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

**ROMANS-013**. **THE WARRING QUEENS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"As sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."*

*Romans 5:21*

I am afraid this text will sound to some of you rather unpromising. It is full of well-worn terms, sin, death, grace, righteousness, eternal life, which suggest dry theology, if they suggest anything. When they welled up from the Apostle's glowing heart they were like a fiery lava-stream. But the stream has cooled, and, to a good many of us, they seem as barren and sterile as the long ago cast out coils of lava on the sides of a quiescent volcano. They are so well-worn and familiar to our ears that they create but vague conceptions in our minds, and they seem to many of us to be far away from a bearing upon our daily lives. But you much mistake Paul if you take him to be a mere theological writer. He is an earnest evangelist, trying to draw men to love and trust in Jesus Christ. And his writings, however old-fashioned and doctrinally hard they may seem to you, are all throbbing with life--instinct with truths that belong to all ages and places, and which fit close to every one of us.

I do not know if I can give any kind of freshness to these words, but I wish to try. To begin with, I notice the highly-imaginative and picturesque form into which the Apostle casts his thoughts here. He, as it were, draws back a curtain, and lets us see two royal figures, which are eternally opposed and dividing the dominion between them. Then he shows us the issues to which these two rulers respectively conduct their subjects; and the question that is trembling on his lips is Under which of them do you stand? Surely that is not fossil theology, but truths that are of the highest importance, and ought to be of the deepest interest, to every one of us. They are to you the former, whether they are the latter or not.

**I. So, first, look at the two Queens who rule over human life.**

Sin and Grace are both personified; and they are both conceived of as female figures, and both as exercising dominion. They stand face to face, and each recognises as her enemy the other. The one has established her dominion: Sin hath reigned. The other is fighting to establish hers: That Grace might reign. And the struggle is going on between them, not only on the wide field of the world; but in the narrow lists of the heart of each of us.

Sin reigns. The truths that underlie that solemn picture are plain enough, however unwelcome they may be to some of us, and however remote from the construction of the universe which many of us are disposed to take.

Now, let us understand our terms. Suppose a man commits a theft. You may describe it from three different points of view. He has thereby broken the law of the land; and when we are thinking about that we call it crime. He has also broken the law of morality, as we call it; and when we are looking at his deed from that point of view, we call it vice. Is that all? He has broken something else. He has broken the law of God; and when we look at it from that point of view we call it sin. Now, there are a great many things which are sins that are not crimes; and, with due limitations, I might venture to say that there are some things which are sins that are not to be qualified as vices. Sin implies God. The Psalmist was quite right when he said; Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned; although he was confessing a foul injury he had done to Bathsheba, and a glaring crime that he had committed against Uriah. It was as to God, and in reference to Him only, that his crime and his vice darkened and solidified into sin.

And what is it, in our actions or in ourselves considered in reference to God, that makes our actions sins and ourselves sinners? Remember the prodigal son. Father! Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. There you have it all. He went away, and wasted his substance in riotous living. To claim myself for my own; to act independently of, or contrary to, the will of God; to try to shake myself clear of Him; to have nothing to do with Him, even though it be by mere forgetfulness and negligence, and, in all my ways to comport myself as if I had no relations of dependence on and submission to him--that is sin. And there may be that oblivion or rebellion, not only in the gross vulgar acts which the law calls crimes, or in those which conscience declares to be vices, but also in many things which, looked at from a lower point of view, may be fair and pure and noble. If there is this assertion of self in them, or oblivion of God and His will in them, I know not how we are to escape the conclusion that even these fall under the class of sins. For there can be no act or thought, truly worthy of a man, situated and circumstanced as we are, which has not, for the very core and animating motive of it, a reference to God.

