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

**ACTS-035. A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE EARLY CHURCH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"So the Church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied."*

*Acts 9:31 (R.V.)*

A man climbing a hill stops every now and then to take breath and look about him; and in the earlier part of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles there are a number of such landing-places where the writer suspends the course of his narrative, in order to give a general notion of the condition of the Church at the moment. We have in this verse one of the shortest, but perhaps the most significant, of these resting-places. The original and proper reading, instead of the Churches, as our Version has it, reads the Church as a whole --the whole body of believers in the three districts named--Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria--being in the same circumstances and passing through like experiences. The several small communities of disciples formed a whole. They were churches' individually; they were collectively the Church. Christ's order of expansion, given in chapter i., had been thus far followed, and the sequence here sums up the progress which the Acts has thus far recorded. Galilee had been the cradle of the Church, but the onward march of the Gospel had begun at Jerusalem. Before Luke goes on to tell how the last part of our Lord's programme--to the uttermost parts of the earth--began to be carried into execution by the conversion of Cornelius, he gives us this bird's-eye view. To its significant items I desire to draw your attention now.

There are three of them: outward rest, inward progress, outward increase.

**I. Outward rest.**

Then had the Church rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.

The principal persecutor had just been converted, and that would somewhat damp the zeal of his followers. Saul having gone over to the enemy, it would be difficult to go on harrying the Church with the same spirit, when the chief actor was turned traitor. And besides that, historians tell us that there were political complications which gave both Romans and Jews quite enough to do to watch one another, instead of persecuting this little community of Christians. I have nothing to do with these, but this one point I desire to make, that the condition of security and tranquillity in which the Church found itself conduced to spiritual good and growth. This has not always been the case. As one of our quaint divines says, as in cities where ground is scarce men build high up, so in times of straitness and persecution the Christian community, and the individuals who compose it, are often raised to a higher level of devotion than in easier and quieter times. But these primitive Christians utilised this breathing-space in order to grow, and having a moment of lull and stillness in the storm, turned it to the highest and best uses. Is that what you and I do with our quiet times? None of us have any occasion to fear persecution or annoyance of that sort, but there are other thorns in our pillows besides these, and other rough places in our beds, and we are often disturbed in our nests. When there does come a quiet time in which no outward circumstances fret us, do we seize it as coming from God, in order that, with undistracted energies, we may cast ourselves altogether into the work of growing like our Master and doing His will more fully? How many of us, dear brethren, have misused both our adversity and our prosperity by making the one an occasion for deeper worldliness, and the other a reason for forgetting Him in the darkness as in the light? To be absorbed by earthly things, whether by the enjoyment of their possession or by the bitter pain and misery of their withdrawal, is fatal to all our spiritual progress, and only they use things prosperous and things adverse aright, who take them both as means by which they may be wafted nearer to their God. Whatsoever forces act upon us, if we put the helm right and trim the sails as we ought, they will carry us to our haven. And whatsoever forces act upon us, if we neglect the sailor's skill and duty, we shall be washed backwards and forwards in the trough of the sea, and make no progress in the voyage. Then had the Church rest--and grew lazy? Then had the Church rest--and grew worldly? Then was I happy and prosperous and peaceful in my home and in my business, and I said, I shall never be moved, and I forgot my God? Then had the Church rest, and was edified.

Now, in the next place, note the

**II. Inward progress.**

There are difficulties about the exact relation of the clauses here to one another, the discussion of which would be fitter for a lecture-room than for a pulpit. I do not mean to trouble you with these, but it seems to me that we may perhaps best understand the writer's intention if we throw together the clauses which stand in the middle of this verse, and take them as being a description of the inward progress, being edified and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost. There are two things, then--the being edified and walking; and I wish to say a word or two about each of them.

Now that word edified and the cognate one edification have been enfeebled in signification so as to mean very much less than they did to Luke. When we speak of being edified, what do we mean? Little more than that we have been instructed, and especially that we have been comforted. And what is the instrument of edification in our ordinary religious parlance? Good words, wise teaching, or pious speech. But the New Testament means vastly more than this by the word, and looks not so much to other people's utterances as to a man's own strenuous efforts, as the means of edification. Much misunderstanding would have been avoided if our translators had really translated, instead of putting us off with a Latinised word which to many readers conveys little meaning and none of the significant metaphor of the original. Being edified sounds very theological and far away from daily life. Would it not sound more real if we read being built up? That is the emblem of the process that ought to go on, not only in the Christian community as a whole, but in every individual member of it. Each Christian is bound to build himself up and to help to build up other Christians; and God builds them all up by His Spirit. We have brought before us the picture of the rising of some stately fabric upon a firm foundation, course by course, stone by stone, each laid by a separate act of the builder's hand, and carefully bedded in its place until the whole is complete.

