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

**1 CORINTHIANS-013**. **THE CHRISTIAN LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God."*

*1 Corinthians 7:24*

You find that three times within the compass of a very few verses this injunction is repeated. As God hath distributed to every man, says the Apostle in the seventeenth verse, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all the churches. Then again in the twentieth verse, Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called. And then finally in our text.

The reason for this emphatic reiteration is not difficult to ascertain. There were strong temptations to restlessness besetting the early Christians. The great change from heathenism to Christianity would seem to loosen the joints of all life, and having been swept from their anchorage in religion, all external things would appear to be adrift. It was most natural that a man should seek to alter even the circumstances of his outward life, when such a revolution had separated him from his ancient self. Hence would tend to come the rupture of family ties, the separation of husband and wife, the Jewish convert seeking to become like a Gentile, the Gentile seeking to become like a Jew; the slave trying to be free, the freeman, in some paroxysm of disgust at his former condition, trying to become a slave. These three cases are all referred to in the context--marriage, circumcision, slavery. And for all three the Apostle has the same advice to give--Stop where you are. In whatever condition you were when God's invitation drew you to Himself--for that, and not being set to a vocation in life, is the meaning of the word called here--remain in it.

And then, on the other hand, there was every reason why the Apostle and his co-workers should set themselves, by all means in their power, to oppose this restlessness. For, if Christianity in those early days had once degenerated into the mere instrument of social revolution, its development would have been thrown back for centuries, and the whole worth and power of it, for those who first apprehended it, would have been lost. So you know Paul never said a word to encourage any precipitate attempts to change externals. He let slavery--he let war alone; he let the tyranny of the Roman Empire alone--not because he was a coward, not because he thought that these things were not worth meddling with, but because he, like all wise men, believed in making the tree good and then its fruit good. He believed in the diffusion of the principles which he proclaimed, and the mighty Name which he served, as able to girdle the poison-tree, and to take the bark off it, and the rest, the slow dying, might be left to the work of time. And the same general idea underlies the words of my text. Do not try to change, he says, do not trouble about external conditions; keep to your Christian profession; let those alone, they will right themselves. Art thou a slave? Seek not to be freed. Art thou circumcised? Seek not to be uncircumcised. Get hold of the central, vivifying, transmuting influence, and all the rest is a question of time.

But, besides this more especial application of the words of my text to the primitive times, it carries with it, dear brethren, a large general principle that applies to all times--a principle, I may say, dead in the teeth of the maxims upon which life is being ordered by the most of us. Our maxim is, Get on! Paul's is, Never mind about getting on, get up! Our notion is--Try to make the circumstances what I would like to have them. Paul's is--Leave circumstances to take care of themselves, or rather leave God to take care of the circumstances. You get close to Him, and hold His hand, and everything else will right itself. Only he is not preaching stolid acquiescence. His previous injunctions were--Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. He sees that that may be misconceived and abused, and so, in his third reiteration of the precept, he puts in a word which throws a flood of light upon the whole thing--Let every man wherein he is called therein abide. Yes, but that is not all--therein abide with God! Ay, that is it! not an impossible stoicism; not hypocritical, fanatical contempt of the external. But whilst that gets its due force and weight, whilst a man yields himself in a measure to the natural tastes and inclinations which God has given him, and with the intention that he should find there subordinate guidance and impulse for his life, still let him abide where he is called with God, and seek to increase his fellowship with Him, as the main thing that he has to do.

**I. Thus we are led from the words before us first to the thought that our chief effort in life ought to be union with God.**

Abide with God, which, being put into other words, means, I think, mainly two things--constant communion, the occupation of all our nature with Him, and, consequently, the recognition of His will in all circumstances.

As to the former, we have the mind and heart and will of God revealed to us for the light, the love, the obedience of our will and heart and mind; and our Apostle's precept is, first, that we should try, moment by moment, in all the bustle and stir of our daily life, to have our whole being consciously directed to and engaged with, fertilised and calmed by contact with, the perfect and infinite nature of our Father in heaven.

