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

**LUKE-081**. **A GREAT FALL AND A GREAT RECOVERY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."*

*Luke 22:32*

Our Lord has just been speaking words of large and cordial praise of the steadfastness with which His friends had continued with Him in His temptations, and it is the very contrast between that continuance and the prevision of the cowardly desertion of the Apostle which occasioned the abrupt transition to this solemn appeal to him, which indicates how the forecast pained Christ's heart. He does not let the foresight of Peter's desertion chill His praise of Peter's past faithfulness as one of the Twelve. He does not let the remembrance of Peter's faithfulness modify His rebuke for Peter's intended and future desertion. He speaks to him, with significant and emphatic reiteration of the old name of Simon that suggests weakness, unsanctified and unhelped: Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. There is a glimpse given, a corner of the curtain being lifted, into a dim region in which faith should not refuse to discern so much light as Christ has given, because superstition has so often fancied that it saw what it only dreamed. But passing from that, the words before us seem to me to suggest a threefold thought of the Intercessor for tempted souls; of the consequent re-illumination of eclipsed faith; and of the larger service for which the discipline of fall and recovery fits him who falls. Let me say a word or two about each of these thoughts.

**I. We have the Intercessor for tempted souls.**

Notice that majestic butwith which my text begins, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for thee. He presents Himself, then, as the Antagonist, the confident and victorious Antagonist, of whatsoever mysterious, malignant might may lie beyond the confines of sense, and He says, My prayer puts the hook in leviathan's nose, and the malevolent desire to sift, in order that not the chaff but the wheat may disappear, comes all to nothing by the side of My prayer.

Note the discrimination of the intercession. He hath desired to have you--that is plural; I have prayed for thee--that is singular. The man that was in the greatest danger was the man nearest to Christ's heart, and chiefly the object of Christ's intercession. So it is always--the tenderest of His words, the sweetest of His consolations, the strongest of His succours, the most pleading and urgent of His petitions, the mightiest gifts of His grace, are given to the weakest, the neediest, the men and women in most sorrow and stress and peril, and they who want Him most always have Him nearest. The thicker the darkness, the brighter His light; the drearier our lives, the richer His presence; the more solitary we are, the larger the gifts of His companionship. Our need is the measure of His prayer. Satan hath desired to have you, but thou, Peter, dost stand in the very focus of the danger, and so on thee are focussed, too, the rays of My love and care. Be sure, dear friends, that it is always so for us, and that when you want Christ most, Christ is most to you.

Then, I need not touch at any length upon that great subject on which none of us can speak adequately or with full comprehension--viz. our Lord as the Intercessor for us in all our weakness and need. We believe in His continual manhood, we believe that He prayed upon earth, we believe that He prays in heaven. His prayer is no mere utterance of words: it is the presentation of a fact, the bringing ever before the Infinite Divine Mind, as it were, of His great work of sacrifice, as the condition which determines, and the channel through which flows, the gift of sustaining grace from God Himself. And so we may be sure that whensoever there come to any of us trials, difficulties, conflicts, temptations, they are known to our Brother in the skies, and the stormier the gales that threaten us, the closer He wraps His protection round us. We have an Advocate and an Intercessor before the Throne; His prayer is always heard. Oh, brethren! how different our endurance would be, if we vividly believed that Christ was praying for us! How it would take the sting out of sorrow, and blunt the edge of temptation, if we realised that! O for a faith that shall rend the heavens, and rise above the things seen and temporal, and behold the eternal order of the universe, the central Throne, and at the right hand of God, the Intercessor for all who love and trust Him!

**II. Notice again the consequent re-illumination of eclipsed faith.**

I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not. Did it fail? If we look only at Peter's denial, we must answer, Yes. If we look at the whole of the future life of the Apostle, we answer, No. Eclipse is not extinction; the momentary untruthfulness to one's deepest convictions is not the annihilation of these convictions. Christ's prayer is never vain, and Christ's prayer was answered just because Peter, though he fell, did not lie in the mud, but staggered to his feet again, and with sore weeping and many an agony of shame, struggled onward, with unconquerable hope, in the path from which, for a moment, he strayed. Better one great outburst like his, the nature of which there is no possibility of mistaking, than the going on, as so many professing Christians do, from year to year, walking in a vain show of godliness, and fancying themselves to be disciples, when all the while they are recreants and apostates. There is more chance of the recovery of a good man that has fallen into some sin, gross as a mountain, open, palpable, than there is of the recovery of those who let their religion trickle out of them in drops, and never know that their veins are empty until the heart ceases to beat at all.

