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

**PHILIPPIANS-024**. **NAMES IN THE BOOK OF LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Other my fellow-labourers whose names are in the book of life."*

*Philippians 4:3*

Paul was as gentle as he was strong. Winsome courtesy and delicate considerateness lay in his character, in beautiful union with fiery impetuosity and undaunted tenacity of conviction. We have here a remarkable instance of his quick apprehension of the possible effects of his words, and of his nervous anxiety not to wound even unreasonable susceptibilities.

He had had occasion to mention three of his fellow-workers, and he wishes to associate with them others whom he does not purpose to name. Lest any of these should be offended by the omission, he soothes them with this graceful, half-apologetic reminder that their names are inscribed on a better page than his. It is as if he had said, Do not mind though I do not mention you individually. You can well afford to be anonymous in my letter since your names are inscribed in the Book of Life.

There is a consolation for obscure good people, who need not expect to live except in two or three loving hearts; and whose names will only be preserved on mouldering tombstones that will convey no idea to the reader. We may well dispense with other commemoration if we have this.

Now, this figure of the Book of Life appears in Scripture at intervals, almost from the beginning to the very end. The first instance of its occurrence is in that self-sacrificing, intercessory prayer of Moses, when he expressed his willingness to be blotted out of Thy book as an atonement for the sin of Israel. Its last appearance is when the Apocalyptic Seer is told that none enter into the City of God come down from Heaven save those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Of course in plain English the expression is just equivalent to being a real disciple of Jesus Christ. But then it presents that general notion under a metaphor which, in its various aspects, has a very distinct and stringent bearing upon our duties as well as upon our blessings and our hopes. I, therefore, wish to work out, as well as I can, the various thoughts suggested by this emblem.

**I. The first of them is Citizenship.**

The figure is, of course, originally drawn from the registers of the tribes of Israel. In that use, though not without a glance at some higher meaning, it appears in the Old Testament, where we read of those who are written among them living in Jerusalem; or are written in the writing of the house of Israel. The suggestion of being inscribed on the burgess-rolls of a city is the first idea connected with the word. In the New Testament, for instance, we find in the great passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews the two notions of the city and the census brought into immediate connection, where the writer says, Ye are come unto the city of the living God ... and to the church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven. In this very letter we have, only a verse or two before my text, the same idea of citizenship cropping up. Our citizenship is in Heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour. That, no doubt, helped to suggest to the Apostle the words of my text. And there is another verse in the same letter where the same idea comes out. Only act the citizen as becometh the Gospel of Christ. Now, you will remember, possibly, that Philippi was, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us, a Roman colony. And the reference is exquisitely close-fitting to the circumstances of the people of that city. For a Roman colony was a bit of Rome in another land, and the citizens of Philippi had their names inscribed on the registers of the tribes of Rome. The writer himself was another illustration of the same thing, of living in a community to which he did not belong and of belonging to a community in which he did not live. For Paul was a native of Tarsus; and Paul, the native of the Asiatic Tarsus, was a Roman.

So, then, the first thought that comes out of this great metaphor is that all of us, if we are Christian people, belong to another polity, another order of things than that in which our outward lives are spent. And the plain, practical conclusion that comes from it is, cultivate the sense of belonging to another order. Just as it swelled the heart of a Macedonian Philippian with pride, when he thought that he did not belong to the semi-barbarous people round about him, but that his name was written in the books that lay in the Capitol of Rome, so should we cultivate that sense of belonging to another order. It will make our work here none the worse, but it will fill our lives with the sense of nobler affinities, and point our efforts to grander work than any that belongs to the things that are seen and temporal. Just as the little groups of Englishmen in treaty-ports own no allegiance to the laws of the country in which they live, but are governed by English statutes, so we have to take our orders from headquarters to which we have to report. Men in our colonies get their instructions from Downing Street. The officials there, appointed by the Home Government, think more of what they will say about them at Westminster than of what they say about them at Melbourne. So we are citizens of another country, and have to obey the laws of our own kingdom, and not those of the soil on which we dwell. Never mind about the opinions of men, the babblements of the people in the land you live in. To us, the main thing is that we be acceptable, well-pleasing unto Him. Are you solitary? Cultivate the sense of, in your solitude, being a member of a great community that stretches through all the ages, and binds into one the inhabitants of eternity and of time.

