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

**PHILIPPIANS-014**. **PREPARING TO END by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not irksome, but for you it is safe. 2. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the concision: 3. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."*

*Philippians 3:1-3 (R.V.)*

The first words of the text show that Paul was beginning to think of winding up his letter, and the preceding context also suggests that. The personal references to Timothy and Epaphroditus would be in their appropriate place near the close, and the exhortation with which our text begins is also most fitting there, for it is really the key-note of the letter. How then does he come to desert his purpose? The answer is to be found in his next advice, the warning against the Judaising teachers who were his great antagonists all his life. A reference to them always roused him, and here the vehement exhortation to mark them well and avoid them opens the flood-gates. Forgetting all about his purpose to come to an end, he pours out his soul in the long and precious passage which follows. Not till the next chapter does he get back to his theme in the reiterated exhortation (iv. 4), Rejoice in the Lord alway; again I will say, rejoice. This outburst is very remarkable, for its vehemence is so unlike the tone of the rest of the letter. That is calm, joyous, bright, but this is stormy and impassioned, full of flashing and scathing words, the sudden thunder-storm breaks in on a mellow, autumn day, but it hurtles past and the sun shines out again, and the air is clearer.

Another question suggested is the reference of the second half of verse 1. What are the same things to write which is safe for the Philippians? Are they the injunctions preceding to rejoice in the Lord, or that following, the warning against the Judaisers? The former explanation may be recommended by the fact that Rejoice is in a sense the key-note of the Epistle, but on the other hand, the things where repetition would be safe would most probably be warnings against some evil that threatened the Philippians Christian standing.

There is no attempt at unity in the words before us, and I shall not try to force them into apparent oneness, but follow the Apostle's thoughts as they lie. We note--

**I. The crowning injunction as to the duty of Christian gladness.**

A very slight glance over the Epistle will show how continually the note of gladness is struck in it. Whatever in Paul's circumstances was at enmity with joy could not darken his sunny outlook. This bird could sing in a darkened cage. If we brought together the expressions of his joy in this letter, they would yield us some precious lessons as to what were the sources of his, and what may be the sources of ours. There runs through all the instances in the Epistle the implication which comes out most emphatically in his earnest exhortation, Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. The true source of true joy lies in our union with Jesus. To be in Him is the condition of every good, and, just as in the former verses trust in the Lord is set forth, so the joy which comes from trust is traced to the same source. The joy that is worthy, real, permanent, and the ally of lofty endeavour and noble thoughts has its root in union with Jesus, is realised in communion with Him, has Him for its reason or motive, and Him for its safeguard or measure. As the passages in question in this Epistle show, such joy does not shut out but hallows other sources of satisfaction. In our weakness creatural love and kindness but too often draw us away from our joy in Him. But with Paul the sources which we too often find antagonistic were harmoniously blended, and flowed side by side in the same channel, so that he could express them both in the one utterance, I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again.

We do not sufficiently realise the Christian duty of Christian joy, some of us even take mortified countenances and voices in a minor key as marks of grace, and there is but little in any of us of the joy in the Lord which a saint of the Old Testament had learned was our strength. There is plenty of gladness amongst professing Christians, but a good many of them would resent the question, is your gladness in the Lord? No doubt any deep experience in the Christian life makes us aware of much in ourselves that saddens, and may depress, and our joy in Him must always be shaded by penitent sorrow for ourselves. But that necessary element of sadness in the Christian life is not the cause why so many Christian lives have little of the buoyancy and hope and spontaneity which should mark them. The reason rather lies in the lack of true union with Christ, and habitual keeping of ourselves in the love of God.

