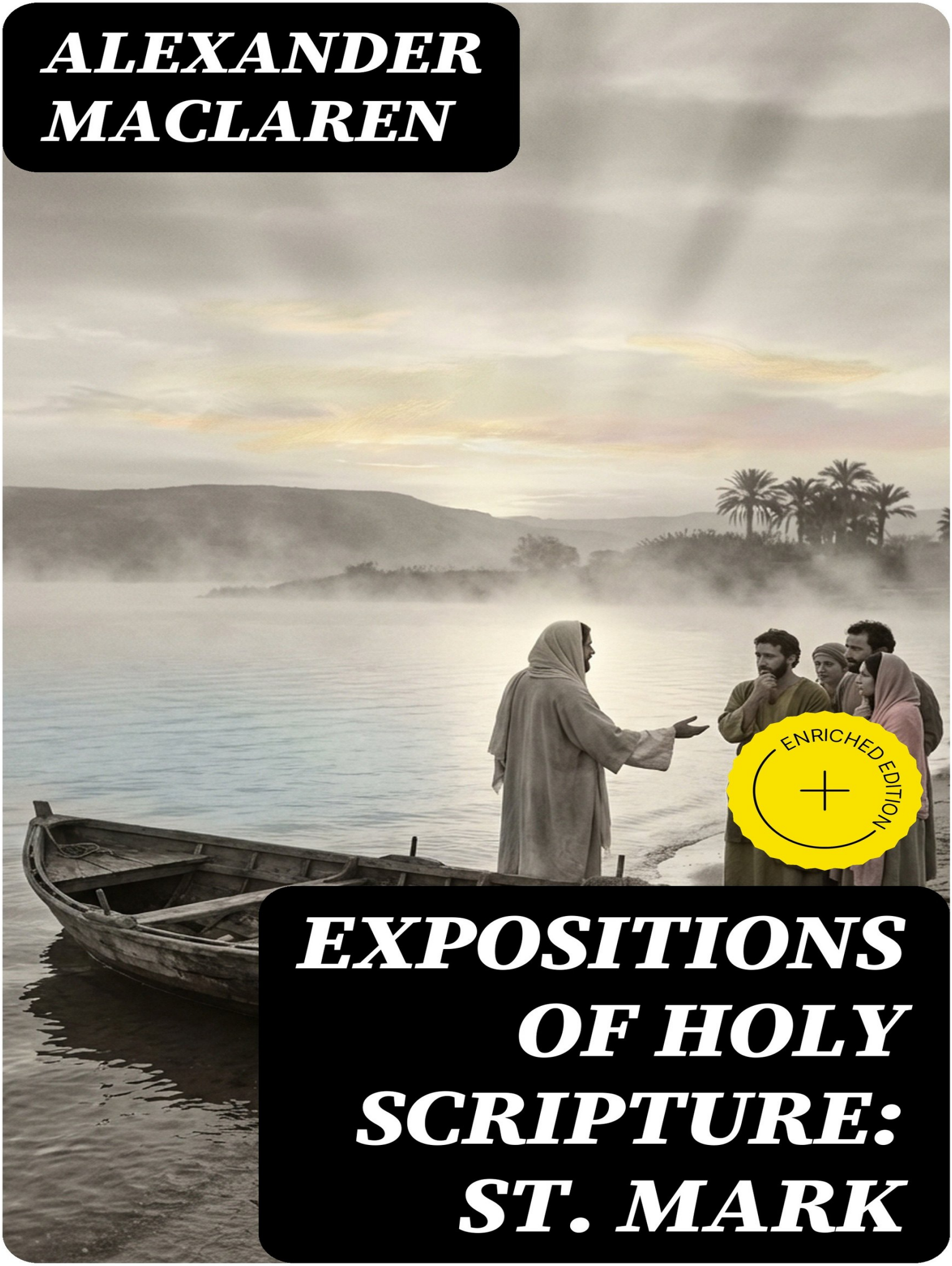
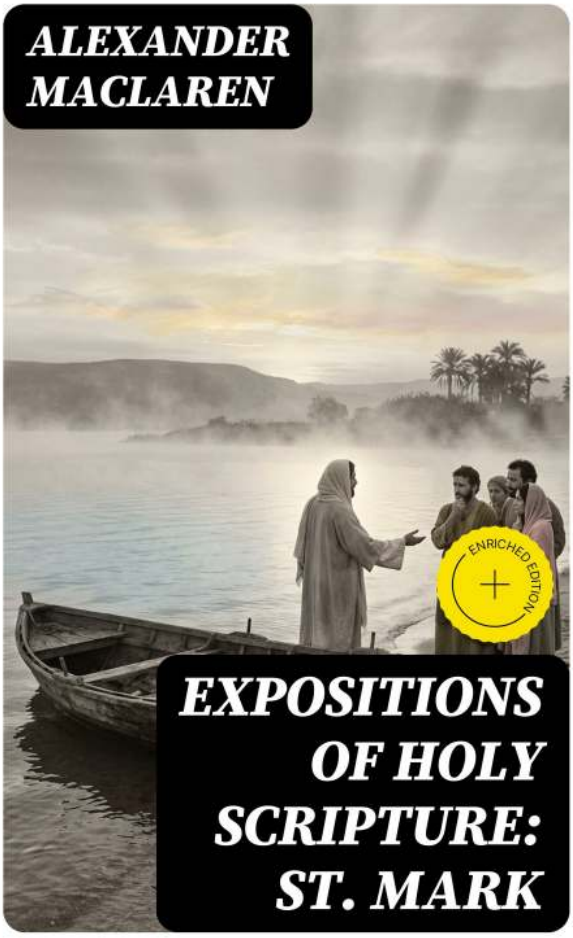
ALEXANDER MACLAREN



EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE: ST. MARK


ALEXANDER MACLAREN
ENRICHED EDITION
EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE: ST. MARK

Alexander Maclaren

Expositions of Holy Scripture: St. Mark

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Miles Fenner

EAN 8596547018599

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022

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Introduction

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This single-author collection gathers Alexander Maclaren’s expository sermons on the Gospel according to Mark from his Expositions of Holy Scripture. Its purpose is to accompany readers through Mark’s narrative with clear, devotional, and practical instruction, offering a pastor’s guidance rather than a technical commentary. Each chapter is a carefully shaped homiletic essay, aimed at illuminating a passage and pressing its claims upon heart and life. The volume presents Maclaren’s characteristic blend of reverent interpretation and ethical appeal, inviting ministers, students, and lay readers alike to consider Mark’s portrait of Jesus with attentiveness, humility, and a readiness to obey what is understood.

The contents proceed in concert with Mark’s movement from preparation and proclamation to passion and triumph. Titles signal the focus of individual expositions: from What “The Gospel” Is and The Strong Forerunner and the Stronger Son, through The Storm Stilled, The Alabaster Box, and The Death Which Gives Life, to The World-Wide Commission and The Enthroned Christ. Each piece concentrates on a distinct episode or saying, tracing its immediate context and dominant idea. Readers may follow the whole sequence as a steady walk through the Gospel or consult particular chapters that address passages pertinent to study, preaching, or devotion.

The genres represented are sermons and expository essays—texts originally crafted for the ear and shaped for practical effect. Maclaren’s method marries close, patient reading of Scripture with direct pastoral application. While he engages the narrative’s meaning and moral force, he avoids technical apparatus, preferring clarity over specialization. The result is a form of biblical theology embedded in address: doctrine explained, conscience awakened, and conduct guided. His expositions are not verse-by-verse annotations but unified treatments of passages, moving from explanation to counsel, and concluding with appeals that invite faith, penitence, steadfastness, and service in everyday life.

A strong unity of theme binds the collection. Maclaren highlights Jesus’ authority in word and deed, the summons to faith amid fear, the cost and privilege of discipleship, and the paradox of power expressed in service and suffering. He attends to Mark’s brisk tempo, the educative path of the disciples, the tension between recognition and misunderstanding, and the emergence of sight where there had been blindness. The repeated interplay of amazement, resistance, and trust supplies moral urgency, while the movement toward the cross and beyond gathers the separate scenes into one coherent revelation of the King who serves.