As we go to our work again to-morrow morning, what difference would obedience to this precept make upon my life and yours? Before all else, and in the midst of all else, we should think of that Divine Mind that in the heavens is waiting to illumine our darkness; we should feel the glow of that uncreated and perfect Love, which, in the midst of change and treachery, of coldness and of greetings where no kindness is, in the midst of masterful authority and unloving command, is ready to fill our hearts with tenderness and tranquillity: we should bow before that Will which is absolute and supreme indeed, but neither arbitrary nor harsh, which is the eternal purpose that He hath purposed in Himself indeed, but is also the good pleasure of His goodness and the counsel of His grace.

And with such a God near to us ever in our faithful thoughts, in our thankful love, in our lowly obedience, with such a mind revealing itself to us, and such a heart opening its hidden storehouses for us as we approach, like some star that, as one gets nearer to it, expands its disc and glows into rich colour, which at a distance was but pallid silver, and such a will sovereign above all, energising, even through opposition, and making obedience a delight, what room, brethren, would there be in our lives for agitations, and distractions, and regrets, and cares, and fears--what room for earthly hopes or for sad remembrances? They die in the fruition of a present God all-sufficient for mind, and heart, and will--even as the sun when it is risen with a burning heat may scorch and wither the weeds that grow about the base of the fruitful tree, whose deeper roots are but warmed by the rays that ripen the rich clusters which it bears. Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.

And then, as a consequence of such an occupation of the whole being with God, there will follow that second element which is included in the precept, namely, the recognition of God's will as operating in and determining all circumstances. When our whole soul is occupied with Him, we shall see Him everywhere. And this ought to be our honest effort--to connect everything which befalls ourselves and the world with Him. We should see that Omnipotent Will, the silent energy which flows through all being, asserting itself through all secondary causes, marching on towards its destined and certain goal, amidst all the whirl and perturbation of events, bending even the antagonism of rebels and the unconsciousness of godless men, as well as the play of material instruments, to its own purposes, and swinging and swaying the whole set and motion of things according to its own impulse and by the touch of its own fingers.

Such a faith does not require us to overlook the visible occasions for the things which befall us, nor to deny the stable laws according to which that mighty will operates in men's lives. Secondary causes? Yes. Men's opposition and crime? Yes. Our own follies and sins? No doubt. Blessings and sorrows falling indiscriminately on a whole community or a whole world? Certainly. And yet the visible agents are not the sources, but only the vehicles of the power, the belting and shafting which transmit a mighty impulse which they had nothing to do in creating. And the antagonism subserves the purposes of the rule which it opposes, as the blow of the surf may consolidate the sea-wall that it breaks against. And our own follies and sins may indeed sorrowfully shadow our lives, and bring on us pains of body and disasters in fortune, and stings in spirit for which we alone are responsible, and which we have no right to regard as inscrutable judgments--yet even these bitter plants of which our own hands have sowed the seed, spring by His merciful will, and are to be regarded as His loving, fatherly chastisements--sent before to warn us by a premonitory experience that the wages of sin is death. As a rule, God does not interpose to pick a man out of the mud into which he has been plunged by his own faults and follies, until he has learned the lessons which he can find in plenty down in the slough, if he will only look for them! And the fact that some great calamity or some great joy affects a wide circle of people, does not make its having a special lesson and meaning for each of them at all doubtful. There is one of the great depths of all-moving wisdom and providence, that in the very self-same act it is in one aspect universal, and in another special and individual. The ordinary notion of a special providence goes perilously near the belief that God's will is less concerned in some parts of a man's life than in others. It is very much like desecrating and secularising a whole land by the very act of focussing the sanctity in some single consecrated shrine. But the true belief is that the whole sweep of a life is under the will of God, and that when, for instance, war ravages a nation, though the sufferers be involved in a common ruin occasioned by murderous ambition and measureless pride, yet for each of the sufferers the common disaster has a special message. Let us believe in a divine will which regards each individual caught up in the skirts of the horrible storm, even as it regards each individual on whom the equal rays of His universal sunshine fall. Let us believe that every single soul has a place in the heart, and is taken into account in the purposes of Him who moves the tempest, and makes His sun to shine upon the unthankful and on the good. Let us, in accordance with the counsel of the Apostle here, first of all try to anchor and rest our own souls fast and firm in God all the day long, that, grasping His hand, we may look out upon all the confused dance of fleeting circumstances and say, Thy will is done on earth--if not yet as it is done in heaven, still done in the issues and events of all--and done with my cheerful obedience and thankful acceptance of its commands and allotments in my own life.