**II. Paul's apology for reiteration.**

He is going to give once more old and well-worn precepts which are often very tedious to the hearer, and not much less so to the speaker. He can only say that to him the repetition of familiar injunctions is not irksome, and that to them it is safe. The diseased craving for originality in the present day tempts us all, hearers and speakers alike, and we ever need to be reminded that the staple of Christian teaching must be old truths reiterated, and that it is not time to stop proclaiming them until all men have begun to practise them. But a speaker must try to make the thousandth repetition of a truth fresh to himself, and not a wearisome form, or a dead commonplace, by freshening it to his own mind and by living on it in his own practice, and the hearers must remember that it is only the completeness of their obedience that antiquates the commandment. The most threadbare commonplace becomes a novelty when occasions for its application arise in our own lives, just as a prescription may lie long unnoticed in a drawer, but when a fever attacks its possessor it will be quickly drawn out and worth its weight in gold.

**III. Paul's warning against teachers of a ceremonial religion.**

It scarcely seems congruous with the tone of the rest of this letter that the preachers whom Paul so scathingly points out here had obtained any firm footing in the Philippian Church, but no doubt there, as everywhere, they had dogged Paul's footsteps, and had tried as they always did to mar his work. They had not missionary fervour or Christian energy enough to initiate efforts amongst the Gentiles so as to make them proselytes, but when Paul and his companions had made them Christians, they did their best, or their worst, to insist that they could not be truly Christians, unless they submitted to the outward sign of being Jews. Paul points a scathing finger at them when he bids the Philippians beware, and he permits himself a bitter retort when he lays hold of the Jewish contemptuous word for Gentiles which stigmatised them as dogs, that is profane and unclean, and hurls it back at the givers. But he is not indulging in mere bitter retorts when he brings against these teachers the definite charge that they are evil workers. People who believed that an outward observance was the condition of salvation would naturally be less careful to insist upon holy living. A religion of ceremonies is not a religion of morality. Then the Apostle lets himself go in a contemptuous play of words, and refuses to recognise that these sticklers for circumcision had themselves been circumcised. I will not call them the circumcision, they have not been circumcised, they have only been gashed and mutilated, it has been a mere fleshly maiming. His reason for denying the name to them is his profound belief that it belonged to true Christians. His contemptuous reference puts in a word, the principle which he definitely states in another place, He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh.

The Apostle here is not only telling us who are the truly circumcised, but at the same time he is telling us what makes a Christian, and he states three points in which, as I take it, he begins at the end and works backwards to the beginning. We are the circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God--that is the final result--and glory in Christ Jesus--and have no confidence in the flesh--that is the starting-point. The beginning of all true Christianity is distrust of self. What does Paul mean by flesh? Body? Certainly not. Animal nature, or the passions rooted in it? Not only these, as may be seen by noting the catalogue which follows of the things in the flesh, in which he might have trusted. What are these? Circumcised the eighth day, of the tribe of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews--these belong to ritual and race; as touching the law a Pharisee--that belongs to ecclesiastical standing; concerning zeal persecuting the church--that has nothing to do with the animal nature: touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless--that concerns the moral nature. All these come under the category of the flesh, which, therefore, plainly includes all that belongs to humanity apart from God. Paul's old-fashioned language translated into modern English just comes to this--it is vain to trust in external connection with the sacred community of the Church, or in participation in any of its ordinances and rites. To Paul, Christian rites and Jewish rites were equally rites and equally insufficient as bases of confidence. Do not let us fancy that dependence on these is peculiar to certain forms of Christian belief. It is a very subtle all-pervasive tendency, and there is no need to lift up Nonconformist hands in holy horror at the corruptions of Romanism and the like. Their origin is not solely priestly ambition, but also the desires of the so-called laity. Demand creates a supply, and if there were not people to think, Now it shall be well with me because I have a Levite for my priest, there would be no Levites to meet their wishes.

Notice that Paul includes amongst the things belonging to the flesh this touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless. Many of us can say the same. We do our duties so far as we know them, and are respectable law-abiding people, but if we are trusting to that, we are of the flesh. Have we estimated what God is, and what the real worth of our conduct is? Have we looked not at our actions but at our motives, and seen them as they are seen from above or from the inside? How many blameless lives are like the scenes in a theatre, effective and picturesque, when seen with the artificial glory of the footlights? But go behind the scenes and what do we find? Dirty canvas and cobwebs. If we know ourselves we know that a life may have a fair outside, and yet not be a thing to trust to.