Stylistically, Maclaren is marked by lucid structure, measured progression, and a speaking tone that carries naturally from pulpit to page. He favors concrete images drawn from the text, crisp contrasts that clarify moral alternatives, and sentences shaped to be memorable

without ornament for its own sake. Often the exposition advances in three stages: the passage explained, the truth distilled, the life addressed. The prose respects the narrative’s force, allowing details to yield doctrine and comfort. Without sensationalism or novelty, he seeks plainness, reverence, and usefulness, trusting Scripture’s power to kindle conscience and hope.

Historically situated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these expositions have endured because they combine accessibility with depth and devotion with steadiness. Ministers find in them outlines that honor the text; readers discover companionship for prayer, work, and suffering; students meet a classic model of Christ-centered preaching. Maclaren’s pages neither argue for ingenuity nor strain for effect. They commend the Gospel by exhibiting its simplicity and grandeur side by side, and by urging holiness, compassion, and steadfast faith. Their continuing appeal lies in their capacity to clarify conviction and to guide action without coercion or controversy.

Readers will profit most by keeping an open Bible and letting each chapter converse with the passage at hand. The collection may be read straight through, mirroring Mark’s sweep, or consulted topically—for instruction on faith, service, prayer, humility, courage, or mission. Teachers will find seed-thoughts for lessons; preachers, tested pathways from text to application; all disciples, steady nourishment for reflection and obedience. One might begin with What “The Gospel” Is and trace the arc to The Enthroned Christ, noting how the way of the Lord becomes the way for His people. The aim is clarity, steadfastness, and loving service.

Historical Context

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Alexander Maclaren (1826–1910), the Baptist preacher famed as the 'Prince of Expositors,' developed these sermons on Mark amid Victorian Britain's urban transformation. After early ministry in Southampton, he spent 1858–1903 in Manchester at Union Chapel, preaching to congregations shaped by industry, migration, and an expanding working class. The St. Mark expositions, later gathered and issued by Hodder & Stoughton in the early 1900s, distilled decades of weekday lectures and Sunday preaching. Their plain style, close attention to the English text, and pastoral urgency reflect settings where Nonconformist chapels functioned as moral communities and educational hubs for clerks, artisans, and merchants across a rapidly modernizing city.

Maclaren wrote as biblical scholarship was being reshaped by textual criticism and the emerging study of the Synoptic Gospels. The Revised Version New Testament (1881) and the work of Westcott and Hort encouraged attention to variants and Mark's distinctive immediacy. Debates about the Gospel's ending (Mark 16:9–20) and Markan priority circulated in English pulpits and periodicals like The Expositor (founded 1875). Maclaren engaged such questions without polemic, favoring careful exposition that upheld the narrative's reliability and spiritual force. His focus on action-laden scenes—storms stilled, demons expelled, hands healed—aligned with contemporary interest

in Mark's pace while anchoring doctrine in the lived ministry of Jesus.

Victorian Evangelicalism, invigorated by revival currents in 1859 and by the campaigns of D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey in the 1870s, fostered a culture of decision, testimony, and hymnody. While temperamentally restrained, Maclaren shared the Evangelical emphasis on conversion and holy living. Titles such as Christ's Authority to Forgive, The Omnipotence of Faith, and Unbelieving Belief reflect the era's concern with assurance, repentance, and the immediate accessibility of grace. The sermons translate revival themes into steady pastoral counsel: faith as trustful reliance, discipleship as obedient service, and joy as the fruit of reconciliation—applications well suited to Manchester's mixed congregations of skeptics, seekers, and seasoned church members.

Industrial Manchester confronted preachers with overcrowding, irregular labor, and moral panics over drink, recreation, and Sabbath observance. Nonconformists helped form the Nonconformist conscience, pressing for personal temperance and civic reforms while avoiding partisan entanglements. In this climate, Maclaren's treatments of the Publicans' Friend, Works Which Hallow the Sabbath, and Dishonest Tenants balance ethical critique with compassion for the poor. He presents Jesus as healer and servant, validating medical care and philanthropy yet insisting on inner renewal. Such applications resonated with lay volunteers in missions and Sunday schools, and with employers who looked to Scripture for guidance on fairness, duty, and restraint in a volatile marketplace.