**II. The second idea which comes out of these words is this--Such union with God will lead to contented continuance in our place, whatever it be.**

Our text is as if Paul had said, You have been "called" in such and such worldly circumstances. The fact proves that these circumstances do not obstruct the highest and richest blessings. The light of God can shine on your souls through them. Since then you have such sacred memorials associated with them, and know by experience that fellowship with God is possible in them, do you remain where you are, and keep hold of the God who has visited you in them.

If once, in accordance with the thoughts already suggested, our minds have, by God's help, been brought into something like real, living fellowship with Him, and we have attained the wisdom that pierces through the external to the Almighty will that underlies all its mazy whirl, then why should we care about shifting our place? Why should we trouble ourselves about altering these varying events, since each in its turn is a manifestation of His mind and will; each in its turn is a means of discipline for us; and through all their variety a single purpose works, which tends to a single end--that we should be partakers of His holiness?

And that is the one point of view from which we can bear to look upon the world and not be utterly bewildered and over-mastered by it. Calmness and central peace are ours; a true appreciation of all outward good and a charm against the bitterest sting of outward evils are ours; a patient continuance in the place where He has set us is ours--when by fellowship with Him we have learned to look upon our work as primarily doing His will, and upon all our possessions and conditions primarily as means for making us like Himself. Most men seem to think that they have gone to the very bottom of the thing when they have classified the gifts of fortune as good or evil, according as they produce pleasure or pain. But that is a poor, superficial classification. It is like taking and arranging books by their bindings and flowers by their colours. Instead of saying, We divide life into two halves, and we put there all the joyful, and here all the sad, for that is the ruling distinction--let us rather say, The whole is one, because it all comes from one purpose, and it all tends towards one end. The only question worth asking in regard to the externals of our life is--How far does each thing help me to be a good man? how far does it open my understanding to apprehend Him? how far does it make my spirit pliable and plastic under His touch? how far does it make me capable of larger reception of greater gifts from Himself? what is its effect in preparing me for that world beyond? Is there any other greater, more satisfying, more majestic thought of life than this--the scaffolding by which souls are built up into the temple of God? And to care whether a thing is painful or pleasant is as absurd as to care whether the bricklayer's trowel is knocking the sharp corner off a brick, or plastering mortar on the one below it before he lays it carefully on its course. Is the building getting on? That is the one question that is worth thinking about.

You and I write our lives as if on one of those manifold writers which you use. A thin filmy sheet here, a bit of black paper below it; but the writing goes through upon the next page, and when the blackness that divides two worlds is swept away there, the history of each life written by ourselves remains legible in eternity. And the question is--What sort of autobiography are we writing for the revelation of that day, and how far do our circumstances help us to transcribe fair in our lives the will of our God and the image of our Redeemer?

If, then, we have once got hold of that principle that all which is--summer and winter, storm and sunshine, possession and loss, memory and hope, work and rest, and all the other antitheses of life--is equally the product of His will, equally the manifestation of His mind, equally His means for our discipline, then we have the amulet and talisman which will preserve us from the fever of desire and the shivering fits of anxiety as to things which perish. And, as they tell of a Christian father who, riding by one of the great lakes of Switzerland all day long, on his journey to the Church Council that was absorbing his thoughts, said towards evening to the deacon who was pacing beside him, Where is the lake? so you and I, journeying along by the margin of this great flood of things when wild storms sweep across it, or when the sunbeams glint upon its blue waters, and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave, will be careless of the changeful sea, if the eye looks beyond the visible and beholds the unseen, the unchanging real presences that make glory in the darkest lives, and sunshine in the shady place. Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.

**III. Still further, another thought may be suggested from these words, or rather from the connection in which they occur, and that is--Such contented continuance in our place is the dictate of the truest wisdom.**

There are two or three collateral topics, partly suggested by the various connections in which this commandment occurs in the chapter, from which I draw the few remarks I have to make now.