Now, when I come and say, as my Bible teaches me to say, that this is the deepest view of the state of humanity that sin reigns, I do not wish to fall into the exaggerations by which sometimes that statement has been darkened and discredited; but I do want to press upon you, dear brethren, this, as a matter of personal experience, that wherever there is a heart that loves, and leaves God out, and wherever there is a will that resolves, determines, impels to action, and does not bow itself before Him, and wherever there are hands that labour, or feet that run, at tasks and in paths self-chosen and unconsecrated by reference to our Father in heaven, no matter how great and beautiful subsidiary lustres may light up their deeds, the very heart of them all is transgression of the law of God. For this, and nothing else or less, is His law: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind. I do not charge you with crimes. You know how far it would be right to charge you with vices. I do not charge you with anything; but I pray you to come with me and confess: We all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

I suppose I need not dwell upon the difficulty of getting a lodgment for this conviction in men's hearts. There is no sadder, and no more conclusive proof, of the tremendous power of sin over us, than that it has lulled us into unconsciousness, hard to be broken, of its own presence and existence. You remember the old stories--I suppose there is no truth in them, but they will do for an illustration--about some kind of a blood-sucking animal that perched upon a sleeping man, and with its leathern wings fanned him into deeper drowsiness whilst it drew from him his life-blood. That is what this hideous Queen does for men. She robes herself in a dark cloud, and sends out her behests from obscurity. And men fancy that they are free whilst all the while they are her servants. Oh, dear brethren! you may call this theology, but it is a simple statement of the facts of our condition. Sin hath reigned.

And now turn to the other picture, Grace might reign. Then there is an antagonistic power that rises up to confront the widespread dominion of this anarch of old. And this Queen comes with twenty thousand to war against her that has but ten thousand on her side.

Again I say, let us understand our terms. I suppose, there are few of the keywords of the New Testament which have lost more of their radiance, like quicksilver, by exposure in the air during the centuries than that great word Grace, which is always on the lips of this Apostle, and to him had music in its sound, and which to us is a piece of dead doctrine, associated with certain high Calvinistic theories which we enlightened people have long ago grown beyond, and got rid of. Perhaps Paul was more right than we when his heart leaped up within him at the very thought of all which he saw to lie palpitating and throbbing with eager desire to bless men, in that great word. What does he mean by it? Let me put it into the shortest possible terms. This antagonist Queen is nothing but the love of God raying out for ever to us inferior creatures, who, by reason of our sinfulness, have deserved something widely different. Sin stands there, a hideous hag, though a queen; Grace stands here, in all her gestures dignity and love, fair and self-communicative, though a sovereign. The love of God in exercise to sinful men: that is what the New Testament means by grace. And is it not a great thought?

Notice, for further elucidation of the Apostle's conception, how he sacrifices the verbal correctness of his antithesis in order to get to the real opposition. What is the opposite of Sin? Righteousness. Why does he not say, then, that as Sin hath reigned unto death, even so might Righteousness reign unto life? Why? Because it is not man, or anything in man, that can be the true antagonist of, and victor over, the regnant Sin of humanity; but God Himself comes into the field, and only He is the foe that Sin dreads. That is to say, the only hope for a sin-tyrannised world is in the out-throb of the love of the great heart of God. For, notice the weapon with which He fights man's transgression, if I may vary the figure for a moment. It is only subordinately punishment, or law, or threatening, or the revelation of the wickedness of the transgression. All these have their places, but they are secondary places. The thing that will conquer a world's wickedness is nothing else but the manifested love of God. Only the patient shining down of the sun will ever melt the icebergs that float in all our hearts. And wonderful and blessed it is to think that, in whatsoever aspects man's sin may have been an interruption and a contradiction of the divine purpose, out of the evil has come a good; that the more obdurate and universal the rebellion, the more has it evoked a deeper and more wondrous tenderness. The blacker the thundercloud, the brighter glows the rainbow that is flung across it. So these two front each other, the one settled in her established throne--

Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell--

the other coming on her adventurous errand to conquer the world to herself, and to banish the foul tyranny under which men groan. Sin hath reigned. Grace is on her way to her dominion.

**II. Notice the gifts of these two Queens to their subjects.**

Sin hath reigned in death (as the accurate translation has it); Grace reigns unto eternal life. The one has established her dominion, and its results are wrought out, her reign is, as it were, a reign in a cemetery; and her subjects are dead. If you want a modern instance to illustrate an ancient saw, think of Armenia. There is a reign whose gifts to its subjects are death. Sin reigns, says Paul, and for proof points to the fact that men die.

