us, and it is that when He died He died for us, because He bare our sins in His own body on the tree.

Dear brethren, I dare say some of you do not take that view, but I know not how justice can be done to the plain words of Scripture unless this is the point of view from which we look at the Cross of Calvary--that there the Lamb of Sacrifice was bearing, and bearing away, the sins of the whole world. I know that Christian men who unite in the belief that Christ's death was a sacrifice and an atonement diverge from one another in their interpretations of the way in which that came to be a fact, and I believe, for my part, that the divergent interpretations are like the divergent beams of light that fall upon men who stand round the same great luminary, and that all of them take their origin in, and are part of the manifestation of, the one transcendent fact, which passes all understanding, and gathers into itself all the diverse conceptions of it which are formed by limited minds. He died for us because, in His death, our sins are taken away and we are restored to the divine favour.

I know that Jesus Christ is said to have made far less of that aspect of His work in the Gospels than His disciples have done in the Epistles, and that we are told that, if we go back to Jesus, we shall not find the doctrine which for some of us is the first form in which the Gospel finds its way into the hearts of men. I admit that the fully-developed teaching followed the fact, as was necessarily the case. I do not admit that Jesus Christ spake nothing concerning Himself as the sacrifice for the world's sins. For I hear from His lips--not to dwell upon other sayings which I could quote--I hear from His lips, The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister--that is only half His purpose--and to give His life a ransom instead of the many. You cannot strike the atoning aspect of His death out of that expression by any fair handling of the words.

And what does the Lord's Supper mean? Why did Jesus Christ select that one point of His life as the point to be remembered? Why did He institute the double memorial, the body parted from the blood being a sign of a violent death? I know of no explanation that makes that Lord's Supper an intelligible rite except the explanation which says that He came, to live indeed, and in that life to be a sacrifice, but to make the sacrifice complete by Himself bearing the consequences of transgression, and making atonement for the sins of the world.

Brethren, that is the only aspect of Christ's death which makes it of any consequence to us. Strip it of that, and what does it matter to me that He died, any more than it matters to me that any philanthropist, any great teacher, any hero or martyr or saint, should have died? As it seems to me, nothing. Christ's death is surrounded by tenderly pathetic and beautiful accompaniments. As a story it moves the hearts of men, and purges them, by pity and by terror. But the death of many a hero of tragedy does all that. And if you want to have the Cross of Christ held upright in its place as the Throne of Christ and the attractive power for the whole world, you must not tamper with that great truth, but say, He died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.

Now, there is a second question that I wish to ask, and that is--

**II. How does Christ's death commend God's love?**

That is a strange expression, if you will think about it, that God commendeth His love towards us in that Christ died. If you take the interpretation of Christ's death of which I have already been speaking, one could have understood the Apostle if he had said, Christ commendeth His love towards us in that Christ died. But where is the force of the fact of a man's death to prove God's love? Do you not see that underlying that swift sentence of the Apostle there is a presupposition, which he takes for granted? It is so obvious that I do not need to dwell upon it to vindicate his change of persons, viz. that God was in Christ, in such fashion as that whatsoever Christ did was the revelation of God. You cannot suppose, at least I cannot see how you can, that there is any force of proof in the words of my text, unless you come up to the full belief, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

Suppose some great martyr who dies for his fellows. Well, all honour to him, and the race will come to his tomb for a while, and bring their wreaths and their sorrow. But what bearing has his death upon our knowledge of God's love towards us? None whatever, or at most a very indirect and shadowy one. We have to dig deeper down than that. God commends His love ... in that Christ died. He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. And we have the right and the obligation to argue back from all that is manifest in the tender Christ to the heart of God, and say, not only, God so loved the world that He sent His Son, but to see that the love that was in Christ is the manifestation of the love of God Himself.