Remember that this citizenship in the heavens is the highest honour that can be conferred upon a man. The patricians of Venice used to have their names inscribed upon what was called the golden book that was kept in the Doge's Palace. If our names are written in the book of gold in the heavens, then we have higher dignities than any that belong to the fleeting chronicles of this passing, vain world. So we can accept with equanimity evil report or good report, and can acquiesce in a wholesome obscurity, and be careless though our names appear on no human records, and fill no trumpet of fame blown by earthly cheeks. Intellectual power, wealth, gratified ambition, and all the other things that men set before them, are small indeed compared with the honour, with the blessedness, with the repose and satisfaction that attend the conscious possession of citizenship in the heavens. Let us lay to heart the great words of the Master which put a cooling hand on all the feverish ambitions of earth. In this rejoice, not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

**II. Then the second idea suggested by these words is the possession of the life which is life indeed.**

The Book of Life, it is called in the New Testament. Its designation in the Old might as well be translated the book of living as the book of life. It is a register of the men who are truly alive.

Now, that is but an imaginative way of putting the commonplace of the New Testament, that anything which is worth calling life comes to us, not by creation or physical generation, but by being born again through faith in Jesus Christ, and by receiving into our else dead spirits the life which He bestows upon all them that trust Him.

In the New Testament life is far more than being; far more than physical existence; removed by a whole world from these lower conceptions, and finding its complete explanation only in the fact that the soul which is knit to God by conscious surrender, love, aspiration, and obedience, is the only soul that really lives. All else is death--death! He that liveth in pleasure is dead while he liveth. The ghastly imagination of one of our poets, of the dead man standing on the deck pulling at the ropes by the side of the living, is true in a very deep sense. In spite of all the feverish activities, the manifold vitalities of practical and intellectual life in the world, the deepest, truest, life of every man who is parted from God by alienation of will, by indifference, and neglect of love, lies sheeted and sepulchred in the depths of his own heart. Brethren, there is no life worth calling life, none to which that august name can without degradation be applied, except the complete life of body, soul, and spirit, in lowly obedience to God in Christ. The deepest meaning of the work of the Saviour is that He comes into a dead world, and breathes into the bones--very many and very dry--the breath of His own life. Christ has died for us; Christ will live in us if we will; and, unless He does, we are twice dead.

Do not put away that thought as if it were a mere pulpit metaphor. It is a metaphor, but yet in the metaphor there lies this deepest truth, which concerns us all, that only he is truly himself, and lives the highest, best, and noblest life that is possible for him, who is united to Jesus Christ, and drawing from Christ his own life. He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son hath not life. Either my name and yours are written in the Book of Life, or they are written in the register of a cemetery. We have to make our choice which.

**III. Another idea suggested by this emblem is experience of divine individualising knowledge and care.**

In the Old Testament the book is called Thy book, in the New it is called the Lamb's book. That is of a piece with the whole relation of the New to the Old, and of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word and Manifestor of God, to the Jehovah revealed in former ages. For, unconditionally, and without thought of irreverence or idolatry, the New Testament lifts over and confers upon Jesus Christ the attributes which the Old jealously preserved as belonging only to Jehovah. And thus Christ the Manifestor of God, and the Mediator to us of all divine powers and blessings, takes the Book and makes the entries in it. Each man of us, as in your ledgers, has a page to himself. His account is opened, and is not confused with other entries. There is individualising love and care, and as the basis of both, individualising knowledge. My name, the expression of my individual being, stands there. Christ does not deal with me as one of a crowd, nor fling out blessings broadcast, that I may grasp them in the midst of a multitude, if I choose to put out a hand, but He deals with each of us singly, as if there were not any beings in the world but He and I, our two selves, all alone.

It is hard to realise the essentially individualising and isolating character of our relation to Jesus Christ. But we shall never come to the heart of the blessedness and the power of His Gospel unless we translate all us-es and every ones and worlds in Scripture into I and me, and can say not only He gives Himself to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, but He loved me and gave Himself for me. The same individualising love which is manifested in that mighty universal Atonement, if we rightly understand it, is manifested in all His dealings with us. One by one we come under His notice; the Shepherd tells His sheep singly as they pass out through the gate or into the fold. He knows them all by name. I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.

Lift up your eyes and behold who made all these; the countless host of the nightly stars. What are nebulae to our eyes are blazing suns to His. He telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by name by the greatness of His power, for that He is strong in might not one faileth. So we may nestle in the protection of His hand, sure of a separate place in His knowledge and His heart.

