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

**ROMANS-017**. **THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."*

*Romans 8:16*

The sin of the world is a false confidence, a careless, complacent taking for granted that a man is a Christian when he is not. The fault, and sorrow, and weakness of the Church is a false diffidence, an anxious fear whether a man be a Christian when he is. There are none so far away from false confidence as those who tremble lest they be cherishing it. There are none so inextricably caught in its toils as those who are all unconscious of its existence and of their danger. The two things, the false confidence and the false diffidence, are perhaps more akin to one another than they look at first sight. Their opposites, at all events--the true confidence, which is faith in Christ; and the true diffidence, which is utter distrust of myself--are identical. But there may sometimes be, and there often is, the combination of a real confidence and a false diffidence, the presence of faith, and the doubt whether it be present. Many Christians go through life with this as the prevailing temper of their minds--a doubt sometimes arising almost to agony, and sometimes dying down into passive patient acceptance of the condition as inevitable--a doubt whether, after all, they be not, as they say, deceiving themselves; and in the perverse ingenuity with which that state of mind is constantly marked, they manage to distil for themselves a bitter vinegar of self-accusation out of grand words in the Bible, that were meant to afford them but the wine of gladness and of consolation.

Now this great text which I have ventured to take--not with the idea that I can exalt it or say anything worthy of it, but simply in the hope of clearing away some misapprehensions--is one that has often and often tortured the mind of Christians. They say of themselves, I know nothing of any such evidence: I am not conscious of any Spirit bearing witness with my spirit. Instead of looking to other sources to answer the question whether they are Christians or not--and then, having answered it, thinking thus, That text asserts that all Christians have this witness, therefore certainly I have it in some shape or other, they say to themselves, I do not feel anything that corresponds with my idea of what such a grand, supernatural voice as the witness of God's Spirit in my spirit must needs be; and therefore I doubt whether I am a Christian at all. I should be thankful if the attempt I make now to set before you what seems to me to be the true teaching of the passage, should be, with God's help, the means of lifting some little part of the burden from some hearts that are right, and that only long to know that they are, in order to be at rest.

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. The general course of thought which I wish to leave with you may be summed up thus: Our cry Father is the witness that we are sons. That cry is not simply ours, but it is the voice of God's Spirit. The divine Witness in our spirits is subject to the ordinary influences which affect our spirits.

Let us take these three thoughts, and dwell on them for a little while.

**I. Our cry Father is the witness that we are sons.**

Mark the terms of the passage: The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit--. It is not so much a revelation made to my spirit, considered as the recipient of the testimony, as a revelation made in or with my spirit considered as co-operating in the testimony. It is not that my spirit says one thing, bears witness that I am a child of God; and that the Spirit of God comes in by a distinguishable process, with a separate evidence, to say Amen to my persuasion; but it is that there is one testimony which has a conjoint origin--the origin from the Spirit of God as true source, and the origin from my own soul as recipient and co-operant in that testimony. From the teaching of this passage, or from any of the language which Scripture uses with regard to the inner witness, it is not to be inferred that there will rise up in a Christian's heart, from some origin consciously beyond the sphere of his own nature, a voice with which he has nothing to do; which at once, by its own character, by something peculiar and distinguishable about it, by something strange in its nature, or out of the ordinary course of human thinking, shall certify itself to be not his voice at all, but God's voice. That is not the direction in which you are to look for the witness of God's Spirit. It is evidence borne, indeed, by the Spirit of God; but it is evidence borne not only to our spirit, but through it, with it. The testimony is one, the testimony of a man's own emotion, and own conviction, and own desire, the cry, Abba, Father! So far, then, as the form of the evidence goes, you are not to look for it in anything ecstatic, arbitrary, parted off from your own experience by a broad line of demarcation; but you are to look into the experience which at first sight you would claim most exclusively for your own, and to try and find out whether there there be not working with your soul, working through it, working beneath it, distinct from it but not distinguishable from it by anything but its consequences and its fruitfulness--a deeper voice than yours--a still small voice,--no whirlwind, nor fire, nor earthquake--but the voice of God speaking in secret, taking the voice and tones of your own heart and your own consciousness, and saying to you, Thou art my child, inasmuch as, operated by My grace, and Mine inspiration alone, there rises, tremblingly but truly, in thine own soul the cry, Abba, Father.

