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

**ROMANS-025**. **LOVE'S TRIUMPH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God."*

*Romans 8:38-39*

These rapturous words are the climax of the Apostle's long demonstration that the Gospel is the revelation of the righteousness of God from faith to faith, and is thereby the power of God unto salvation. What a contrast there is between the beginning and the end of his argument! It started with sombre, sad words about man's sinfulness and aversion from the knowledge of God. It closes with this sunny outburst of triumph; like some stream rising among black and barren cliffs, or melancholy moorlands, and foaming through narrow rifts in gloomy ravines, it reaches at last fertile lands, and flows calm, the sunlight dancing on its broad surface, till it loses itself at last in the unfathomable ocean of the love of God.

We are told that the Biblical view of human nature is too dark. Well, the important question is not whether it is dark, but whether it is true. But, apart from that, the doctrine of Scripture about man's moral condition is not dark, if you will take the whole of it together. Certainly, a part of it is very dark. The picture, for instance, of what men are, painted at the beginning of this Epistle, is shadowed like a canvas of Rembrandt's. The Bible is Nature's sternest painter but her best. But to get the whole doctrine of Scripture on the subject, we have to take its confidence as to what men may become, as well as its portrait of what they are--and then who will say that the anthropology of Scripture is gloomy? To me it seems that the unrelieved blackness of the view which, because it admits no fall, can imagine no rise, which sees in all man's sins and sorrows no token of the dominion of an alien power, and has, therefore, no reason to believe that they can be separated from humanity, is the true Gospel of despair, and that the system which looks steadily at all the misery and all the wickedness, and calmly proposes to cast it all out, is really the only doctrine of human nature which throws any gleam of light on the darkness. Christianity begins indeed with, There is none that doeth good, no, not one, but it ends with this victorious paean of our text.

And what a majestic close it is to the great words that have gone before, fitly crowning even their lofty height! One might well shrink from presuming to take such words as a text, with any idea of exhausting or of enhancing them. My object is very much more humble. I simply wish to bring out the remarkable order, in which Paul here marshals, in his passionate, rhetorical amplification, all the enemies that can be supposed to seek to wrench us away from the love of God; and triumphs over them all. We shall best measure the fullness of the words by simply taking these clauses as they stand in the text.

**I. The love of God is unaffected by the extremest changes of our condition.**

The Apostle begins his fervid catalogue of vanquished foes by a pair of opposites which might seem to cover the whole ground--neither death nor life. What more can be said? Surely, these two include everything. From one point of view they do. But yet, as we shall see, there is more to be said. And the special reason for beginning with this pair of possible enemies is probably to be found by remembering that they are a pair, that between them they do cover the whole ground and represent the extremes of change which can befall us. The one stands at the one pole, the other at the other. If these two stations, so far from each other, are equally near to God's love, then no intermediate point can be far from it. If the most violent change which we can experience does not in the least matter to the grasp which the love of God has on us, or to the grasp which we may have on it, then no less violent a change can be of any consequence. It is the same thought in a somewhat modified form, as we find in another word of Paul's, Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Our subordination to Him is the same, and our consecration should be the same, in all varieties of condition, even in that greatest of all variations. His love to us makes no account of that mightiest of changes. How should it be affected by slighter ones?

The distance of a star is measured by the apparent change in its position, as seen from different points of the earth's surface or orbit. But this great Light stands steadfast in our heaven, nor moves a hair's-breadth, nor pours a feebler ray on us, whether we look up to it from the midsummer day of busy life, or from the midwinter of death. These opposites are parted by a distance to which the millions of miles of the world's path among the stars are but a point, and yet the love of God streams down on them alike.

Of course, the confidence in immortality is implied in this thought. Death does not, in the slightest degree, affect the essential vitality of the soul; so it does not, in the slightest degree, affect the outflow of God's love to that soul. It is a change of condition and circumstance, and no more. He does not lose us in the dust of death. The withered leaves on the pathway are trampled into mud, and indistinguishable to human eyes; but He sees them even as when they hung green and sunlit on the mystic tree of life.