The late nineteenth century's missionary movement widened horizons. The China Inland Mission under Hudson Taylor, the Student Volunteer Movement's 'the evangelization of the world in this generation,' and expanding imperial connections made distant peoples present in English pews. Maclaren's expositions on the World-Wide Commission and Ambassadors for Christ channel this outward impulse, yet temper it with Mark's themes of humility, suffering, and service. Rather than baptizing imperial triumph, he elevates cross-bearing and servant leadership as the pattern for outreach. Collections supporting foreign missions, often announced from Manchester pulpits, supplied practical contexts in which such sermons urged prayer, generosity, and culturally sensitive witness.

Victorian science and critical histories—Darwin's Origin of Species (1859), Strauss's and Renan's skeptical Lives of Jesus—challenged inherited beliefs. Many ministers sought to reconcile faith and inquiry without surrendering the supernatural. Maclaren's Mark sermons respond by foregrounding Christ's authority in deed and word: the Storm Stilled, the Lord of Demons, the Transfiguration. He neither delves into technical apologetics nor concedes to demythologizing; instead he reads miracles as morally luminous acts, signs of God's kingdom invading human need. This approach offered ordinary believers a coherent framework: Scripture interprets experience; the character of Jesus validates power; and ethical transformation corroborates belief.

Victorian sermon culture thrived through periodicals, lecture series, and affordable books. Increased literacy and cheap printing allowed pulpit work to circulate far beyond its original audience. Publishers like Hodder & Stoughton issued Maclaren's Expositions for ministers preparing sermons and laypeople seeking devotional guidance. His lucid outlines, careful transitions, and avoidance of rhetorical flourish made the volumes classroom-ready and pulpit-ready. Compared with Charles Spurgeon's illustrative breadth, Maclaren offered steady, text-led movement. The essays on parables, healing, and discipleship thus entered a transatlantic homiletic tradition, shaping Bible classes, midweek meetings, and pastors' libraries from provincial Britain to North America and the colonies.

The closing years of Victoria's reign and the early Edwardian era brought fatigue with triumphal narratives: labor unrest, social surveys of poverty, and the Boer War (1899–1902) prompted sober reflection. Maclaren retired in 1903; the Mark volume, drawn from decades of preaching and edited in the early 1900s, met readers primed for realistic discipleship. Themes like Christ on the Road to the Cross, Dignity and Service, and The Death Which Gives Life address leadership, suffering, and integrity under pressure. Contemporary reviewers valued the combination of reverent criticism, practical application, and spiritual gravity—a blend that enabled the collection to outlast its immediate controversies and fashions.

Synopsis (Selection)

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Prologue: Gospel and Forerunner

Introduces Mark’s terse announcement of good news and sets the forerunner’s rugged call beside Jesus’ surpassing authority.

Maclaren’s clear, urgent preaching highlights repentance, divine initiative, and the dawning reign of God.

Early Galilean Authority: Word, Touch, and Mercy

Explores early scenes where Jesus teaches with authority, heals, forgives, and calls unexpected followers.

The sermons blend close textual notes with practical exhortation on compassion, holiness, Sabbath purpose, and mission.

Misunderstanding and True Kinship

Reflects on charges of imbalance, misread motives, and who truly belongs to Jesus’ family.

Maclaren contrasts surface familiarity with obedient allegiance, urging discernment amid opposition.

Parables of Hearing and Witness

Unpacks how receptive hearts and faithful testimony determine kingdom fruitfulness.

The tone is pastoral and searching, pressing listeners to listen well and share light without fear.

Mastery over the Deep

Meditates on Christ’s presence amid danger and the mystery of divine strength working through fatigue.

Themes of fear, trust, and sustaining grace frame Mark’s fast-paced nautical episodes.

Dominion over Darkness

Treats the liberation of the tormented and the paradox of people declining costly deliverance.

Maclaren accentuates Christ’s sovereign purity and the moral choices that follow mercy.

Interwoven Healings and the Gaze of Christ

Dwells on intertwined acts of restoration and the interplay between contact, trust, and Christ’s searching look.

The expositions encourage bold, humble faith that meets personal need without spectacle.

Rejection at Home and Mission Beyond

Notes the limits unbelief imposes and the widening call as Jesus commissions others.

The emphasis falls on resilience, shared labor, and the dignity of simple obedience.

