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

**1 THESSALONIANS-001**. **FAITH, LOVE, HOPE, AND THEIR FRUITS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope."*

*1 Thessalonians 1:3*

This Epistle, as I suppose we all know, is Paul's first letter. He had been hunted out of Thessalonica by the mob, made the best of his way to Athens, stayed there for a very short time, then betook himself to Corinth, and at some point of his somewhat protracted residence there, this letter was written. So that we have in it his first attempt, so far as we know, to preach the Gospel by the pen. It is interesting to notice how, whatever changes and developments there may have been in him thereafter, all the substantial elements of his latest faith beam out in this earliest letter, and how even in regard to trifles we see the germs of much that came afterwards. This same triad, you remember, faith, hope, charity, recurs in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, though with a very significant difference in the order, which I shall have to dwell upon presently.

The letter is interesting on another account. Remembering that it was only a very short time since these Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living God, there is something very beautiful in the overflowing generosity of commendation, which never goes beyond veracity, with which he salutes them. Their Christian character, like seeds sown in some favoured tropical land, had sprung up swiftly; yet not with the dangerous kind of swiftness which presages decay of the growth. It was only a few days since they had been grovelling before idols, but now he can speak of your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope ... and declare that the Gospel sounded out from them--the word which he employs is that which is technically used for the blast of a trumpet--so that we need not to speak anything. Rapid growth is possible for us all, and is not always superficial.

I desire now to consider that pair of triads--the three foundation-stones, and the three views of the fair building that is reared upon them.

**I. The three foundation-stones.**

That is a natural metaphor to use, but it is not quite correct, for these three--faith, love, hope--are not to be conceived of as lying side by side. Rather than three foundations we have three courses of the building here; the lowest one, faith; the next one, love; and the top one, hope. The order in 1 Corinthians is different, faith, hope, charity, and the alteration in the sequence is suggested by the difference of purpose. The Apostle intended in 1 Corinthians to dwell at some length thereafter on charity, or love. So he puts it last to make the link of connection with what he is going to say. But here he is dealing with the order of production, the natural order in which these three evolve themselves. And his thought is that they are like the shoots that successive springs bring upon the bough of a tree, where each year has its own growth, and the summit of last year's becomes the basis of next. Thus we have, first, faith; then, shooting from that, love; and then, sustained by both, hope. Now let us look at that order.

It is a well-worn commonplace, which you may think it not needful for me to dwell upon here, that in the Christian theory, both of salvation and of morals, the basis of everything is trust. And that is no arbitrary theological arrangement, but it is the only means by which the life that is the basis both of salvation and of righteousness can be implanted in men. There is no other way by which Jesus Christ can come into our hearts than by what the New Testament calls trust, which we have turned into the hard, theological concept which too often glides over people's minds without leaving any dint at all--faith. Distrust is united with trust. There is no trust without, complementary to it, self-distrust. Just as the sprouting seed sends one little radicle downwards, and that becomes the root, and at the same time sends up another one, white till it reaches the light, and it becomes the stem, so the underside of faith is self-distrust, and you must empty yourselves before you can open your hearts to be filled by Jesus. That being so, this self-distrustful trust is the beginning of everything. That is the alpha of the whole alphabet, however glorious and manifold may be the words into which its letters are afterwards combined. Faith is the hand that grasps. It is the means of communication, it is the channel through which the grace which is the life, or, rather, I should say, the life which is the grace, comes to us. It is the open door by which the angel of God comes in with his gifts. It is like the petals of the flowers, opening when the sunshine kisses them, and, by opening, laying bare the depths of their calyxes to be illuminated and coloured, and made to grow by the sunshine which itself has opened them, and without the presence of which, within the cup, there would have been neither life nor beauty. So faith is the basis of everything; the first shoot from which all the others ascend. Brethren, have you that initial grace? I leave the question with you. If you have not that, you have nothing else.