How beautifully this thought contrasts with the saddest aspect of the power of death in our human experience! He is Death the Separator, who unclasps our hands from the closest, dearest grasp, and divides asunder joints and marrow, and parts soul and body, and withdraws us from all our habitude and associations and occupations, and loosens every bond of society and concord, and hales us away into a lonely land. But there is one bond which his abhorred shears cannot cut. Their edge is turned on it. One Hand holds us in a grasp which the fleshless fingers of Death in vain strive to loosen. The separator becomes the uniter; he rends us apart from the world that He may bring us to God. The love filtered by drops on us in life is poured upon us in a flood in death; for I am persuaded, that neither death nor life shall be able to separate us from the love of God.

**II. The love of God is undiverted from us by any other order of beings.**

Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, says Paul. Here we pass from conditions affecting ourselves to living beings beyond ourselves. Now, it is important for understanding the precise thought of the Apostle to observe that this expression, when used without any qualifying adjective, seems uniformly to mean good angels, the hierarchy of blessed spirits before the throne. So that there is no reference to spiritual wickedness in high places striving to draw men away from God. The supposition which the Apostle makes is, indeed, an impossible one, that these ministering spirits, who are sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation, should so forget their mission and contradict their nature as to seek to bar us out from the love which it is their chiefest joy to bring to us. He knows it to be an impossible supposition, and its very impossibility gives energy to his conclusion, just as when in the same fashion he makes the other equally impossible supposition about an angel from heaven preaching another gospel than that which he had preached to them.

So we may turn the general thought of this second category of impotent efforts in two different ways, and suggest, first, that it implies the utter powerlessness of any third party in regard to the relations between our souls and God.

We alone have to do with Him alone. The awful fact of individuality, that solemn mystery of our personal being, has its most blessed or its most dread manifestation in our relation to God. There no other Being has any power. Counsel and stimulus, suggestion or temptation, instruction or lies, which may tend to lead us nearer to Him or away from Him, they may indeed give us; but after they have done their best or their worst, all depends on the personal act of our own innermost being. Man or angel can affect that, but from without. The old mystics called prayer the flight of the lonely soul to the only God. It is the name for all religion. These two, God and the soul, have to transact, as our Puritan forefathers used to say, as if there were no other beings in the universe but only they two. Angels and principalities and powers may stand beholding with sympathetic joy; they may minister blessing and guardianship in many ways; but the decisive act of union between God and the soul they can neither effect nor prevent.

And as for them, so for men around us; the limits of their power to harm us are soon set. They may shut us out from human love by calumnies, and dig deep gulfs of alienation between us and dear ones; they may hurt and annoy us in a thousand ways with slanderous tongues, and arrows dipped in poisonous hatred, but one thing they cannot do. They may build a wall around us, and imprison us from many a joy and many a fair prospect, but they cannot put a roof on it to keep out the sweet influences from above, or hinder us from looking up to the heavens. Nobody can come between us and God but ourselves.

Or, we may turn this general thought in another direction, and say, These blessed spirits around the throne do not absorb and intercept His love. They gather about its steps in their solemn troops and sweet societies; but close as are their ranks, and innumerable as is their multitude, they do not prevent that love from passing beyond them to us on the outskirts of the crowd. The planet nearest the sun is drenched and saturated with fiery brightness, but the rays from the centre of life pass on to each of the sister spheres in its turn, and travel away outwards to where the remotest of them all rolls in its far-off orbit, unknown for millenniums to dwellers closer to the sun, but through all the ages visited by warmth and light according to its needs. Like that poor, sickly woman who could lay her wasted fingers on the hem of Christ's garment, notwithstanding the thronging multitude, we can reach our hands through all the crowd, or rather He reaches His strong hand to us and heals and blesses us. All the guests are fed full at that great table. One's gain is not another's loss. The multitudes sit on the green grass, and the last man of the last fifty gets as much as the first. They did all eat, and were filled; and more remains than fed them all. So all beings are nourished from the King's country, and none jostle others out of their share. This healing fountain is not exhausted of its curative power by the early comers. I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.