So much, then, for the form of this evidence--my own conviction. Then with regard to the substance of it: conviction of what? The text itself does not tell us what is the evidence which the Spirit bears, and by reason of which we have a right to conclude that we are the children of God. The previous verse tells us. I have partially anticipated what I have to say on that point, but it will bear a little further expansion. Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father. The Spirit itself, by this means of our cry, Abba, Father, beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. The substance, then, of the conviction which is lodged in the human spirit by the testimony of the Spirit of God is not primarily directed to our relation or feelings to God, but to a far grander thing than that--to God's feelings and relation to us. Now I want you to think for one moment, before I pass on, how entirely different the whole aspect of this witness of the Spirit of which Christian men speak so much, and sometimes with so little understanding, becomes according as you regard it mistakenly as being the direct testimony to you that you are a child of God, or rightly as being the direct testimony to you that God is your Father. The two things seem to be the same, but they are not. In the one case, the false case, the mistaken interpretation, we are left to this, that a man has no deeper certainty of his condition, no better foundation for his hope, than what is to be drawn from the presence or absence of certain emotions within his own heart. In the other case, we are admitted into this wide place, that all which is our own is second and not first, and that the true basis of all our confidence lies not in the thought of what we are and feel to God, but in the thought of what God is and feels to us. And instead, therefore, of being left to labour for ourselves, painfully to search amongst the dust and rubbish of our own hearts, we are taught to sweep away all that crumbled, rotten surface, and to go down to the living rock that lies beneath it; we are taught to say, in the words of the book of Isaiah, Doubtless Thou art our Father--we are all an unclean thing; our iniquities, like the wind, have carried us away; there is nothing stable in us; our own resolutions, they are swept away like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor, by the first gust of temptation; but what of that?--in those is continuance, and we shall be saved! Ah, brethren! expand this thought of the conviction that God is my Father, as being the basis of all my confidence that I am His child, into its widest and grandest form, and it leads us up to the blessed old conviction, I am nothing, my holiness is nothing, my resolutions are nothing, my faith is nothing, my energies are nothing; I stand stripped, and barren, and naked of everything, and I fling myself out of myself into the merciful arms of my Father in heaven! There is all the difference in the world between searching for evidence of my sonship, and seeking to get the conviction of God's Fatherhood. The one is an endless, profitless, self-tormenting task; the other is the light and liberty, the glorious liberty, of the children of God.

And so the substance of the Spirit's evidence is the direct conviction based on the revelation of God's infinite love and fatherhood in Christ the Son, that God is my Father; from which direct conviction I come to the conclusion, the inference, the second thought, Then I may trust that I am His son. But why? Because of anything in me? No: because of Him. The very emblem of fatherhood and sonship might teach us that that depends upon the Father's will and the Father's heart. The Spirit's testimony has for form my own conviction: and for substance my humble cry, Oh Thou, my Father in heaven! Brethren, is not that a far truer and nobler kind of thing to preach than saying, Look into your own heart for strange, extraordinary, distinguishable signs which shall mark you out as God's child--and which are proved to be His Spirit's, because they are separated from the ordinary human consciousness? Is it not far more blessed for us, and more honouring to Him who works the sign, when we say, that it is to be found in no out-of-rule, miraculous evidence, but in the natural (which is in reality supernatural) working of His Spirit in the heart which is its recipient, breeding there the conviction that God is my Father? And oh, if I am speaking to any to whom that text, with all its light and glory, has seemed to lift them up into an atmosphere too rare and a height too lofty for their heavy wings and unused feet, if I am speaking to any Christian man to whom this word has been like the cherubim and flaming sword, bright and beautiful, but threatening and repellent when it speaks of a Spirit that bears witness with our spirit--I ask you simply to take the passage for yourself, and carefully and patiently to examine it, and see if it be not true what I have been saying, that your trembling conviction--sister and akin as it is to your deepest distrust and sharpest sense of sin and unworthiness--that your trembling conviction of a love mightier than your own, everlasting and all-faithful, is indeed the selectest sign that God can give you that you are His child. Oh, brethren and sisters! be confident; for it is not false confidence: be confident if up from the depths of that dark well of your own sinful heart there rises sometimes, through all the bitter waters, unpolluted and separate, a sweet conviction, forcing itself upward, that God hath love in His heart, and that God is my Father. Be confident; the Spirit itself beareth witness with your spirit.