Then again, out of faith rises love. No man can love God unless he believes that God loves him. I, for my part, am old-fashioned and narrow enough not to believe that there is any deep, soul-cleansing or soul-satisfying love of God which is not the answer to the love that died on the Cross. But you must believe that, and more than believe it; you must have trusted and cast yourselves on it, in the utter abandonment of self-distrust and Christ-confidence, before there will well up in your heart the answering love to God. First faith, then love. My love is the reverberation of the primeval voice, the echo of God's. The angle at which the light falls on the mirror is the same as the angle at which it is reflected from it. And though my love at its highest is low, at its strongest is weak: yet, like the echo that is faint and far, feeble though it be, it is pitched on the same key, and is the prolongation of the same note as the mother-sound. So my love answers God's love, and it will never answer it unless faith has brought me within the auditorium, the circle wherein the voice that proclaims I love thee, my child, can be heard.

Now, we do not need to ask ourselves whether Paul is here speaking of love to God or love to man. He is speaking of both, because the New Testament deals with the latter as being a part of the former, and sure to accompany it. But there is one lesson that I wish to draw. If it be true that love in us is thus the result of faith in the love of God, let us learn how we grow in love. You cannot say, Now I will make an effort to love. The circulation of the blood, the pulsations of the heart, are not within the power of the will. But you can say, Now I will make an effort to trust. For faith is in the power of the will, and when the Master said, Ye will not come unto me, He taught us that unbelief is not a mere intellectual deficiency or perversity, but that it is the result, in the majority of cases--I might almost say in all-of an alienated will. Therefore, if you wish to love, do not try to work yourself into a hysteria of affection, but take into your hearts and minds the Christian facts, and mainly the fact of the Cross, which will set free the frozen and imprisoned fountains of your affections, and cause them to flow out abundantly in sweet water. First faith, then love; and get at love through faith. That is a piece of practical wisdom that it will do us all good to keep in mind.

Then the third of the three, the topmost shoot, is hope. Hope is faith directed to the future. So it is clear enough that, unless I have that trust of which I have been speaking, I have none of the hope which the Apostle regards as flowing from it. But love has to do with hope quite as much, though in a different way, as faith has to do with it. For in the direct proportion in which we are taking into our hearts Christ and His truth, and letting our hearts go out in love towards Him and communion with Him, will the glories beyond brighten and consolidate and magnify themselves in our eyes. The hope of the Christian man is but the inference from his present faith, and the joy and sweetness of his present love. For surely when we rise to the heights which are possible to us all, and on which I suppose most Christian people have been sometimes, though for far too brief seasons; when we rise to the heights of communion with God, anything seems more possible to us than that death, or anything that lies in the future, should have power over a tie so sweet, so strong, so independent of externals, and so all-sufficing in its sweetness. Thus we shall be sure that God is our portion for ever, in the precise degree in which, by faith and love, we feel that He is the strength of our hearts, to-day and now. So, then, we have the three foundation-stones.

And now a word or two, in the second place, about

**II. The fair building which rises on them.**

I have already half apologised for using the metaphor of a foundation and a building. I must repeat the confession that the symbol is an inadequate one. For the Apostle does not conceive of the work and labour and patience which are respectively allocated to these three graces as being superimposed upon them, as it were, by effort, so much as he thinks of them as growing out of them by their inherent nature. The work is the work of faith, that which characterises faith, that which issues from it, that which is its garment, visible to the world, and the token of its reality and its presence. Faith works. It is the foundation of all true work; even in the lowest sense of the word we might almost say that. But in the Christian scheme it is eminently the underlying requisite for all work which God does not consider as busy idleness. I might here make a general remark, which, however, I need not dwell upon, that we have here the broad thought which Christian people in all generations need to have drummed into their heads over and over again, and that is that inward experiences and emotions, and states of mind and heart, however good and precious, are so mainly as being the necessary foundations of conduct. What is the good of praying and feeling comfortable within, and having a blessed assurance, a happy experience, sweet communion, and so on? What is the good of it all, if these things do not make us live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world? What is the good of the sails of a windmill going whirling round, if the machinery has been thrown out of gear, and the great stones which it ought to actuate are not revolving? What is the good of the screw of a steamer revolving, when she pitches, clean above the waves? It does nothing then to drive the vessel onwards, but will only damage the machinery. And Christian emotions and experiences which do not drive conduct are of as little use, often as perilous, and as injurious. If you want to keep your faith, love, hope, sound and beneficial, set them to work. And do not be too sure that you have them, if they do not crave for work, whether you set them to it or not.