**III. The love of God is raised above the power of time.**

Nor things present, nor things to come, is the Apostle's next class of powers impotent to disunite us from the love of God. The rhythmical arrangement of the text deserves to be noticed, as bearing not only on its music and rhetorical flow, but as affecting its force. We had first a pair of opposites, and then a triplet; death and life: angels, principalities, and powers. We have again a pair of opposites; things present, things to come, again followed by a triplet, height nor depth, nor any other creature. The effect of this is to divide the whole into two, and to throw the first and second classes more closely together, as also the third and fourth. Time and Space, these two mysterious ideas, which work so fatally on all human love, are powerless here.

The great revelation of God, on which the whole of Judaism was built, was that made to Moses of the name I Am that I Am. And parallel to the verbal revelation was the symbol of the Bush, burning and unconsumed, which is so often misunderstood. It appears wholly contrary to the usage of Scriptural visions, which are ever wont to express in material form the same truth which accompanies them in words, that the meaning of that vision should be, as it is frequently taken as being, the continuance of Israel unharmed by the fiery furnace of persecution. Not the continuance of Israel, but the eternity of Israel's God is the teaching of that flaming wonder. The burning Bush and the Name of the Lord proclaimed the same great truth of self-derived, self-determined, timeless, undecaying Being. And what better symbol than the bush burning, and yet not burning out, could be found of that God in whose life there is no tendency to death, whose work digs no pit of weariness into which it falls, who gives and is none the poorer, who fears no exhaustion in His spending, no extinction in His continual shining?

And this eternity of Being is no mere metaphysical abstraction. It is eternity of love, for God is love. That great stream, the pouring out of His own very inmost Being, knows no pause, nor does the deep fountain from which it flows ever sink one hair's-breadth in its pure basin.

We know of earthly loves which cannot die. They have entered so deeply into the very fabric of the soul, that like some cloth dyed in grain, as long as two threads hold together they will retain the tint. We have to thank God for such instances of love stronger than death, which make it easier for us to believe in the unchanging duration of His. But we know, too, of love that can change, and we know that all love must part. Few of us have reached middle life, who do not, looking back, see our track strewed with the gaunt skeletons of dead friendships, and dotted with oaks of weeping, waving green and mournful over graves, and saddened by footprints striking away from the line of march, and leaving us the more solitary for their departure.

How blessed then to know of a love which cannot change or die! The past, the present, and the future are all the same to Him, to whom a thousand years, that can corrode so much of earthly love, are in their power to change as one day, and one day, which can hold so few of the expressions of our love, may be as a thousand years in the multitude and richness of the gifts which it can be expanded to contain. The whole of what He has been to any past, He is to us to-day. The God of Jacob is our refuge. All these old-world stories of loving care and guidance may be repeated in our lives.

So we may bring the blessedness of all the past into the present, and calmly face the misty future, sure that it cannot rob us of His love.

Whatever may drop out of our vainly-clasping hands, it matters not, if only our hearts are stayed on His love, which neither things present nor things to come can alter or remove. Looking on all the flow of ceaseless change, the waste and fading, the alienation and cooling, the decrepitude and decay of earthly affection, we can lift up with gladness, heightened by the contrast, the triumphant song of the ancient Church: Give thanks unto the Lord: for He is good: because His mercy endureth for ever!

**IV. The love of God is present everywhere.**

The Apostle ends his catalogue with a singular trio of antagonists; nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, as if he had got impatient of the enumeration of impotencies, and having named the outside boundaries in space of the created universe, flings, as it were, with one rapid toss, into that large room the whole that it can contain, and triumphs over it all.

