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

**ROMANS-018**. **SONS AND HEIRS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."*

*Romans 8:17*

God Himself is His greatest gift. The loftiest blessing which we can receive is that we should be heirs, possessors of God. There is a sublime and wonderful mutual possession of which Scripture speaks much wherein the Lord is the inheritance of Israel, and Israel is the inheritance of the Lord. The Lord hath taken you to be to Him a people of inheritance, says Moses; Ye are a people for a possession, says Peter. And, on the other hand, The Lord is the portion of my inheritance, says David; Ye are heirs of God, echoes Paul. On earth and in heaven the heritage of the children of the Lord is God Himself, inasmuch as He is with them for their delight, in them to make them partakers of the divine nature, and for them in all His attributes and actions.

This being clearly understood at the outset, we shall be prepared to follow the Apostle's course of thought while he points out the conditions upon which the possession of that inheritance depends. It is children of God who are heirs of God. It is by union with Christ Jesus, the Son, to whom the inheritance belongs, that they who believe on His name receive power to become the sons of God, and with that power the possession of the inheritance. Thus, then, in this condensed utterance of the text there appear a series of thoughts which may perhaps be more fully unfolded in some such manner as the following, that there is no inheritance without sonship, that there is no sonship without a spiritual birth, that there is no spiritual birth without Christ, and that there is no Christ for us without faith.

**I. First, then, the text tells us, no inheritance without sonship.**

In general terms, spiritual blessings can only be given to those who are in a certain spiritual condition. Always and necessarily the capacity or organ of reception precedes and determines the bestowment of blessings. The light falls everywhere, but only the eye drinks it in. The lower orders of creatures are shut out from all participation in the gifts which belong to the higher forms of life, simply because they are so made and organised as that these cannot find entrance into their nature. They are, as it were, walled up all round; and the only door they have to communicate with the outer world is the door of sense. Man has higher gifts simply because he has higher capacities. All creatures are plunged in the same boundless ocean of divine beneficence and bestowment, and into each there flows just that, and no more, which each, by the make and constitution that God has given it, is capable of receiving. In the man there are more windows and doors opened out than in the animal He is capable of receiving intellectual impulses, spiritual emotions; he can think, and feel, and desire, and will, and resolve: and so he stands on a higher level than the beast below him.

Not otherwise is it in regard to God's kingdom, which is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. The gift and blessing of salvation is primarily a spiritual gift, and only involves outward consequences secondarily and subordinately. It mainly consists in the heart being at peace with God, in the whole soul being filled with divine affections, in the weight and bondage of transgression being taken away, and substituted by the impulse and the life of the new love. Therefore, neither God can give, nor man can receive, that gift upon any other terms, than just this, that the heart and nature be fitted and adapted for it. Spiritual blessings require a spiritual capacity for the reception of them; or, as my text says, you cannot have the inheritance unless you are sons. If salvation consisted simply in a change of place; if it were merely that by some expedient or arrangement, an outward penalty, which was to fall or not to fall at the will of an arbitrary judge, were prevented from coming down, why then, it would be open to Him who held the power of letting the sword fall, to decide on what terms He might choose to suspend its infliction. But inasmuch as God's deliverance is not a deliverance from a mere arbitrary and outward punishment: inasmuch as God's salvation, though it be deliverance from the penalty as well as from the guilt of sin, is by no means chiefly a deliverance from outward consequences, but mainly a removal of the nature and disposition that makes these outward consequences certain,--therefore a man cannot be saved, God's love cannot save him, God's justice will not save him, God's power stands back from saving him, upon any other condition than this that his soul shall be adapted and prepared for the reception and enjoyment of the blessing of a spiritual salvation.

