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

**1 THESSALONIANS-009**. **CONTINUAL PRAYER AND ITS EFFECTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks."*

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

The peculiarity and the stringency of these three precepts is the unbroken continuity which they require. To rejoice, to pray, to give thanks, are easy when circumstances favour, as a taper burns steadily in a windless night; but to do these things always is as difficult as for the taper's flame to keep upright when all the winds are eddying round it. Evermore--without ceasing--in everything--these qualifying words give the injunctions of this text their grip and urgency. The Apostle meets the objections which he anticipates would spring to the lips of the Thessalonians, to the effect that he was requiring impossibilities, by adding that, hard and impracticable as they might think such a constant attitude of mind and heart, This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. So, then, a Christian life may be lived continuously on the high level; and more than that, it is our duty to try to live ours thus.

We need not fight with other Christian people about whether absolute obedience to these precepts is possible. It will be soon enough for us to discuss whether a completely unbroken uniformity of Christian experience is attainable in this life, when we have come a good deal nearer to the attainable than we have yet reached. Let us mend our breaches of continuity a good deal more, and then we may begin to discuss the question whether an absolute absence of any cessation of the continuity is consistent with the conditions of Christian life here.

Now it seems to me that these three exhortations hold together in a very striking way, and that Paul knew what he was about when he put in the middle, like the strong central pole that holds up a tent, that exhortation, Pray without ceasing. For it is the primary precept, and on its being obeyed the possibility of the fulfilment of the other two depends. If we pray without ceasing, we shall rejoice evermore and in everything give thanks. So, then, the duty of continual prayer, and the promise, as well as the precept, that its results are to be continual joy and continual thanksgiving, are suggested by these words.

**I. The duty of continual prayer.**

Roman Catholics, with their fatal habit of turning the spiritual into material, think that they obey that commandment when they set a priest or a nun on the steps of the altar to repeat Ave Marias day and night. That is a way of praying without ceasing which we can all see to be mechanical and unworthy. But have we ever realised what this commandment necessarily reveals to us, as to what real prayer is? For if we are told to do a thing uninterruptedly, it must be something that can run unbroken through all the varieties of our legitimate duties and necessary occupations and absorptions with the things seen and temporal. Is that your notion of prayer? Or do you fancy that it simply means dropping down on your knees, and asking God to give you some things that you very much want? Petition is an element in prayer, and that it shall be crystallised into words is necessary sometimes; but there are prayers that never get themselves uttered, and I suppose that the deepest and truest communion with God is voiceless and wordless. Things which it was not possible for a man to utter, was Paul's description of what he saw and felt, when he was most completely absorbed in, and saturated with, the divine glory. The more we understand what prayer is, the less we shall feel that it depends upon utterance. For the essence of it is to have heart and mind filled with the consciousness of God's presence, and to have the habit of referring everything to Him, in the moment when we are doing it, or when it meets us. That, as I take it, is prayer. The old mystics had a phrase, quaint, and in some sense unfortunate, but very striking, when they spoke about the practice of the presence of God. God is here always, you will say; yes, He is, and to open the shutters, and to let the light always in, into every corner of my heart, and every detail of my life--that is what Paul means by Praying without ceasing. Petitions? Yes; but something higher than petitions--the consciousness of being in touch with the Father, feeling that He is all round us. It was said about one mystical thinker that he was a God-intoxicated man. It is an ugly word, but it expresses a very deep thing; but let us rather say a God-filled man. He who is such prays always.

But how may we maintain that state of continual devotion, even amidst the various and necessary occupations of our daily lives? As I said, we need not trouble ourselves about the possibility of complete attainment of that ideal. We know that we can each of us pray a great deal more than we do, and if there are regions in our lives into which we feel that God will not come, habits that we have dropped into which we feel to be a film between us and Him, the sooner we get rid of them the better. But into all our daily duties, dear friends, however absorbing, however secular, however small, however irritating they may be, however monotonous, into all our daily duties it is possible to bring Him.

A servant with this clause Makes drudgery divine, Who sweeps a room, as by Thy laws, Makes that and the calling fine.

But if that is our aim, our conscious aim, our honest aim, we shall recognise that a help to it is words of prayer. I do not believe in silent adoration, if there is nothing but silent; and I do not believe in a man going through life with the conscious presence of God with him, unless, often, in the midst of the stress of daily life, he shoots little arrows of two-worded prayers up into the heavens, Lord! be with me. Lord! help me. Lord! stand by me now; and the like. They cried unto God in the battle, when some people would have thought they would have been better occupied in trying to keep their heads with their swords. It was not a time for very elaborate supplications when the foemen's arrows were whizzing round them, but they cried unto the Lord, and He was entreated of them. Pray without ceasing.