Herod and the Forerunner’s End

Probes conscience jolted by truth and the tragic cost of vacillation.

Maclaren’s moral clarity warns against intrigue and celebrates courageous witness.

Bread in the Wilderness and Beyond Israel

Considers lavish provision in desolate places and mercy that crosses ethnic boundaries.

These homilies spotlight abundance born of compassion and the widening horizon of the kingdom.

Patterns of Service and Slow Learning

Charts servant leadership, patient pedagogy, and the role of memory in discipleship.

The tone is gently corrective, urging perseverance when understanding is partial.

Sight Restored Gradually

Uses a staged healing to illustrate how spiritual perception often brightens by degrees.

Maclaren applies the scene to growth that is real, humble, and open to a second touch.

The Cross Announced and Accepted

Sets Christ’s path of self-giving against human expectations and calls followers to a like surrender.

The argument is sobering yet liberating: life is found in losing it for him.

Glory on the Mountain: Revelation and Response

Contemplates unveiled majesty, divine affirmation, and the summons to attentive obedience.

Awe yields to practicality as Maclaren urges hearing, not merely seeing, the beloved Son.

Faith’s Tension after Glory

Surveys faltering trust, unbounded possibility, and the honest struggle to believe.

The sermons marry realism about weakness with confidence in Christ’s power.

Community Boundaries and Purifying Fire

Weighs welcome and restraint, stumbling-blocks and inner seasoning.

Maclaren presses integrity, charity, and holiness as marks of a durable fellowship.

Near but Not Yielded

Examines one who approaches the kingdom sincerely yet holds back at the decisive point.

With compassionate candor, Maclaren exposes rival loves that dull discipleship.

On the Road: Cost, Greatness, and Service

Follows Jesus toward suffering while redefining status as lowly service.

The tone is bracing and hopeful, recasting ambition as self-forgetful ministry.

Jericho Encounters: Sight and Desire

Highlights urgent appeal, persistent pleading, and searching love on the margins.

The focus is on desire clarified and answered by merciful authority.

Royal Entry and Fruitless Leaves

Frames public homage with quiet dependence and a warning against show without substance.

Maclaren contrasts outward flourish with the inward fruit God seeks.

Temple Parables and Warnings

Interprets a vineyard story as a severe mercy and a final summons to respond.

The rhetoric tightens, underlining accountability to long-patient love.

Near the Kingdom yet Outside

Reflects on commendable insight that still falls short of surrender.

The appeal is earnest: take the last step from admiration to allegiance.

Skepticism’s Blind Spots and True Authority

Counters clever doubt with the sturdiness of tested truth and obedient work.

Maclaren contrasts suspicion’s credulity toward error with the reliability of Christ’s commission.

Anointing, Betrayal, and Preparation

Sets lavish devotion beside calculated treachery and a meal freighted with meaning.

The tone is intimate and solemn, guiding hearts toward grateful remembrance.

Gethsemane: Sorrow and Slumber

Enters the pressure of prayer and the frailty of friends.

Maclaren draws out watchfulness, surrender, and the cost of compassion.

Arrest, Trial, and Counterfeit Power

Traces circles of fear and force around a calm, truthful prisoner.

The sermons expose sham authority and reveal a kingship rooted in witness.

The Cross and Compelled Companionship

Meditates on death that gives life and a passerby drawn into costly proximity.

The focus rests on sacrificial love and participation in bearing the burden.

From Fear to Witness

Follows movement from amazement and hesitation to renewed youthfulness of hope and love’s restoration.

Maclaren emphasizes patient grace that meets the first messengers and rekindles courage.

Commission and Coronation

Concludes with a worldwide sending under the risen Lord’s enduring presence.

The tone is confident and missionary, fixing eyes on a present reign that energizes labor.

Expositions of Holy Scripture: St. Mark

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WHAT 'THE GOSPEL' IS

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The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.—Mark i. 1

My purpose now is to point out some of the various connections in which the New Testament uses that familiar phrase, 'the gospel,' and briefly to gather some of the important thoughts which these suggest. Possibly the process may help to restore freshness to a word so well worn that it slips over our tongues almost unnoticed and excites little thought.