But the inheritance which my text speaks about is also that which a Christian hopes to receive and enter upon in heaven. The same principle precisely applies there. There is no inheritance of heaven without sonship; because all the blessings of that future life are of a spiritual character. The joy and the rapture and the glory of that higher and better life have, of course, connected with them certain changes of bodily form, certain changes of local dwelling, certain changes which could perhaps be granted equally to a man, of whatever sort he was. But, friends, it is not the golden harps, not the pavement of glass mingled with fire, not the cessation from work, not the still composure, and changeless indwelling, not the society even, that makes the heaven of heaven. All these are but the embodiments and rendering visible of the inward facts, a soul at peace with God in the depths of its being, an eye which gazes upon the Father, and a heart which wraps itself in His arms. Heaven is no heaven except in so far as it is the possession of God. That saying of the Psalmist is not an exaggeration, nor even a forgetting of the other elements of future blessedness, but it is a simple statement of the literal fact of the case, I have none in heaven but Thee! God is the heritage of His people. To dwell in His love, and to be filled with His light, and to walk for ever in the glory of His sunlit face, to do His will, and to bear His character stamped upon our foreheads--that is the glory and the perfectness to which we are aspiring. Do not then rest in the symbols that show us, darkly and far off, what that future glory is. Do not forget that the picture is a shadow. Get beneath all these figurative expressions, and feel that whilst it may be true that for us in our present earthly state, there can be no higher, no purer, no more spiritual nor any truer representations of the blessedness which is to come, than those which couch it in the forms of earthly experience, and appeal to sense as the minister of delight--yet that all these things are representations, and not adequate presentations. The inheritance of the servants of the Lord is the Lord Himself, and they dwell in Him, and there is their joy.

Well then, if that be even partially true--admitting all that you may say about circumstances which go to make some portion of the blessedness of that future life--if it be true that God is the true blessing given by His Gospel upon earth, that He Himself is the greatest gift that can be bestowed, and that He is the true Heaven of heaven--what a flood of light does it cast upon that statement of my text, If children, then heirs; no inheritance without sonship! For who can possess God but they who love Him? who can love, but they who know His love? who can have Him working in their hearts a blessed and sanctifying change, except the souls that lie thankfully quiet beneath the forming touch of His invisible hand, and like flowers drink in the light of His face in their still joy? How can God dwell in any heart except a heart which has in it a love of purity? Where can He make His temple except in the upright heart and pure? How can there be fellowship betwixt Him and any one except the man who is a son because he hath received of the divine nature, and in whom that divine nature is growing up into a divine likeness? What fellowship hath Christ with Belial? is not only applicable as a guide for our practical life, but points to the principle on which God's inheritance belongs to God's sons alone. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God; and those only who love, and are children, to them alone does the Father come and does the Father belong.

So much, then, for the first principle: No inheritance without sonship.

**II. Secondly, the text leads us to the principle that there is no sonship without a spiritual birth.**

The Apostle John in that most wonderful preface to his Gospel, where all deepest truths concerning the Eternal Being in itself and in the solemn march of His progressive revelations to the world are set forth in language simple like the words of a child and inexhaustible like the voice of a god, draws a broad distinction between the relation to the manifestations of God which every human soul by virtue of his humanity sustains, and that into which some, by virtue of their faith, enter. Every man is lighted by the true light because he is a man. They who believe in His name receive from Him the prerogative to become the sons of God. Whatever else may be taught in John's words, surely they do teach us this, that the sonship of which he speaks does not belong to man as man, is not a relation into which we are born by natural birth, that we become sons after we are men, that those who become sons do not include all those who are lighted by the Light, but consist of so many of that greater number as receive Him, and that such become sons by a divine act, the communication of a spiritual life, whereby they are born of God.

The same Apostle, in his Epistles, where the widest love is conjoined with the most firmly drawn lines of moral demarcation between the great opposites--life, light, love--death, darkness, hate--contrasts in the most unmistakable antithesis the sons of God who are known for such because they do righteousness, and the world which knew not Christ, nor knows those who, dimly beholding, partially resemble Him. Nay, he goes further, and says in strange contradiction to the popular estimate of his character, but in true imitation of that Incarnate love which hated iniquity, In this the children of God are manifested and the children of the devil--echoing thus the words of Him whose pitying tenderness had sometimes to clothe itself in sharpest words, even as His hand of powerful love had once to grasp the scourge of small cords. If God were your Father, ye would love Me: ye are of your father, the devil.