So there stands the Cross, the revelation to us, not only of a Brother's sacrifice, but of a Father's love; and that because Jesus Christ is the revelation of God as being the eradiation of His glory, and the express image of His person. Friends! light does pour out from that Cross, whatever view men take of it. But the omnipotent beam, the all-illuminating radiance, the transforming light, the heat that melts, are all dependent on our looking at it--I do not only say, as Paul looked at it, nor do I even say as Christ looked at it, but as the deep necessities of humanity require that the world should look at it, as the altar whereon is laid the sacrifice for our sins, the very Son of God Himself. To me the great truths of the Incarnation and the Atonement of Jesus Christ are not points in a mere speculative theology; they are the pulsating vital centre of religion. And every man needs them in his own experience.

I was going to have said a word or two here--but it is not necessary--about the need that the love of God should be irrefragably established, by some plain and undeniable and conspicuous fact. I need not dwell upon the ambiguous oracles which--

Nature, red in tooth and claw,

With rapine

gives forth, nor on how the facts of human life, our own sorrows, and the world's miseries, the tears that swathe the earth, as it rolls on its orbit, like a misty atmosphere, war against the creed that God is love. I need not remind you, either, of how deep, in our own hearts, when the conscience begins to speak its not ambiguous oracles, there does rise the conviction that there is much in us which it is impossible should be the object of God's love. Nor need I remind you how all these difficulties in believing in a God who is love, based on the contradictory aspects of nature, and the mysteries of providence, and the whisperings of our own consciousness, are proved to have been insuperable by the history of the world, where we find mythologies and religions of all types and gods of every sort, but nowhere in all the pantheon a God who is Love.

Only let me press upon you that that conviction of the love of God, which is found now far beyond the limits of Christian faith, and amongst many of us who, in the name of that conviction itself, reject Christianity, because of its sterner aspects, is historically the child of the evangelical doctrine of the Incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And if it still subsists, as I know it does, especially in this generation, amongst many men who reject what seems to me to be the very kernel of Christianity--subsists like the stream cut off from its source, but still running, that only shows that men hold many convictions the origin of which they do not know. God is love. You will not permanently sustain that belief against the pressure of outward mysteries and inward sorrows, unless you grasp the other conviction that Christ died for our sins. The two are inseparable.

And now lastly--

**III. What kind of love does Christ's death declare to us as existing in God?**

A love that is turned away by no sin--that is the thing that strikes the Apostle here, as I have already pointed out. The utmost reach of human affection might be that a man would die for the good--he would scarcely die for the righteous. But God sends His Son, and comes Himself in His Son, and His Son died for the ungodly and the sinner. That death reveals a love which is its own origin and motive. We love because we discern, or fancy we do, something lovable in the object. God loves under the impulse, so to speak, of His own welling-up heart.

And yet it is a love which, though not turned away by any sin, is witnessed by that death to be rigidly righteous. It is no mere flaccid, flabby laxity of a loose-girt affection, no mere foolish indulgence like that whereby earthly parents spoil their children. God's love is not lazy good-nature, as a great many of us think it to be and so drag it in the mud, but it is rigidly righteous, and therefore Christ died. That Death witnesses that it is a love which shrinks from no sacrifices. This Isaac was not spared. God gave up His Son. Love has its very speech in surrender, and God's love speaks as ours does. It is a love which, turned away by no sin, and yet rigidly righteous and shrinking from no sacrifices, embraces all ages and lands. God commendeth--not commended. The majestic present tense suggests that time and space are nothing to the swift and all-filling rays of that great Light. That love is towards us, you and me and all our fellows. The Death is an historical fact, occurring in one short hour. The Cross is an eternal power, raying out light and love over all humanity and through all ages.

God lays siege to all hearts in that great sacrifice. Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures? Do you see there the assurance of a love which will lift you up above all the cross-currents of earthly life, and the mysteries of providence, into the clear ether where the sunshine is unobscured? And above all, do you fling back the reverberating ray from the mirror of your own heart that directs again towards heaven the beam of love which heaven has shot down upon you? Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Is it true of us that we love God because He first loved us?