The history of the word in the New Testament books is worth notice. It seldom occurs in those lives of our Lord which now are emphatically so called, and where it does occur, it is 'the gospel of the Kingdom' quite as frequently as 'the gospel' of the King. The word is never used in Luke, and only twice in the Acts of the Apostles, both times in quotations. The Apostle John never employs it, either in his 'gospel' or in his epistles, and in the Apocalypse the word is only once found, and then it may be a question whether it refers to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. John thought of the word which he had to proclaim as 'the message,' 'the witness,' 'the truth,' rather than as 'the gospel.' We search for the expression in vain in the epistles of James, Jude, and to the Hebrews. Thrice it is used by Peter. The great bulk of the instances of its occurrence are

in the writings of Paul, who, if not the first to use it, at any rate is the source from which the familiar meaning of the phrase, as describing the sum total of the revelation in Jesus Christ, has flowed.

The various connections in which the word is employed are remarkable and instructive. We can but touch lightly on the more important lessons which they are fitted to teach.

I. The Gospel is the 'Gospel of Christ.'

On our Lord's own lips and in the records of His life we find, as has already been noticed, the phrase, 'the gospel of the kingdom'—the good news of the establishment on earth of the rule of God in the hearts and lives of men. The person of the King is not yet defined by it. The diffused dawn floods the sky, and upon them that sit in darkness the greatness of its light shines, before the sun is above the horizon. The message of the Forerunner proclaimed, like a herald's clarion, the coming of the Kingdom, before he could say to a more receptive few, 'Behold the Lamb of God.' The order is first the message of the Kingdom, then the discovery of the King. And so that earlier phrase falls out of use, and when once Christ's life had been lived, and His death died, the gospel is no longer the message of an impersonal revolution in the world's attitude to God's will, but the biography of Him who is at once first subject and monarch of the Kingdom of Heaven, and by whom alone we are brought into it. The standing expression comes to be 'the gospel of Christ.'

It is His, not so much because He is the author, as because He is the subject of it. It is the good news about Christ. He is its contents and great theme. And so we are led

up at once to the great central peculiarity of Christianity, namely that it is a record of historical fact, and that all the world's life and blessedness lie in the story of a human life and death. Christ is Christianity**[1q]**. His biography is the good news for every child of man.

Neither a philosophy nor a morality, but a history, is the true good news for men. The world is hungry, and when it cries for bread wise men give it a stone, but God gives it the fare it needs in the bread that comes down from Heaven. Though it be of small account in many people's eyes, like the common barley cakes, the poor man's food, it is what we all need; and humble people, and simple people, and uneducated people, and barbarous people, and dying people, and the little children can all eat and live. They would find little to keep them from starving in anything more ambitious, and would only break their teeth in mumbling the dry bones of philosophies and moralities. But the story of their Brother who has lived and died for them feeds heart and mind and will, fancy and imagination, memory and hope, nourishes the whole nature into health and beauty, and alone deserves to be called good news for men.

All that the world needs lies in that story. Out of it have come peace and gladness to the soul, light for the understanding, cleansing for the conscience, renovation for the will, which can be made strong and free by submission, a resting-place for the heart, and a starting-point and a goal for the loftiest flights of hope. Out of it have come the purifying of family and civic life, the culture of all noble social virtues, the sanctity of the household, and the

elevation of the state. The thinker has found the largest problems raised and solved therein. The setting forth of a loftier morality, and the enthusiasm which makes the foulest nature aspire to and reach its heaven-touching heights, are found together there. To it poet and painter, architect and musician, owe their noblest themes. The good news of the world is the story of Christ's life and death. Let us be thankful for its form; let us be thankful for its substance.