Deliverance and security are the results of that individualising care. In one of the Old Testament instances of the use of this metaphor, we read that in the great day of calamity and sorrow Thy people shall be delivered, even every one that is written in Thy Book. So we need not dread anything if our names are there. The sleepless King will read the Book, and will never forget, nor forget to help and succour His poor servants.

But there are two other variations of this thought in the Old Testament even more tenderly suggestive of that individualising care and strong sufficient love than the emblem of my text. We read that when, in the exercise of his official functions, the high priest passed into the Tabernacle he wore, upon his breast, near the seat of personality, and the home of love--the names of the tribes graven, and that the same names were written on his shoulders, as if guiding the exercise of his power. So we may think of ourselves as lying near the beatings of His heart, and as individually the objects of the work of His almighty arm. Nor is this all. For there is yet another, and still tenderer, application of the figure, when we read of the Divine voice as saying to Israel, I have graven thee on the palms of My hands. The name of each who loves and trusts and serves is written there; printed deep in the flesh of the Sovereign Christ. We bear in our bodies the marks, the stigmata that tell whose slaves we are--the marks of the Lord Jesus. And He bears in His body the marks that tell who His servants are.

**IV. Lastly, there is suggested by this text the idea of future entrance into the land of the living.**

The metaphor occurs three times in the final book of Scripture, the book which deals with the future and with the last things. And it occurs in all these instances in very remarkable connection. First we read, in the highly imaginative picture of the final judgment, that when the thrones are set two books are opened, one the Book of Life, the other the book in which are written the deeds of men, and that by these two books men are judged. There is a judgment by conduct. There is also a judgment by the Book of Life. That is to say, the question at last comes to be, Is this man's name written in that book? Is he a citizen of the kingdom, and therefore capable of entering into it? Has he the life from Christ in his heart? Or, in other words, the question is, first, has the man who stands at the bar faith in Jesus Christ; and, second, has he proved that his faith is genuine and real by the course of his earthly conduct? These are the books from which the judgment is made.

Further, we read, in that blessed vision which stands at the far-off end of all the knowledge of the future which is given to humanity, the vision of the City of God that came down from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, that only they enter in there who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Only citizens are capable of entrance into the city. Aliens are necessarily shut out. The Lord, when He writeth up His people, shall count that this man was born there, though he never trod its streets while on earth, and, therefore, can enter into his native home.

Further, in one of the letters to the seven churches our Lord gives as a promise to him that overcometh, I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life, but I will confess his name.

What need we care what other people may think about us, or whether the hollow wraith of dying fame that comes like a nimbus round some men may fade wholly or no, so long as we may be sure of acknowledgment and praise from Him from whom acknowledgment and praise are precious indeed.

I have but one or two more words to add. Remember that Paul had no hesitation in taking upon himself to declare that the names of these anonymous saints in Philippi were written in the Book of Life. What business had he to do that? Had he looked over the pages, and marked the entries? He had simply the right of estimating their state by their conduct. He saw their works; he knew that these works were the fruit of their faith; and he knew that, therefore, their faith had united them to Jesus Christ. So, Christian men and women, two things: show your faith by your works, and make it impossible for anybody that looks at you to doubt what King you serve, and to what city you belong. Again, do not ask, Is my name there? Ask, Have I faith, and does my faith work the works that belong to the Kingdom of Heaven?'

Remember that names can be blotted out of the book. The metaphor has often been pressed into the service of a doctrine of unconditional and irreversible predestination. But rightly looked at, it points in the opposite direction. Remember Moses's agonised cry, Blot me out of Thy book; and the Divine answer, Him that sinneth against Me, his name will I blot out of My book. And remember that it is only to him that overcometh that the promise is made, I will not blot him out. We are made partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.

Remember that it depends upon ourselves whether our names are there or not. John Bunyan describes the armed man who came up to the table, where the man with the book and the inkhorn was seated, and said: Set down my name. And you and I may do that. If we cast ourselves on Jesus Christ and yield our wills to be guided by Him, and give our lives for His service, then He will write our names in His book. If we trust Him we shall be citizens of the City of God; shall be filled with the life of Christ; shall be objects of an individualising love and care; shall be accepted in that Day; and shall enter in through the gates into the city. They that forsake me shall be written on the earth; and there wiped out as are the children's scribbles on the sand when the ocean come up. They that trust in Jesus Christ shall have their names written in the Book of Life; graven on the High Priest's breastplate, and inscribed on His mighty hand and His faithful heart.