Your work of faith. There is the whole of the thorny subject of the relation of faith and works packed into a nutshell. It is exactly what James said and it is exactly what a better than James said. When the Jews came to Him with their externalism, and thought that God was to be pleased by a whole rabble of separate good actions, and so said, What shall we do that we might work the works of God? Jesus said, Never mind about works. This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent, and out of that will come all the rest. That is the mother-tincture; everything will flow from that. So Paul says, Your work of faith.

Does your faith work? Perhaps I should ask other people rather than you. Do men see that your faith works; that its output is different from the output of men who are not possessors of a like precious faith? Ask yourselves the question, and God help you to answer it.

Love labours. Labour is more than work, for it includes the notion of toil, fatigue, difficulty, persistence, antagonism. Ah! the work of faith will never be done unless it is the toil of love. You remember how Milton talks about the immortal garland that is to be run for, not without dust and sweat. The Christian life is not a leisurely promenade. The limit of our duty is not ease of work. There must be toil. And love is the only principle that will carry us through the fatigues, and the difficulties, and the oppositions which rise against us from ourselves and from without. Love delights to have a hard task set it by the beloved, and the harder the task the more poignant the satisfaction. Loss is gain when it brings us nearer the beloved. And whether our love be love to God, or its consequence, love to man, it is the only foundation on which toil for either God or man will ever permanently be rested. Do not believe in philanthropy which has not a bottom of faith, and do not believe in work for Christ which does not involve in toil. And be sure that you will do neither, unless you have both these things: the faith and the love.

And then comes the last. Faith works, love toils, hope is patient. Is that all that hope is? Not if you take the word in the narrow meaning which it has in modern English; but that was not what Paul meant. He meant something a great deal more than passive endurance, great as that is. It is something to be able to say, in the pelting of a pitiless storm, Pour on! I will endure. But it is a great deal more to be able, in spite of all, not to bate one jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward; and that is involved in the true meaning of the word inadequately rendered patience in the New Testament. For it is no passive virtue only, but it is a virtue which, in the face of the storm, holds its course; brave persistence, active perseverance, as well as meek endurance and submission.

Hope helps us both to bear and to do. They tell us nowadays that it is selfish for a Christian man to animate himself, either for endurance or for activity, by the contemplation of those great glories that lie yonder. If that is selfishness, God grant we may all become a great deal more selfish than we are! No man labours in the Christian life, or submits to Christian difficulty, for the sake of going to heaven. At least, if he does, he has got on the wrong tack altogether. But if the motive for both endurance and activity be faith and love, then hope has a perfect right to come in as a subsidiary motive, and to give strength to the faith and rapture to the love. We cannot afford to throw away that hope, as so many of us do--not perhaps, intellectually, though I am afraid there is a very considerable dimming of the clearness, and a narrowing of the place in our thoughts, of the hope of a future blessedness, in the average Christian of this day--but practically we are all apt to lose sight of the recompense of the reward. And if we do, the faith and love, and the work and toil, and the patience will suffer. Faith will relax its grasp, love will cool down its fervour; and there will come a film over Hope's blue eye, and she will not see the land that is very far off. So, dear brethren, remember the sequence, faith, love, hope, and remember the issues, work, toil, patience.