Here, then, we have two large lessons from which we may take strength, taught us by this darkening and re-illumination of an eclipsed faith. One is that the sincerest love, the truest desire to follow Jesus, the firmest faith, may be overborne, and the whole set of a life contradicted for a time. Thank God, there is a vast difference between conduct which is inconsistent with being a Christian and conduct which is incompatible with being a Christian. It is dangerous, perhaps, to apply the difference too liberally in judging ourselves; it is imperative to apply it always in judging our fellows. But if it be true that Peter meant, down to the very bottom of his heart, all that he said when he said, I will lay down my life for Thee, while yet within a few hours afterwards the sad prophecy of our Lord was fulfilled--Thou shalt deny Me thrice!--let us take the lesson, not, indeed, to abate our horror of the sin, but on the one hand to cut the comb of our own self-confidence, and on the other hand to judge with all charity and tenderness the faults of our brethren. Be not high-minded, but fear, and when we look into the black gulf into which Peter fell bodily, let us cry, Hold Thou me up and I shall be safe.

The other lesson is that the deepest fall may be recovered. Our Lord in the words of our text does not definitely prophesy what He subsequently declares in plain terms, the fall of Peter, but He implies it when He says, when thou art converted--or, as the Revised Version reads it much more accurately, when once thou hast turned again strengthen thy brethren. Then, the Apostle's face had been turned the wrong way for a time, and he needed to turn right-about-face in order to renew the old direction of his life. He came back for two reasons--one because Christ prayed for him, and the other because he turned himself. For the only way back is through the valley of weeping and the dark lane of penitence; and whosoever has denied with Peter, or at least grovelled with Peter, or perhaps grovelled much more than Peter, denying the Lord that bought himby living as if He was not his Lord, will never come back to the place that Peter again won for himself, but by the road by which Peter went. The Lord turned and looked upon him, and Christ's face, with love and sorrow and reproach in it, taught him his sin, and bowed his heart, and he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter and Judas both went out; the one went out and hanged himself, because his conviction of his sin was unaccompanied with a faith in his Master's love, and his repentance was only remorse; and the other went out and wept bitterly, and so came back with a clean heart. And on the Resurrection morning he was ready for the message: Go, tell His disciples, and Peter, He goeth before you into Galilee. And the Lord appeared to him, in that conversation, the existence of which was known, though the particulars were unknown, to the rest; and when He appeared unto Cephas, spoke his full forgiveness. There is the road back for all wanderers.

**III. The last thought is, the larger service for which such an experience will fit him who falls.**

Strengthen thy brethren when once thou hast turned again. I need not remind you how nobly the Apostle fulfilled this commandment. Satan desired to have him, that he might sift him as wheat; but Satan's sifting was in order that he might get rid of the wheat and harvest the chaff. His malice worked indirectly the effect opposite to his purpose, and achieved the same result as Christ's winnowing seeks to accomplish--namely, it got rid of the chaff and kept the wheat. Peter's vanity was sifted out of him, his self-confidence was sifted out of him, his rash presumption was sifted out of him, his impulsive readiness to blurt out the first thought that came into his head was sifted out of him, and so his unreliableness and changeableness were largely sifted out of him, and he became what Christ said he had in him the makings of being--Cephas, a rock, or, as the Apostle Paul, who was never unwilling to praise the others, said, a man who looked like a pillar. He strengthened his brethren, and to many generations the story of the Apostle who denied the Lord he loved has ministered comfort. To how many tempted souls, and souls that have yielded to temptation, and souls that, having yielded, are beginning to grope their way back again out of its vulgar delights and surfeiting sweetnesses, and find that there is a desert to be traversed before they can again reach the place where they stood before, has that story ministered hope, as it will minister to the very end! The bone that is broken is stronger, they tell us, at the point of junction, when it heals and grows again, than it ever was before. And it may well be that a faith that has made experience of falling and restoration has learned a depth of self-distrust, a firmness of confidence in Christ, a warmth of grateful love which it would never otherwise have experienced.

The Apostle about whom we have been speaking seems to have carried in his mind and memory an abiding impression from that bitter experience, and in his letter when he was an old man, and all that past was far away, he writes many words which sound like echoes and reminiscences of it. In the last chapter of his epistle, in which he speaks of himself as a witness of the sufferings of Christ, there are numbers of verses which seem to point to what had happened in the Upper Room. Ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Jesus Christ had then said, He that is the greater among you, let him be as the younger. Peter says, Be clothed with humility; he remembers Christ wrapping a towel around Him, girding Himself, and taking the basin. He says, God resisteth the proud, and he remembers how proud he had been, with his boast: Though all should ... yet will not I, and how low he fell because he was foolenough to trust in his own heart. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, steadfast in the faith. The God of all grace stablish, strengthen, settle you. He thus strengthened his brethren when he reminded them of the temptation to which he himself had so shamefully succumbed, and when he referred them for all their strength to the source of it all, even God in Christ.