**II. And now, secondly, That cry is not simply ours, but it is the voice of God's Spirit.**

Our own convictions are ours because they are God's. Our own souls possess these emotions of love and tender desire going out to God--our own spirits possess them; but our own spirits did not originate them. They are ours by property; they are His by source. The spirit of a Christian man has no good thought in it, no true thought, no perception of the grace of God's Gospel, no holy desire, no pure resolution, which is not stamped with the sign of a higher origin, and is not the witness of God's Spirit in his spirit. The passage before us tells us that the sense of Fatherhood which is in the Christian's heart, and becomes his cry, comes from God's Spirit. This passage, and that in the Epistle to the Galatians which is almost parallel, put this truth very forcibly, when taken in connection. Ye have received, says the text before us, the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The variation in the Epistle to the Galatians is this: Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying (the Spirit crying), Abba, Father. So in the one text, the cry is regarded as the voice of the believing heart; and in the other the same cry is regarded as the voice of God's Spirit. And these two things are both true; the one would want its foundation if it were not for the other; the cry of the Spirit is nothing for me unless it be appropriated by me. I do not need to plunge here into metaphysical speculation of any sort, but simply to dwell upon the plain practical teaching of the Bible--a teaching verified, I believe, by every Christian's experience, if he will search into it--that everything in him which makes the Christian life, is not his, but is God's by origin, and his only by gift and inspiration. And the whole doctrine of my text is built on this one thought--without the Spirit of God in your heart, you never can recognise God as your Father. That in us which runs, with love, and childlike faith, and reverence, to the place where His honour dwelleth, that in us which says Father, is kindred with God, and is not the simple, unhelped, unsanctified human nature. There is no ascent of human desires above their source. And wherever in a heart there springs up heavenward a thought, a wish, a prayer, a trembling confidence, it is because that came down first from heaven, and rises to seek its level again. All that is divine in man comes from God. All that tends towards God in man is God's voice in the human heart; and were it not for the possession and operation, the sanctifying and quickening, of a living divine Spirit granted to us, our souls would for ever cleave to the dust and dwell upon earth, nor ever rise to God and live in the light of His presence. Every Christian, then, may be sure of this, that howsoever feeble may be the thought and conviction in his heart of God's Fatherhood, he did not work it, he received it only, cherished it, thought of it, watched over it, was careful not to quench it; but in origin it was God's, and it is now and ever the voice of the Divine Spirit in the child's heart.

But, my friends, if this principle be true, it does not apply only to this one single attitude of the believing soul when it cries, Abba, Father; it must be widened out to comprehend the whole of a Christian's life, outward and inward, which is not sinful and darkened with actual transgression. To all the rest of his being, to everything in heart and life which is right and pure, the same truth applies. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit in every perception of God's word which is granted, in every revelation of His counsel which dawns upon our darkness, in every aspiration after Him which lifts us above the smoke and dust of this dim spot, in every holy resolution, in every thrill and throb of love and desire. Each of these is mine--inasmuch as in my heart it is experienced and transacted; it is mine, inasmuch as I am not a mere dead piece of matter, the passive recipient of a magical and supernatural grace; but it is God's; and therefore, and therefore only, has it come to be mine!

