

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

a sermon by

Alexander MacLaren
(1862 – 1910)

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By Alexander MacLaren

John 13:31-32

“Therefore, when He was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God be glorified in Him, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall straightway glorify Him.”

How did the Cross glorify Christ? In two ways. It was the revelation of His heart; it was the throne of His sovereign power.

It was the revelation of His heart. All His life long He had been trying to tell the world how much He loved it. His love had been, as it were, filtered by drops through His words, through His deeds, through His whole demeanor and bearing; but in His death it comes in a flood, and pours itself upon the world. All His life long He had been revealing His heart, through the narrow rifts of His deeds, like some slender lancet windows; but in His death all the barriers are thrown down and the brightness blazes out upon men. All through His life He had been trying to communicate His love to the world, and the fragrance came from the box of ointment exceeding precious, but when the box was broken the house was filled with the odor.

For Him to be known was to be glorified. So pure and perfect was He, that revelation of His character and glorification of Himself were one and the same thing. Because His Cross reveals to the world for all time and for eternity, too, a love which shrinks from no sacrifice, a love which is capable of the most entire abandonment, a love which is diffused over the whole surface of humanity and through all the ages, a love which comes laden with the richest and the highest gifts, even the turning of selfish and sinful hearts into its own pure and perfect likeness, therefore does He say, in contemplation of the Cross which was to reveal Him for what He was to the world, and to bring His love to every one of us,

“Now is the Son of Man glorified.”

Christ yearns to impart the knowledge of Himself to us, because by that knowledge we may be won to His love and service; and hence when He looks forward to the agony and sorrow every other thought is swallowed up in this one: “They will be the means by which the whole world will find out how deep my heart of love to it was.” Therefore does He triumph and say, *“Now is the Son of Man glorified.”*

Still further, He regards His Cross as the means of His glorifying, because it is His throne of saving power. The paradoxical words of our text rest upon His profound conviction that in His death He was about to put forth a mightier and diviner power than ever He had manifested in His life. They are the same in effect and in tone as the great words: *“I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.”* Now I want you to ask yourselves one question: In what sense is Christ’s Cross Christ’s glorifying, unless His Cross bears an altogether different relation to His life from what the death of a great teacher or benefactor ordinarily bears to His? It is impossible that Christ could have spoken such words as these of my text if He had simply thought of His death as a Plato or a John Howard might have thought of his, as being the close of his activity for the welfare of his fellows. Unless Christ’s death has in it some substantive value, unless it is something more than the mere termination of His work for the world, I see not how the words before us can be interpreted. If His death is His glorifying, it must be because in that death something is done which was not completed by the life, however fair; by the words, however wise and thunder; by the works of power, however restorative and healing. Here is something more than these present. What more? This more, that His Cross is the *“propitiation for the sins of the whole world.”* He is glorified therein, not as a Socrates might be glorified by his calm and noble death; not because nothing in His life became Him better than the leaving of it; not because the page that tells the story of His passion is turned to by us as the tenderest and most sacred in the world’s records; but because in that death He wrestled with and overcame our foes, and because, like the Jewish hero of old, dying, He pulled down the house which our tyrants had built, and overwhelmed them in its ruins. *“Now is the*

Son of Man glorified.”

And so, brethren, there blend, in that last act of our Lord’s— for His death was His act— in strange fashion, the two contradictory ideas of glory and shame; like some sky, all full of dark thunderclouds, and yet between them the brightest blue and the blazing sunshine. In the Cross, death crowns Him the Prince of Life, and His Cross is His throne. All His life long He was the Light of the World, but the very noontide hour of His glory was that hour when the shadow of eclipse lay over all the land, and He hung on the Cross dying in the dark. At His “eventide it was light.” *“He endured the Cross, despising the shame”*; and the shame flashed up into the very brightness of glory, and the ignominy and the suffering became the jewels of His crown. *“Now is the Son of Man glorified.”*

Now, let us turn for a moment to the second of the threefold glorifications that are set forth here: God glorified in the Son of Man.

The mystery deepens as we advance. That God should be glorified in a man is not strange, but that He should be so glorified in the eminent and special fashion which Jesus contemplates here, is strange; and stranger still when we think that the act in which He was to be glorified was the death of an innocent Man. If God, in any special and eminent manner, is glorified in the cross of Jesus Christ, that implies, as it seems to me, two things at all events - many more which I have not time to touch upon, but two things very plainly. One is that *“God was in Christ,”* in some singular and eminent manner. If all His life was a continual manifestation of the divine character, if Christ’s words were the divine wisdom, if Christ’s compassion was the divine pity, if Christ’s lowliness was the divine gentleness, if His whole human life and nature were the brightest and clearest manifestation to the world of what God is, we can understand that the Cross was the highest point of the revelation of the divine nature to the world, and so was the glorifying of God in Him. But if we take any lower view of the relation between God and Christ, I know not how we can acquit these words of our Master of the charge of being a world too wide for the facts of the case.