That is one emblem of the growth of the Christian community and of the Christian individual, and the other clause that is coupled with it in the text seems to me to give the same idea under a slightly different figure. The rising of a stately building and the advance on a given path suggest substantially the same notion of progress.

And of these two metaphors, I would dwell chiefly on the former, because it is the less familiar of the two to modern readers, and because it is of some consequence to restore it to its weight and true significance in the popular mind. Edification, then, is the building up of Christian character, and it involves four things: a foundation, a continuous progress, a patient, persistent effort, and a completion.

Now, Christian men and women, this is our office for ourselves, and, according to our faculty and opportunities, for the Churches with which we may stand connected, that on the foundation which is Jesus Christ--and other foundation can no man lay--we all should slowly, carefully, unceasingly be at our building work; each day's attainment, like the course of stones laid in some great temple, becoming the basis upon which to-morrow's work is to be piled, and each having in it the toil of the builder and being a result and monument of his strenuous effort, and each being built in, according to the plan that the great Architect has given, and each tending a little nearer to the roof-tree, and the time that the top stone shall be brought forth with the shout of rejoicing. Is that a transcript of my life and yours? Do we make a business of the cultivation of Christian character thus? Do we rest the whole structure of our lives upon Jesus Christ? And then, do we, hour by hour, moment by moment, lay the fair stones, until

Firm and fair the building rise,

A temple to His praise.

The old worn metaphor, which we have vulgarised and degraded into a synonym for a comfortable condition produced by a brother's words, carries in it the solemnest teaching as to what the duty and privilege of all Christian souls is-to build themselves up for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

But note further the elements of which this progress consists. May we not suppose that both metaphors refer to the clauses that follow, and that the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost are the particulars in which the Christian is built up and walks?

The fear of the Lord is eminently an Old Testament expression, and occurs only once or twice in the New. But its meaning is thoroughly in accordance with the loftiest teaching of the new revelation. The fear of the Lord is that reverential awe of Him, by which we are ever conscious of His presence with us, and ever seek, as our supreme aim and end, to submit our wills to His commandment, and to do the things that are pleasing in His sight. Are you and I building ourselves up in that? Do we feel more thrillingly and gladly to-day than we did yesterday, that God is beside us? And do we submit ourselves more loyally, more easily, more joyously to His will, in blessed obedience, now than ever before? Have we learned, and are we learning, moment by moment, more of that secret of the Lord which is with them that fear Him, and of that covenant which He will show to them? Unless we do, our growth in Christian character is a very doubtful thing. And are we advancing, too, in that other element which so beautifully completes and softens the notion of the fear of the Lord, the encouragement which the divine Spirit gives us? Are we bolder to-day than we were yesterday? Are we ready to meet with more undaunted confidence whatever we may have to face? Do we feel ever increasing within us the full blessedness and inspiration of that divine visitant? And do these sweet communications take all the torment away from fear, and leave only the bliss of reverential love? They who walk in the fear of the Lord, and who with the fear have the courage that the divine Spirit gives, will have rest, like the first Christians, whatsoever storms may howl around them, and whatsoever enemies may threaten to disturb their peace.

And so, lastly, note

**III. The outward growth.**

Thus building themselves up, and thus growing, the Church was multiplied. Of course it was. Christian men and women that are spiritually alive, and who, because they are alive, grow, and grow in these things, the manifest reverence of God, and the manifest comfort of the divine Spirit's giving, will commend their gospel to a blind world. They will be an attractive force in the midst of men, and their inward growth will make them eager to hold forth the word of life, and will give them a mouth and wisdom which nothing but genuine spiritual experience can give.

And so, dear friends, especially those of you who set yourselves to any of the many forms of Christian work which prevail in this day, learn the lesson of my text, and make sure of a before you go on to b, and see to it that before you set yourselves to try to multiply the Church, you set yourselves to build up yourselves in your most holy faith.

We hear a great deal nowadays about forward movements, and I sympathise with all that is said in favour of them. But I would remind you that the precursor of every genuine forward movement is a Godward movement, and that it is worse than useless to talk about lengthening the cords unless you begin with strengthening the stakes. The little prop that holds up the bell-tent that will contain half-a-dozen soldiers will be all too weak for the great one that will cover a company. And the fault of some Christian people is that they set themselves to work upon others without remembering that the first requisite is a deepened and growing godliness and devotion in their own souls. Dear friends, begin at home, and remember that whilst what the world calls eloquence may draw people, and oddities will draw them, and all sorts of lower attractions will gather multitudes for a little while, the one solid power which Christian men and women can exercise for the numerical increase of the Church is rooted in, and only tenable through, their own personal increase day by day in consecration and likeness to the Saviour, in possession of the Spirit, and in loving fear of the Lord.