The beginning of our Christianity is the consciousness that we are naked and poor, and blind, and in need of all things. Men come to Jesus Christ by many ways, thank God, and I care little by what road they come so long as they get there, nor do I insist upon any stereotyped order of religious experience. But of this I am very sure: that unless we abandon confidence in ourselves, because we have seen ourselves in the light of God's law, we have not learned all that we need nor laid hold of all that Christ gives. Let us measure ourselves in the light of God, and we shall learn that we have to take our places beside Job, when the vision of God silenced his protestations of innocence. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.

That self-distrust should pass into glorying in Christ Jesus. If a man has learned his emptiness he will look about for something to fill it. Unless I know myself to be under condemnation because of my sin, and fevered, disturbed, and made wretched, by its inward consequences which forbid repose, the sweetest words of Gospel invitation will pass by me like wind whistling through an archway. But if once I have been driven from self-confidence, then like music from heaven will come the word, Trust in Jesus. The seed dropped into the ground puts out a downward-going shoot, which is the root, and an upward-growing one, which is the stalk. The downward-going shoot is no confidence in the flesh, the upward-going is glorying in Christ Jesus.

But that word suggests the blessed experience of triumph in the possession of the Person known and felt to be all, and to give all that life needs. A true Christian should ever be triumphant in a felt experience, in a Name proved to be sufficient, in a power which infuses strength into his weakness, and enables him to do the will of God. It is for want of utter self-distrust and absolute faith in Christ that glorying in Him is so far beyond the ordinary mood of the average Christian. You say, I hope, sometimes I doubt, sometimes I fear, sometimes I tremblingly trust. Is that the kind of experience that these words shadow? Why do we continue amidst the mist when we might rise into the clear blue above the obscuring pall? Only because we are still in some measure clinging to self, and still in some measure distrusting our Lord. If our faith were firm and full our glorying would be constant. Do not be contented with the prevailing sombre type of Christian life which is always endeavouring, and always foiled, which is often doubting and often indifferent, but seek to live in the sunshine, and expatiate in the light, and rejoice in the Lord always.

Glorying not only describes an attitude of mind, but an activity of life. Many things to-day tempt Christian people to speak of their religion and of their Lord in an apologetic tone, in the face of strong and educated unbelief; but if we have within us, as we all may have, and ought to have, the triumphant assurance of His sufficiency, nearness, and power, it will not be with bated breath that we shall speak of our Master, or apologise for our Christianity, but we shall obey the commandment, Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid. Ring out the name and be proud that you can ring it out, as the Name of your Lord, and your Saviour, and your all-sufficient Friend. Whatever other people say, you have the experience, if you are a Christian, which more than answers all that they can say.

We have said that the final result set forth here by Paul is, We worship by the Spirit of God. The expression translated worship is the technical word for rendering priestly service. Just as Paul has asserted that uncircumcised Christians, not circumcised Jews, are the true circumcision, so he asserts that they are the true priests, and that these officials in the outward temple at Jerusalem have forfeited the title, and that it has passed over to the despised followers of the despised Nazarene. If we have no confidence in the flesh, and are glorying in Christ Jesus, we are all priests of the most high God. Worship in the Spirit is our function and privilege. The externals of ceremonial worship dwindle into insignificance. They may be means of helping, or they may be means of hindering, the worship in the Spirit, which I venture to think all experience shows is the more likely to be pure and real, the less it invokes the aid of flesh and sense. To make the senses the ladder for the soul by which to climb to God is quite as likely to end in the soul's going down the ladder as up it. Aesthetic aids to worship are crutches which keep a lame soul lame all its days.

Such worship is the obligation as well as the prerogative of the Christian. We have no right to say that we have truly forsaken confidence in ourselves, and are truly glorying in Christ Jesus, unless our daily life is communion with God, and all your work worshipping by the Spirit of God. Such communion and worship are possible for those, and for those only, who have no confidence in the flesh and who glory in Christ Jesus.