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

**PHILIPPIANS-031**. **FAREWELL WORDS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Now unto our God and Father be the glory for ever and ever, Amen. Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me salute you. All the saints salute you, especially they that are of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."*

*Philippians 4:20-23 (R.V.)*

These closing words fall into three unconnected parts, a doxology, greetings, and a benediction. As in all his letters, the Apostle follows the natural instinct of making his last words loving words. Even when he had to administer a bitter draught, the last drops in the cup were sweetened, and to the Philippians whom he loved so well, and in whose loyal love he confided so utterly, his parting was tender as an embrace. Taking together the three elements of this farewell, they present to us a soul filled with desire for the glory of God and with loving yearning for all His brethren. We shall best deal with them by simply taking them in order.

**I. The Doxology.**

It is possibly evoked by the immediately preceding thought of God's infinite supply of all human need according to his riches in glory; but the glory which is so richly stored in Christ, and is the full storehouse from which our emptiness is to be filled, is not the same as the glory here ascribed to Him. The former is the sum of His divine perfections, the light of His own infinite being: the latter is the praise rendered to Him when we know Him for what He is, and exalt Him in our thankful thoughts and adoration. As this doxology is the last word of this whole letter, we may say that it gathers into one all that precedes it. Our ascription of glory to God is the highest object of all His self-manifestation, and should be the end of all our contemplations of Him and of His acts. The faith that God does all for His glory may be and often has been so interpreted as to make his character repellent and hideous, but in reality it is another way of saying that God is love. He desires that all men should be gladdened and elevated by knowing Him as He is. His glory is to give. That to which He has committed the charge of interpreting Him to our dim eyes and disordered natures is not the attributes of sovereign power, or creative wisdom, or administrative providence, or any other elements which men lay hold of in their conceptions of deity. When men make gods they make them in their own image: when God reveals God, the emphasis is put on an altogether different aspect of His nature. It is His self-communicating and paternal love revealed to the heart of a son which will kindle the highest aspiration of praise, and that fatherhood is not found in the fact that God has made us, but in the higher fact that He has redeemed us and has sent the spirit of His Son into our hearts. The doxology of our text is a distinctively Christian doxology which Paul conceives can only be uttered by lips which have learned to say Abba, Father, and have received the adoption of sons through the eternal Son.

Mark, too, that this glad ascription of glory to God is conceived of as sounded forth for ever and ever, or literally through ages and ages, as long as successive epochs shall unfold. It is not as if the revelation of the divine character were in the past, and the light of it continued to touch stony lips to music, but it fills in continuous forthcoming every age, and in every age men receive the fulness of God, and in every age redeemed hearts bring back their tribute of praise and love to Him.

**II. The Greetings.**

The Apostle's habit of closing all his letters with kindly messages is, of course, more than a habit. It is the natural instinct to which all true hearts have a hundred times yielded. It is remarkable that in this letter there are no individual greetings, but that instead of such there is the emphatic greeting to every saint in Christ Jesus. He will not single out any where all are so near His heart, and He will have no jealousies to be fed by His selection of more favoured persons. It may be too, that the omission of individual messages is partly occasioned by some incipient tendencies to alienation and faction of which we see some traces in His earnest exhortations to stand fast in one spirit, and to be of the same mind, having the same love, and being of one accord, as well as in his exhortation to two Philippian women to be of the same mind in the Lord. The all-embracing word at parting singularly links the end of the letter with its beginning, where we find a remarkable sequence of similar allusions to all the Philippian Christians. He has them all in His heart; they are all partakers with Him of grace; He longs after them all.

The designation by which Paul describes the recipients of his greeting carries in it a summons as well as a promise. They are saints, and they are so as being in Christ. That name is often used as a clumsy sarcasm, but it goes to the very root of Christian character. The central idea contained in it is that of consecration to God, and that which is often taken to be its whole meaning is but a secondary one, a result of that consecration. The true basis of all real purity of conduct lies in devotion of heart and life to God, and for want of discerning the connection of these two elements the world's ethics fail in theory and in practice. A saint is not a faultless monster, and the persistence of failures and inconsistencies, whilst affording only too sad an occasion for penitence and struggle, afford no occasion for a man's shrinking from taking to himself the humble claim to be a saint. Both the elements of consecration to God and of real and progressive, though never complete perfection of personal character, are realised only in Christ; in and only in fellowship with Him whose life was unbroken fellowship with the Father, and whose will was completely accordant with the Father's, do we rise to the height of belonging to God. And only in Him who could challenge a world to convict Him of sin shall we make even a beginning of personal righteousness. If we are in Christ we should be saints to-day however imperfect our holiness, and shall be as the angels of God in the day that is coming--nay, rather as the Lord of the Angels, not having spot or blemish or any such thing.