These are but specimens of a whole cycle of Scripture statements which in every form of necessary implication, and of direct statement, set forth the principle that he who is born again of the Spirit, and he only, is a son of God.

Nothing in all this contradicts the belief that all men are the children of God, inasmuch as they are shaped by His divine hand and He has breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. They who hold that sonship is obtained on the condition which these passages seem to assert, do also rejoice to believe and to preach that the Father's love broods over every human heart as the dovelike Spirit over the primeval chaos. They rejoice to proclaim that Christ has come that all, that each, may receive the adoption of sons. They do not feel that their message to, nor their hope for, the world is less blessed, less wide, because while they call on all to come and take the things that are freely given to them of God, they believe that those only who do come and take possess the blessing. Every man may become a son and heir of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

But notwithstanding all the mercies that belong to us all, notwithstanding the divine beneficence, which, like the air and the light, pervades all nature, and underlies all our lives, notwithstanding the universal adaptation and intention of Christ's work, notwithstanding the wooing of His tender voice and the unceasing beckoning of His love, it still remains true that there are men in the world, created by God, loved and cared for by Him, for whom Christ died, who might be, but are not, sons of God.

Fatherhood! what does that word itself teach us? It speaks of the communication of a life, and the reciprocity of love. It rests upon a divine act, and it involves a human emotion. It involves that the father and the child shall have kindred life--the father bestowing and the child possessing a life which is derived; and because derived, kindred; and because kindred, unfolding itself in likeness to the father that gave it. And it requires that between the father's heart and the child's heart there shall pass, in blessed interchange and quick correspondence, answering love, flashing backwards and forwards, like the lightning that touches the earth and rises from it again. A simple appeal to your own consciousness will decide if that be the condition of all men. Are you, my brother, conscious of anything within you higher than the common life that belongs to you because you are an immortal soul? Can you say, From God's hand I have received the granting and implantation of a new and better life? Is your claim verified by this, that you are kindred with God in holy affections, in like purposes, loving what He loves, hating what He hates, doing what He wills, accepting what He sends, longing for Himself, and blessed in His presence? Is your sonship proved by the depth and sincerity, the simplicity and power, of your throbbing heart of love to your Father in heaven? Or are all these emotions empty words to you, things that are spoken in pulpits, but to which you have nothing in your life corresponding? Oh then, my friend, what am I to say to you? What but this? no sonship except by that spiritual birth; and if not such sonship, then the spirit of bondage. If not such sonship, why then, by all the tendencies of your nature, and by all the affinities of your moral being, if you are not holding of heaven, you are holding of hell; if you are not drawing your life, your character, your emotions, your affections, from the sacred well that lies up yonder, you are drawing them from the black one that lies down there. There are heaven, hell, and the earth that lies between, ever influenced either from above or from below. You are sons because born again, or slaves and enemies by wicked works. It is a grim alternative, but it is a fact.

**III. Thirdly, no spiritual birth without Christ.**

We have seen that the sonship which gives power of possessing the inheritance and which comes by spiritual birth, rests upon the giving of life, spiritual life, from God; and unfolds itself in certain holy characters, and affections, and desires, the throbbing of the whole soul in full accord and harmony with the divine character and will. Well then, it looks very clear that a man cannot make that new life for himself, cannot do it because of the habit of sin, and cannot do it because of the guilt and punishment of sin. If for sonship there must be a birth again, why, surely, the very symbol might convince you that such a process does not lie within our own power. There must come down a divine leaven into the mass of human nature, before this new being can be evolved in any one. There must be a gift of God. A divine energy must be the source and fountain of all holy and of all Godlike life. Christ comes, comes to make you and me live again as we never lived before; live possessors of God's love; live tenanted and ruled by a divine Spirit; live with affections in our hearts which we never could kindle there; live with purposes in our souls which we never could put there.