And the first point I would suggest is that very old commonplace one, so often forgotten, that after all, though you may change about as much as you like, there is a pretty substantial equipoise and identity in the amount of pain and pleasure in all external conditions. The total length of day and night all the year round is the same at the North Pole and at the Equator--half and half. Only, in the one place, it is half and half for four-and-twenty hours at a time, and in the other, the night lasts through gloomy months of winter, and the day is bright for unbroken weeks of summer. But, when you come to add them up at the year's end, the man who shivers in the ice, and the man who pants beneath the beams from the zenith, have had the same length of sunshine and of darkness. It does not matter much at what degrees between the Equator and the Pole you and I live; when the thing comes to be made up we shall be all pretty much upon an equality. You do not get the happiness of the rich man over the poor one by multiplying twenty shillings a week by as many figures as will suffice to make it up to £10,000 a year. What is the use of such eager desires to change our condition, when every condition has disadvantages attending its advantages as certainly as a shadow; and when all have pretty nearly the same quantity of the raw material of pain and pleasure, and when the amount of either actually experienced by us depends not on where we are, but on what we are?

Then, still further, there is another consideration to be kept in mind upon which I do not enlarge, as what I have already said involves it--namely, that whilst the portion of external pain and pleasure summed up comes pretty much to the same in everybody's life, any condition may yield the fruit of devout fellowship with God.

Another very remarkable idea suggested by a part of the context is--What is the need for my troubling myself about outward changes when in Christ I can get all the peculiarities which make any given position desirable to me? For instance, hear how Paul talks to slaves eager to be set free: For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. If you generalise that principle it comes to this, that in union with Jesus Christ we possess, by our fellowship with Him, the peculiar excellences and blessings that are derivable from external relations of every sort. To take concrete examples--if a man is a slave, he may be free in Christ. If free, he may have the joy of utter submission to an absolute master in Christ. If you and I are lonely, we may feel all the delights of society by union with Him. If surrounded and distracted by companionship, and seeking for seclusion, we may get all the peace of perfect privacy in fellowship with Him. If we are rich, and sometimes think that we were in a position of less temptation if we were poorer, we may find all the blessings for which we sometimes covet poverty in communion with Him. If we are poor, and fancy that, if we had a little more just to lift us above the grinding, carking care of to-day and the anxiety of to-morrow, we should be happier, we may find all tranquillity in Him. And so you may run through all the variety of human conditions, and say to yourself--What is the use of looking for blessings flowing from these from without? Enough for us if we grasp that Lord who is all in all, and will give us in peace the joy of conflict, in conflict the calm of peace, in health the refinement of sickness, in sickness the vigour and glow of health, in memory the brightness of undying hope, in hope the calming of holy memory, in wealth the lowliness of poverty, in poverty the ease of wealth; in life and in death being all and more than all that dazzles us by the false gleam of created brightness!

And so, finally--a remark which has no connection with the text itself, but which I cannot avoid inserting here--I want you to think, and think seriously, of the antagonism and diametrical opposition between these principles of my text and the maxims current in the world, and nowhere more so than in this city. Our text is a revolutionary one. It is dead against the watchwords that you fathers give your children--push, energy, advancement, get on, whatever you do. You have made a philosophy of it, and you say that this restless discontent with a man's present position and eager desire to get a little farther ahead in the scramble, underlies much modern civilisation and progress, and leads to the diffusion of wealth and to employment for the working classes, and to mechanical inventions, and domestic comforts, and I don't know what besides. You have made a religion of it; and it is thought to be blasphemy for a man to stand up and say--It is idolatry! My dear brethren, I declare I solemnly believe that, if I were to go on to the Manchester Exchange next Tuesday, and stand up and say--There is no God, I should not be thought half such a fool as if I were to go and say--Poverty is not an evil per se, and men do not come into this world to get on but to get up--nearer and liker to God. If you, by God's grace, lay hold of this principle of my text, and honestly resolve to work it out, trusting in that dear Lord who though He was rich yet for our sakes became poor, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you will have to make up your minds to let the big prizes of your trade go into other people's hands, and be contented to say--I live by peaceful, high, pure, Christ-like thoughts. He that needs least, said an old heathen, is nearest the gods; but I would rather modify the statement into, He that needs most, and knows it, is nearest the gods. For surely Christ is more than mammon; and a spirit nourished by calm desires and holy thoughts into growing virtues and increasing Christlikeness is better than circumstances ordered to our will, in the whirl of which we have lost our God. In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God and the God of peace shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.