As the former clause proclaimed the powerlessness of Time, so this proclaims the powerlessness of that other great mystery of creatural life which we call Space, Height or depth, it matters not. That diffusive love diffuses itself equally in all directions. Up or down, it is all the same. The distance from the centre is the same to Zenith or to Nadir.

Here, we have the same process applied to that idea of Omnipresence as was applied in the former clause to the idea of Eternity. That thought, so hard to grasp with vividness, and not altogether a glad one to a sinful soul, is all softened and glorified, as some solemn Alpine cliff of bare rock is when the tender morning light glows on it, when it is thought of as the Omnipresence of Love. Thou, God, seest me, may be a stern word, if the God who sees be but a mighty Maker or a righteous Judge. As reasonably might we expect a prisoner in his solitary cell to be glad when he thinks that the jailer's eye is on him from some unseen spy-hole in the wall, as expect any thought of God but one to make a man read that grand one hundred and thirty-ninth Psalm with joy: If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. So may a man say shudderingly to himself, and tremble as he asks in vain, Whither shall I flee from Thy Presence? But how different it all is when we can cast over the marble whiteness of that solemn thought the warm hue of life, and change the form of our words into this of our text: Nor height, nor depth, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.

In that great ocean of the divine love we live and move and have our being, floating in it like some sea flower which spreads its filmy beauty and waves its long tresses in the depths of mid-ocean. The sound of its waters is ever in our ears, and above, beneath, around us, its mighty currents run evermore. We need not cower before the fixed gaze of some stony god, looking on us unmoved like those Egyptian deities that sit pitiless with idle hands on their laps, and wide-open lidless eyes gazing out across the sands. We need not fear the Omnipresence of Love, nor the Omniscience which knows us altogether, and loves us even as it knows. Rather we shall be glad that we are ever in His Presence, and desire, as the height of all felicity and the power for all goodness, to walk all the day long in the light of His countenance, till the day come when we shall receive the crown of our perfecting in that we shall be ever with the Lord.

The recognition of this triumphant sovereignty of love over all these real and supposed antagonists makes us, too, lords over them, and delivers us from the temptations which some of them present us to separate ourselves from the love of God. They all become our servants and helpers, uniting us to that love. So we are set free from the dread of death and from the distractions incident to life. So we are delivered from superstitious dread of an unseen world, and from craven fear of men. So we are emancipated from absorption in the present and from careful thought for the future. So we are at home everywhere, and every corner of the universe is to us one of the many mansions of our Father's house. All things are yours, ... and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

I do not forget the closing words of this great text. I have not ventured to include them in our present subject, because they would have introduced another wide region of thought to be laid down on our already too narrow canvas.

But remember, I beseech you, that this love of God is explained by our Apostle to be in Christ Jesus our Lord. Love illimitable, all-pervasive, eternal; yes, but a love which has a channel and a course; love which has a method and a process by which it pours itself over the world. It is not, as some representations would make it, a vague, nebulous light diffused through space as in a chaotic half-made universe, but all gathered in that great Light which rules the day--even in Him who said: I am the Light of the world. In Christ the love of God is all centred and embodied, that it may be imparted to all sinful and hungry hearts, even as burning coals are gathered on a hearth that they may give warmth to all that are in the house. God so loved the world--not merely so much, but in such a fashion--that--that what? Many people would leap at once from the first to the last clause of the verse, and regard eternal life for all and sundry as the only adequate expression of the universal love of God. Not so does Christ speak. Between that universal love and its ultimate purpose and desire for every man He inserts two conditions, one on God's part, one on man's. God's love reaches its end, namely, the bestowal of eternal life, by means of a divine act and a human response. God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. So all the universal love of God for you and me and for all our brethren is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and faith in Him unites us to it by bonds which no foe can break, no shock of change can snap, no time can rot, no distance can stretch to breaking. For I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.