And I want to urge this thought, that the centre point of the Gospel is this regeneration; because if we understand, as we are too much disposed to do, that the Gospel simply comes to make men live better, to work out a moral reformation,--why, there is no need for a Gospel at all. If the change were a simple change of habit and action on the part of men, we could do without a Christ. If the change simply involved a bracing ourselves up to behave better for the future, we could manage somehow or other about as well as or better than we have managed in the past. But if redemption be the giving of life from God; and if redemption be the change of position in reference to God's love and God's law as well, neither of these two changes can a man effect for himself. You cannot gather up the spilt water; you cannot any more gather up and re-issue the past life. The sin remains, the guilt remains. The inevitable law of God will go on its crashing way in spite of all penitence, in spite of all reformation, in spite of all desires after newness of life. There is but one Being who can make a change in our position in regard to God, and there is but one Being who can make the change by which man shall become a new creature. The Creative Spirit that shaped the earth must shape its new being in my soul; and the Father against whose law I have offended, whose love I have slighted, from whom I have turned away, must effect the alteration that I can never effect--the alteration in my position to His judgments and justice, and to the whole sweep of His government. No new birth without Christ; no escape from the old standing-place, of being enemies to God by wicked works, by anything that we can do: no hope of the inheritance unless the Lord and the Man, the second Adam from heaven, have come! He has come, and He has dwelt with us, and He has worn this life of ours, and He has walked in the midst of this world, and He knows all about our human condition, and He has effected an actual change in the possible aspect of the divine justice and government to us; and He has carried in the golden urn of His humanity a new spirit and a new life which He has set down in the midst of the race; and the urn was broken on the cross of Calvary, and the water flowed out, and whithersoever that water comes there is life, and whithersoever it comes not there is death!

**IV. Last of all, no Christ without faith.**

It is not enough, brethren, that we should go through all these previous steps, if we then go utterly astray at the end, by forgetting that there is only one way by which we become partakers of any of the benefits and blessings that Christ has wrought out. It is much to say that for inheritance there must be sonship. It is much to say that for sonship there must be a divine regeneration. It is much to say that the power of this regeneration is all gathered together in Christ Jesus. But there are plenty of people that would agree to all that, who go off at that point, and content themselves with this kind of thinking--that in some vague mysterious way, they know not how, in a sort of half-magical manner, the benefit of Christ's death and work comes to all in Christian lands, whether there be an act of faith or not! Now I am not going to talk theology at present, at this stage of my sermon; but what I want to leave upon all your hearts is this profound conviction,--Unless we are wedded to Jesus Christ by the simple act of trust in His mercy and His power, Christ is nothing to us. Do not let us, my friends, blink that deciding test of the whole matter. We may talk about Christ for ever; we may set forth aspects of His work, great and glorious. He may be to us much that is very precious; but the one question, the question of questions, on which everything else depends, is, Am I trusting to Him as my divine Redeemer? am I resting in Him as the Son of God? Some of us here now have a sort of nominal connection with Christ, who have a kind of imaginative connection with Him; traditional, ceremonial, by habit of thought, by attendance on public worship, and by I know not what other means. Ceremonies are nothing, notions are nothing, beliefs are nothing, formal participation in worship is nothing. Christ is everything to him that trusts Him. Christ is nothing but a judge and a condemnation to him who trusts Him not. And here is the turning-point, Am I resting upon that Lord for my salvation? If so, you can begin upon that step, the low one on which you can put your foot, the humble act of faith, and with the foot there, can climb up. If faith, then new birth; if new birth, then sonship; if sonship, then an heir of God, and a joint-heir with Christ. But if you have not got your foot upon the lowest round of the ladder, you will never come within sight of the blessed face of Him who stands at the top of it, and who looks down to you at this moment, saying to you, My child, wilt thou not cry unto Me "Abba, Father?"