And if it be objected, that this opens a wide door to all manner of delusion, and that there is no more dangerous thing than for a man to confound his own thoughts with the operations of God's Spirit, let me just give you (following the context before us) the one guarantee and test which the Apostle lays down. He says, There is a witness from God in your spirits. You may say, That witness, if it come in the form of these convictions in my own heart, I may mistake and falsely read. Well, then, here is an outward guarantee. As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God; and so, on the regions both of heart and of life the consecrating thought,--God's work, and God's Spirit's work--is stamped. The heart with its love, the head with its understanding, the conscience with its quick response to the law of duty, the will with its resolutions,--these are all, as sanctified by Him, the witness of His Spirit; and the life with its strenuous obedience, with its struggles against sin and temptation, with its patient persistence in the quiet path of ordinary duty, as well as with the times when it rises into heroic stature of resignation or allegiance, the martyrdom of death and the martyrdom of life, this too is all (in so far as it is pure and right) the work of that same Spirit. The test of the inward conviction is the outward life; and they that have the witness of the Spirit within them have the light of their life lit by the Spirit of God, whereby they may read the handwriting on the heart, and be sure that it is God's and not their own.

**III. And now, lastly, this divine Witness in our spirits is subject to the ordinary influences which affect our spirits.**

The notion often prevails that if there be in the heart this divine witness of God's Spirit, it must needs be perfect, clearly indicating its origin by an exemption from all that besets ordinary human feelings, that it must be a strong, uniform, never flickering, never darkening, and perpetual light, a kind of vestal fire burning always on the altar of the heart! The passage before us, and all others that speak about the matter, give us the directly opposite notion. The Divine Spirit, when it enters into the narrow room of the human spirit, condescends to submit itself, not wholly, but to such an extent as practically for our present purpose is wholly to submit itself to the ordinary laws and conditions and contingencies which befall and regulate our own human nature. Christ came into the world divine: He was found in fashion as a man, in form a servant; the humanity that He wore limited (if you like), regulated, modified, the manifestation of the divinity that dwelt in it. And not otherwise is the operation of God's Holy Spirit when it comes to dwell in a human heart. There too, working through man, it is found in fashion as a man; and though the origin of the conviction be of God, and though the voice in my heart be not only my voice, but God's voice there, it will obey those same laws which make human thoughts and emotions vary, and fluctuate, flicker and flame up again, burn bright and burn low, according to a thousand circumstances. The witness of the Spirit, if it were yonder in heaven, would shine like a perpetual star; the witness of the Spirit, here in the heart on earth, burns like a flickering flame, never to be extinguished, but still not always bright, wanting to be trimmed, and needing to be guarded from rude blasts. Else, brother, what does an Apostle mean when he says to you and me, Quench not the Spirit? what does he mean when he says to us, Grieve not the Spirit? What does the whole teaching which enjoins on us, Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and What I say to you, I say to all, Watch! mean, unless it means this, that God-given as (God be thanked!) that conviction of Fatherhood is, it is not given in such a way as that, irrespective of our carefulness, irrespective of our watching, it shall burn on--the same and unchangeable? The Spirit's witness comes from God, therefore it is veracious, divine, omnipotent; but the Spirit's witness from God is in man, therefore it may be wrongly read, it may be checked, it may for a time be kept down, and prevented from showing itself to be what it is.

And the practical conclusion that comes from all this, is just the simple advice to you all: Do not wonder, in the first place, if that evidence of which we speak, vary and change in its clearness and force in your own hearts. The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. Do not think that it cannot be genuine, because it is changeful. There is a sun in the heavens, but there are heavenly lights too that wax and wane; they are lights, they are in the heavens though they change. You have no reason, Christian man, to be discouraged, cast down, still less despondent, because you find that the witness of the Spirit changes and varies in your heart. Do not despond because it does; watch it, and guard it, lest it do; live in the contemplation of the Person and the fact that calls it forth, that it may not. You will never brighten your evidences by polishing at them. To polish the mirror ever so assiduously does not secure the image of the sun on its surface. The only way to do that is to carry the poor bit of glass out into the sunshine. It will shine then, never fear. It is weary work to labour at self-improvement with the hope of drawing from our own characters evidences that we are the sons of God. To have the heart filled with the light of Christ's love to us is the only way to have the whole being full of light. If you would have clear and irrefragable, for a perpetual joy, a glory and a defence, the unwavering confidence, I am Thy child, go to God's throne, and lie down at the foot of it, and let the first thought be, My Father in heaven, and that will brighten, that will stablish, that will make omnipotent in your life the witness of the Spirit that you are the child of God.