Now, I am not going to enter into the question here, and now, whether physical death passes over mankind because of the fact of transgression. I do not suppose that this is so. But I ask you to remember that when the Bible says that Death passed upon all men, for all have sinned, it does not merely mean the physical fact of dissolution, but it means that fact along with the accompaniments of it, and the forerunners of it, in men's consciences. The sting of death is sin, says Paul, in another place. By which he implies, I presume, that, if it were not for the fact of alienation from God and opposition to His holy will, men might lie down and die as placidly as an animal does, and might strip themselves for it as for a bed, that longing they'd been sick for. No doubt, there was death in the world long before there were men in it. No doubt, also, the complex whole phenomenon gets its terror from the fact of men's sin.

But it is not so much that physical fact with its accompaniments which Paul is thinking about when he says that sin reigns in death, as it is that solemn truth which he is always reiterating, and which I pray you, dear friends, to lay to heart, that, whatever activity there may be in the life of a man who has rent himself away from dependence upon God--however vigorous his brain, however active his hand, however full charged with other interests his life, in the very depth of it is a living death, and the right name for it is death. So this is Sin's gift--that over our whole nature there come mortality and decay, and that they who live as her subjects are dead whilst they live. Dear brethren, that may be figurative, but it seems to me that it is absurd for you to turn away from such thoughts, shrug your shoulders, and say, Old-fashioned Calvinistic theology! It is simply putting into a vivid form the facts of your life and of your condition in relation to God, if you are subjects of Sin.

Then, on the other hand, the other queenly figure has her hands filled with one great gift which, like the fatal bestowment which Sin gives to her subjects, has two aspects, a present and a future one. Life, which is given in our redemption from Death and Sin, and in union with God; that is the present gift that the love of God holds out to every one of us. That life, in its very incompleteness here, carries in itself the prophecy of its own completion hereafter, in a higher form and world, just as truly as the bud is the prophet of the flower and of the fruit; just as truly as a half-reared building is the prophecy of its own completion when the roof tree is put upon it. The men that here have, as we all may have if we choose, the gift of life eternal in the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ His Son, must necessarily tend onwards and upwards to a region where Death is beneath the horizon, and Life flows and flushes the whole heaven. Brother! do you put out your whole hand to take the poisoned gift from the claw-like hand of that hideous Queen; or do you turn and take the gift of life eternal from the hands of the queenly Grace?

**III. How this queenly Grace gives her gifts.**

You observe that the Apostle, as is his wont--I was going to say--gets himself entangled in a couple of almost parenthetical or, at all events, subsidiary sentences. I suppose when he began to write he meant to say, simply, as Sin hath reigned unto death, so Grace might reign unto life. But notice that he inserts two qualifications: through righteousness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. What does he mean by these?

He means this, first, that even that great love of God, coming throbbing straight from His heart, cannot give eternal life as a mere matter of arbitrary will. God can make His sun to shine and His rain to fall, on the unthankful and on the evil, and if God could, God would give eternal life to everybody, bad and good; but He cannot. There must be righteousness if there is to be life. Just as sin's fruit is death, the fruit of righteousness is life.

He means, in the next place, that whilst there is no life without righteousness, there is no righteousness without God's gift. You cannot break away from the dominion of Sin, and, as it were, establish yourselves in a little fortress of your own, repelling her assaults by any power of yours. Dear brethren, we cannot undo the past; we cannot strip off the poisoned garment that clings to our limbs; we can mend ourselves in many respects, but we cannot of our own volition and motion clothe ourselves with that righteousness of which the wearers shall be worthy to pass through the gate into the city. There is no righteousness without God's gift.

And the other subsidiary clause completes the thought: through Christ. In Him is all the grace, the manifest love, of God gathered together. It is not diffused as the nebulous light in some chaotic incipient system, but it is gathered into a sun that is set in the centre, in order that it may pour down warmth and life upon its circling planets. The grace of God is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him is life eternal; therefore, if we desire to possess it we must possess Him. In Him is righteousness; therefore, if we desire our own foulness to be changed into the holiness which shall see God, we must go to Jesus Christ. Grace reigns in life, but it is life through righteousness, which is through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, then, brother, my message and my petition to each of you are--knit yourself to Him by faith in Him. Then He who is full of grace and truth will come to you; and, coming, will bring in His hands righteousness and life eternal. If only we rest ourselves on Him, and keep ourselves close in touch with Him; then we shall be delivered from the tyranny of the darkness, and translated into the Kingdom of the Son of His love.