The words involve, as it seems to me, not only that idea of

a close, unique union and indwelling of God in Christ, but they involve also this other: that these sufferings bore no relation to the deserts of the person who endured them. If Christ, with His pure and perfect character—the innocency and nobleness of which all that read the Gospels admit— if Christ suffered so; if the highest virtue that was ever seen in this world brought no better wages than shame and spitting and the Cross; if Christ’s life and Christ’s death are simply a typical example of the world’s treatment of its greatest benefactors; then, if they have any bearing at all on the character of God, they cast a shadow rather than a light upon the divine government, and become not the least formidable of the difficulties and knots that will have to be untied hereafter before it shall be clear that God did everything well. But if we can say, *“He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”*; if we can say, *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”*; if we can say, that His death was the death of Him whom God had appointed to live and die for us, and *“to bear our sins in His own body on the tree,”* then, though deep mysteries come with the thought, still we can see that, in a very unique manner, God is glorified and exalted in His death.

For if the dying Christ be the Son of God dying for us, then the Cross glorifies God, because it teaches us that the glory of the divine character is the divine love. Of wisdom, or of power, or of any of the more “majestic” attributes of the divine nature, that weak Man, hanging dying on the Cross, was a strange embodiment; but if the very heart of the divine brightness be the pure white fire of love; if there be nothing diviner in God than His giving of Himself to His creatures; if the highest glory of the divine nature be to pity and to bestow, then the Cross upon which Christ died towers above all other revelations as the most awful, the most sacred, the most tender, the most complete, the most heart-touching, the most soul-subduing manifestation of the divine nature; and stars and worlds, and angels and mighty creatures, and things in the heights and things in the depths, to each of which have been entrusted some broken syllables of the divine character to make known to the world, dwindle and fade before the brightness, the gentle brightness that beams out from the Cross of Christ, which proclaims— God is love, is pity, is pardon.

And is it not so—is it not so? Is not the thought that has flowed from Christ's Cross through Christendom of what our Father in Heaven is, the highest and the most blessed that the world has ever had? Has it not scattered doubts that lay like mountains of ice of clouds that wrapped it in darkness? Has it not swept the heavens clear of clouds that wrapped it in darkness? Has it not delivered men from the dreams of gods angry, gods capricious, gods vengeful, gods indifferent, gods simply mighty and vast and awful and unspeakable? Has it not taught us that love is God, and God is love; and so brought to the whole world the true Gospel, the Gospel of the grace of God? In that Cross the Father is glorified.

Now, lastly, we have here the Son of Man glorified in the Father.

The mysteries and paradoxes seem to deepen as we advance. *“If God be glorified in Him, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall straightway glorify Him.”* Do these words sound to you as if they expressed no more than the confidence of a good man, who, when he was dying, believed that he would be accepted of a loving Father, and would be at rest from his sufferings? To me they seem to say infinitely more than that. *“He shall also glorify Him in Himself.”* Mark that *“in Himself.”* That is the obvious antithesis to what has been spoken about in the previous clause, a glorifying which consisted in a manifestation to the external universe, whereas this is a glorifying within the depths of the divine nature. And the best commentary upon it is our Lord's own words: *“Father! Glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.”* We get a glimpse, as it were, into the very center of the brightness of God; and there, walking in that beneficent furnace, we see *“One like unto the Son of Man.”* Christ anticipates that, in some profound and unspeakable sense, He shall, as it were, be caught up into the divinity, and shall dwell, as indeed He did dwell from the beginning, *“in the bosom of the Father.”* *“He shall glorify Him in Himself.”*

But then mark, still further, that this reception into the bosom of the Father is given to the Son of Man. That is to say, the Man Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Brother of us all, the very

Person that walked upon earth and dwelt amongst us is taken up into the heart of God, and in His manhood enters into that same glory, which, from the beginning, the Eternal Word had with God.