But we must not forget that, as Paul, who is so fond of the word, has taught us, the historical fact needs some explanation and commentary to make the history a gospel. He has declared to us 'the gospel which he preached,' and to which he ascribes saving power, and he gives these as its elements, 'How that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.' There are three facts—death, burial, resurrection. These are the things that any eye could have seen. Are these the gospel? Is there any saving power in them? Not unless you add the commentary 'for our sins,' and 'according to the Scriptures.' That death was a death for us all, by which we are delivered from our sins—that is the main thing; and in subordination to that thought, the other that Christ's death was the accomplishment of prophecies—these make the history a gospel. The bare facts, without the exhibition of their purpose and meaning, are no more a gospel than any other story of a death would be. The facts with any lower explanation of their meaning are no gospel, any more than the story of the death of Socrates or any innocent martyr would be. If you would know the good news that will lift your

In WORKS WHICH HALLOW THE SABBATH, CHRIST'S AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE, and THE PUBLICANS' FRIEND, Maclaren positions mercy as the interpretive center of contested norms. Relief of suffering, release from guilt, and companionship with the excluded sum to a reading of law that privileges human restoration. THE ANGER AND GRIEF OF JESUS adds moral texture, presenting indignation and sorrow not as opposites but as a unified protest against calcified hearts. These expositions frame authority as interpretive stewardship—answerable to human need—rather than as boundary enforcement for its own sake.

DISHONEST TENANTS and GOD'S LAST ARROW intensify responsibility by picturing entrusted goods returning to the Giver unmet. NOT FAR AND NOT IN and NOTHING BUT LEAVES probe nearness without fruit, where assent’s surface fails to become practice. Maclaren employs these pieces to explore the ethics of proximity: access to privilege heightens accountability, and delay carries its own verdict. The tension is not punitive sensationalism but sober recognition that squandered opportunity shapes outcomes. Stewardship emerges as the thread joining field, temple, and life, tested by what is yielded back.

HEROD—A STARTLED CONSCIENCE and THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN present power unsettled by integrity, while THE CONDEMNATION WHICH CONDEMNS THE JUDGES and CHRIST AND PILATE: THE TRUE KING AND HIS COUNTERFEIT contrast legal process with moral clarity. AUTHORITY AND WORK situates legitimate rule in service rather than display, completing the critique. Maclaren’s treatment outlines how public roles intersect with inner verdicts, where formal

decisions can misname justice even as conscience flickers. The resulting portrait locates true authority in alignment with truth and care, rather than in the optics of control.

Question 4

How does Maclaren weave Mark’s motifs of hearing, seeing, and secrecy into spiritual insight?

In LAMPS AND BUSHELS, Maclaren reads revelation as illumination meant to circulate, framing hearing as responsibility. The motif ripens at the mountain, where 'THIS IS MY BELOVED SON: HEAR HIM' and JESUS ONLY! concentrate attention on the central voice amid surrounding figures. RECEIVING AND FORBIDDING revisits this focus within community disputes about who belongs within earshot. Across these sermons, listening is a communal act with public consequences: sound becomes sight as light is shared, and discernment grows by privileging what clarifies over what dazzles.

THE GRADUAL HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN and BARTIMAEUS make seeing both medical and metaphorical, where recognition advances by stages or arrives with decisive plea. THE TRANSFIGURATION stands at the intersection, translating sight into insight without dissolving ordinary duties below the hill. THE STORM STILLED adds a wider canvas, setting perception against overwhelming forces. Maclaren binds these episodes by showing perception as morally freighted: eyes open not simply to facts but to meanings that reorient action, and clarity must be carried back into common ground.

A SECRET RENDEZVOUS, THE NEW PASSOVER, and 'STRONG CRYING AND TEARS' trace a retreat into hiddenness before public violence, not as evasion but as preparation. THE ANGEL IN THE TOMB marks the pivot from quiet to announcement, and THE WORLD-WIDE COMMISSION completes the movement into speech. Maclaren treats secrecy and disclosure as successive tasks of the same truth: there is a time to guard and a time to scatter. The pattern reframes publicity as vocation rather than impulse, aligning proclamation with the season shaped by obedience.

Memorable Quotes

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1q "Christ is Christianity."

2q "Misery and wretchedness make short work of conventional politeness"

3q "The pitying Christ is near us all"

4q "the joy of the presence of the Bridegroom"

5q "Obedience is the test of relationship to Jesus."

6q "The sower soweth the word."

7q "And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him."

8q "'His eyes were as a flame of fire,'"

9q "a look of love and welcome whensoever we seek Him,"

10q "pity welled in His heart"

11q "Memory and Hope are twins."

12q "This is My beloved Son: hear Him."

13q "The solitary Christ is the sufficient Christ, and that for ever."