Further, if we honestly try to obey this precept we shall more and more find out, the more earnestly we do so, that set seasons of prayer are indispensable to realising it. I said that I do not believe in silent adoration unless it sometimes finds its tongue, nor do I believe in a diffused worship that does not flow from seasons of prayer. There must be, away up amongst the hills, a dam cast across the valley that the water may be gathered behind it, if the great city is to be supplied with the pure fluid. What would become of Manchester if it were not for the reservoirs at Woodhead away among the hills? Your pipes would be empty. And that is what will become of you Christian professors in regard to your habitual consciousness of God's presence, if you do not take care to have your hours of devotion sacred, never to be interfered with, be they long or short, as may have to be determined by family circumstances, domestic duties, daily avocations, and a thousand other causes. But, unless we pray at set seasons, there is little likelihood of our praying without ceasing.

**II. The duty of continual rejoicing.**

If we begin with the central duty of continual prayer, then these other two which, as it were, flow from it on either side, will be possible to us; and of these two the Apostle sets first, Rejoice evermore. This precept was given to the Thessalonians, in Paul's first letter, when things were comparatively bright with him, and he was young and buoyant; and in one of his later letters, when he was a prisoner, and things were anything but rosy coloured, he struck the same note again, and in spite of his bonds in Christ bade the Philippians Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice. Indeed, that whole prison-letter might be called the Epistle of Joy, so suffused with sunshine of Christian gladness is it. Now, no doubt, joy is largely a matter of temperament. Some of us are constitutionally more buoyant and cheerful than others. And it is also very largely a matter of circumstances.

I admit all that, and yet I come back to Paul's command: Rejoice evermore. For if we are Christian people, and have cultivated what I have called the practice of the presence of God in our lives, then that will change the look of things, and events that otherwise would be at enmity with joy will cease to have a hostile influence over it. There are two sources from which a man's gladness may come, the one his circumstances of a pleasant and gladdening character; the other his communion with God. It is like some river that is composed of two affluents, one of which rises away up in the mountains, and is fed by the eternal snows; the other springs on the plain somewhere, and is but the drainage of the surface-water, and when hot weather comes, and drought is over all the land, the one affluent is dry, and only a chaos of ghastly white stones litters the bed where the flashing water used to be. What then? Is the stream gone because one of its affluents is dried up, and has perished or been lost in the sands? The gushing fountains away up among the peaks near the stars are bubbling up all the same, and the heat that dried the surface stream has only loosened the treasures of the snows, and poured them more abundantly into the other's bed. So Rejoice in the Lord always; and if earth grows dark, lift your eyes to the sky, that is light. To one walking in the woods at nightfall all the paths are dim, but the strip of heaven above the trees is the brighter for the green gloom around. The organist's one hand may be keeping up one sustained note, while the other is wandering over the keys; and one part of a man's nature may be steadfastly rejoicing in the Lord, whilst the other is feeling the weight of sorrows that come from earth. The paradox of the Christian life may be realised as a blessed experience of every one of us: a surface troubled, a central calm; an ocean tossed with storm, and yet the crest of every wave flashing in the sunshine. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.

**III. Lastly, the duty of continual thankfulness.**

That, too, is possible only on condition of continual communion with God. As I said in reference to joy, so I say in reference to thankfulness; the look of things in this world depends very largely on the colour of the spectacles through which you behold them.

There's nothing either good or bad

But thinking makes it so.

And if a man in communion with God looks at the events of his life as he might put on a pair of coloured glasses to look at a landscape, it will be tinted with a glory and a glow as he looks. The obligation to gratitude, often neglected by us, is singularly, earnestly, and frequently enjoined in the New Testament. I am afraid that the average Christian man does not recognise its importance as an element in his Christian experience. As directed to the past it means that we do not forget, but that, as we look back, we see the meaning of these old days, and their possible blessings, and the loving purposes which sent them, a great deal more clearly than we did whilst we were passing through them. The mountains that, when you are close to them, are barren rock and cold snow, glow in the distance with royal purples. And so if we, from our standing point in God, will look back on our lives, losses will disclose themselves as gains, sorrows as harbingers of joy, conflict as a means of peace, the crooked things will be straight, and the rough places plain; and we may for every thing in the past give thanks, if only we pray without ceasing. The exhortation as applied to the present means that we bow our wills, that we believe that all things are working together for our good, and that, like Job in his best moments, we shall say, The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the Name of the Lord. Ah, that is hard. It is possible, but it is only possible if we pray without ceasing, and dwell beside God all the days of our lives, and all the hours of every day. Then, and only then, shall we be able to thank Him for all the way by which He hath led us these many years in the wilderness, that has been brightened by the pillar of cloud by day, and the fire by night.