And still further, not only have we here set forth, in most wondrous language, the reception and incorporation into the very center of divinity, as granted to the Son of Man, but we have that glorifying set forth as commencing immediately upon the completion of God's glorifying by Christ upon the Cross. "*He shall straightway glorify Him.*" At the instant then, that He said, "*It is finished,*" and all that the Cross could do to glorify God was done, at that instant there began, with not a pin-point of interval between them, God's glorifying of the Son in Himself. It began in that paradise into which we know that upon that day He entered. It was manifested to the world when He "*raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory.*" It reached a still higher point when "they brought Him near unto the Ancient of Days," and ascending up on high, a dominion and a throne and a glory were given to Him which last now, whilst the Son of Man sits in the heavens on the throne of His glory, wielding the attributes of divinity, and administering the laws of the universe and the mysteries of providence. It shall rise to its highest manifestation before an assembled world, when He "*shall come in His glory, and before Him shall be gathered all nations.*"

This, then, was the vision that lay before the Christ in that upper room, the vision of Himself glorified in His extreme shame, because His Cross manifested His love and His saving power; of God glorified in Him above all other of His acts of manifestation when He died on the Cross, and revealed the very heart of God; and of Himself glorified in the Father when, exalted high above all creatures, He sitteth upon the Father's throne and rules the Father's realm.

And yet from that high summit of His elevation, He looks down ready to bless each poor creature here, toiling amidst sufferings and meanness, and commonplaces and monotony, if we will only put our trust in Him, and love Him and see the brightness of the Father's face in Him. He cares for us all; and if we will but take Him as our Savior, His all-prevalent prayer, presented within the veil for us, will certainly be fulfilled at last: "*Father, I will that*

they also whom Thou hast given me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory.”

A Brief Look at the Life of Alexander MacLaren And some comments upon “The Glory of the Cross”

by Jon Cardwell

Born in 1826 to devout Baptist parents in Glasgow, Scotland, Alexander MacLaren surrendered his life to the Lord and was publicly baptized at the age of 13 years. Educated at both Glasgow High School and University, at 16 years of age, MacLaren entered Stepney College as a student preparing for Baptist ministry. Earning his B.A. degree at London University before his 20th birthday, MacLaren commenced his ministry at Portland Chapel in Southampton in 1846.

Though the work in Southampton was very trying for the young minister, Dr. MacLaren persevered, by the grace of God, and the work brought forth abundant fruit, and formed Alexander MacLaren into a widely known, “powerful and attractive preacher.”¹

There he labored for the Lord until 1858 when he was invited to the pastorate of Union Chapel in Manchester. It was at Manchester where he gained a worldwide fame. During his ministry at Manchester, Dr. MacLaren also served twice as president of the Baptist Union. Dr. MacLaren served as pastor of Union Chapel until 1903 and drew large crowds through his effectual expository messages.

Alexander MacLaren became the first president of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905.

Though controversial because of his desire to unify the Baptists and Congregationalists, his expositional preaching earned him the reputation as “the prince of expository preachers.”

Dr. MacLaren’s method of expository preaching is widely used by many preachers today. Yet, he was very silent about the use of any method at all with regard to his expositions. In a letter sent to the Rev. John Edwards in compiling information for his book, *Nineteenth Century Preachers and Their Methods*, Alexander MacLaren had this to say, “I have really nothing to say about my way of making sermons that could profit your readers. I know no method, except to think about a text until

¹ John Edwards, *Nineteenth Century Preachers and Their Methods*; Charles H. Kelly, London, 1902; p. 76

you have something to say about it, and then to go and say it, with as little thought of self as possible.”² Therefore, Alexander MacLaren leaves for us a very interesting way to learn from him how to preach. We are to read his expositions and draw from them, not the way in which the sermons are presented, or even the format of the 3-point message that he is quite noted for, but for the content behind the Scripture text itself.

The Cross of Christ, the Person of Christ, and the love of God in Christ was the very heart of every one of his expositions. This quote from MacLaren captures one of the great truths behind his preaching: “We believe that the history of the world is but the history of His influence and that the center of the whole universe is the cross of Calvary.”

“The Glory of the Cross” presents to us an excellent example of the content of Alexander MacLaren’s expositional preaching. The very picturesque and compassionate declarations concerning the Scripture text truly express the depth of the love and mercy of God, while exalting the holiness and sovereignty of God in Christ. Dr. MacLaren’s word pictures are very reminiscent of the kind of compassionate preaching that went forth from the pulpits of Andrew Bonar and Robert Murray McCheyne.

“The Glory of the Cross” also expresses a very harmonious view of two seemingly opposing things, i.e., the glory of Christ at the Cross, and the shame of Christ at the Cross. In this way, this message is very similar to Andrew Bonar’s “The Cup of Wrath,” whereas Dr. Bonar exquisitely presents the hearer with the justice and wrath of God at the Cross side-by-side with the mercy and love of God at the Cross.

Yet, still drawing another comparison between Dr. MacLaren’s “The Glory of the Cross” with Dr. Bonar’s “The Cup of Wrath,” the hearer is left with a wondrous awareness that these messages have not exhausted the marvelous truths of God in Christ; that there is much, much more, and that heaven and earth cannot contain it all, and eternity could not tell it all.

² Ibid., p. 78