The New Testament has other names for believers, each of which expresses some great truth in regard to them; for example, the earliest name by which they knew themselves was the simple one of brethren, which spoke of their common relation to a Father and pledged them to the sweetness and blessedness of a family. The sarcastic wits of Antioch called them Christians as seeing nothing in them other than what they had many a time seen in the adherents of some founder of a school or a party. They called themselves disciples or believers, revealing by both names their humble attitude and their Lord's authority, and by the latter disclosing to seeing eyes the central bond which bound them to Him. But the name of Saint declares something more than these in that it speaks of their relation to God, the fulfilment of the Old Testament ideal, and carries in it a prophecy of personal character.

The sharers in Paul's salutation call for some notice. We do not know who the brethren that are with me were. We might have supposed from Paul's pathetic words that he had no man like-minded with him, that the faithful band whom we find named in the other epistles of the captivity were dispersed. But though there were none like-minded who will care truly for your state, there were some recognised as brethren who were closely associated with him, and who, though they had no such warm interest in the Philippians as he had, still had a real affection for them, drawn no doubt from him. Distinct from these was the whole body of the Roman Christians, from the mention of whom we may gather that his imprisonment did not prevent his intercourse with them. Again, distinct from these, though a part of them, were the saints of Caesar's household. He had apparently special opportunities for intercourse with them, and probably his imprisonment brought him through the Praetorian guards into association with them, as Caesar's household included all the servants and retainers of Nero.

May we not see in this union of members of the most alien races a striking illustration of the new bond which the Gospel had woven among men? There was a Jew standing in the midst between Macedonian Greeks and proud Roman citizens, including members of that usually most heartless and arrogant of all classes, the lackeys of a profligate court, and they are all clasping one another's hands in true brotherly love. Society was falling to pieces. We know the tragic spectacle that the empire presented then. Amidst universal decay of all that held men together, here was a new uniting principle; everywhere else dissolution was at work; here was again crystallising. A flower was opening its petals though it grew on a dunghill. What was it that drew slaves and patricians, the Pharisee of Tarsus, rude Lycaonians, the barbarous people of Melita, the Areopagite of Athens, the citizens of Rome into one loving family? How came Lydia and her slave girl, Onesimus and his master, the Praetorian guard and his prisoner, the courtier in Nero's golden house and the jailer at Philippi into one great fellowship of love? They were all one in Christ Jesus.

And what lessons the saints in Caesar's household may teach us! Think of the abyss of lust and murder there, of the Emperor by turns a buffoon, a sensualist, and a murderer. A strange place to find saints in that sty of filth! Let no man say that it is impossible for a pure life to be lived in any circumstances, or try to bribe his conscience by insisting on the difficulties of his environment. It may be our duty to stand at our post however foul may be our surroundings and however uncongenial our company, and if we are sure that He has set us there, we may be sure that He is with us there, and that there we can live the life and witness to His name.

**III. The Parting Benediction.**

The form of the benediction seems to be more correctly given in the Revised Version, which reads with your spirit instead of with you all. That form reappears in Galatians and in Philemon. What Paul especially desires of his favourite church is that they may possess the grace. Grace is love exercising itself to inferiors, and to those who deserve something sadder and darker. The gifts of that one grace are manifold. They comprise all blessings that man can need or receive. This angel comes with her hands and her lap full of good. Her name is shorthand for all that God can bestow or man can ask or think.

And it needs all the names by which Christ is known among men to describe the encyclopaediacal Person who can bestow the encyclopaediacal gift. Here we have them all gathered, as it were, into one great diadem, set on His head where once the crown of thorns was twined. He is Lord, the name which implies at least absolute authority, and is most probably the New Testament translation of the Old Testament name of Jehovah. He is our Lord as supreme over us, and wonderful as it is, as belonging to us. He holds the keys of the storehouse of grace. The river of the water of life flows where He turns it on. He is Jesus--the personal name which He bore in the days of His flesh, and by which men who knew Him only as one of themselves called Him. It is the token of His brotherhood and the guarantee of the sympathy which will ever bestow grace for grace. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the name which points back to the Old Testament ideas and declares His office, realising all the rapturous anticipations of prophets, and the longings of psalmists, and more than fulfilling them all by giving Himself to men.

That great gift is to be the companion of every spirit which looks to that Jesus in the reality of His humanity, in the greatness of His office, in the loftiness of His divinity, and finds in each of His names an anchor for its faith and an authoritative claim for its obedience.

Such a wish as this benediction is the truest expression of human friendship; it is the highest desire any of us can form for ourselves or for those dearest to us. Do we keep it clear before us in our intercourse with them so that the end of that intercourse will naturally be such a prayer?

Our human love has its limitations. We can but wish for others the grace which Christ can give, but neither our wishes nor His giving can make the grace ours unless for ourselves we take the great gift that is freely given to us of God. It is no accident that all his letters close thus. This benediction is the last word of God's revelation to man, the brightness in the clear west, the last strain of the great oratorio. The last word or last book of Scripture is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Let us take up the solemn Amen in our lips and in our hearts.