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

**ACTS-045. PETER'S DELIVERANCE FROM PRISON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Peter therefore was kept in the prison: but prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him."*

*Acts 12:5 (R.V.)*

The narrative of Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison is full of little vivid touches which can only have come from himself. The whole tone of it reminds us of the Gospel according to St. Mark, which is in like manner stamped with peculiar minuteness and abundance of detail. One remembers that at a late period in the life of the Apostle Paul, Mark and Luke were together with him; and no doubt in those days in Rome, Mark, who had been Peter's special companion and is called by one of the old Christian writers his interpreter, was busy in telling Luke the details about Peter which appear in the first part of this Book of the Acts.

The whole story seems to me to be full of instruction as well as of picturesque detail; and I desire to bring out the various lessons which appear to me to lie in it.

**I. The first of them is this: the strength of the helpless.**

Look at that eloquent but in the verse that I have taken as a starting-point: Peter therefore was kept in prison, but prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him. There is another similarly eloquent but at the end of the chapter:

Herod ... was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost, but the Word of God grew and multiplied. Here you get, on the one hand, all the pompous and elaborate preparations--four quaternions of soldiers-- four times four is sixteen--sixteen soldiers, two chains, three gates with guards at each of them, Herod's grim determination, the people's malicious expectation of having an execution as a pleasant sensation with which to wind up the Passover Feast. And what had the handful of Christian people? Well, they had prayer; and they had Jesus Christ. That was all, and that is more than enough. How ridiculous all the preparation looks when you let the light of that great but in upon it! Prayer, earnest prayer, was made of the Church unto God for him. And evidently, from the place in which that fact is stated, it is intended that we should say to ourselves that it was because prayer was made for him that what came to pass did come to pass. It is not jerked out as an unconnected incident; it is set in a logical sequence. Prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him --and so when Herod would have brought him forth, behold, the angel of the Lord came, and the light shined into the prison. It is the same sequence of thought that occurs in that grand theophany in the eighteenth Psalm, My cry entered into His ears; then the earth shook and trembled; and there came all the magnificence of the thunderstorm and the earthquake and the divine manifestation; and this was the purpose of it all--He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters. The whole energy of the divine nature is set in motion and comes swooping down from highest heaven to the trembling earth. And of that fact the one end is one poor man's cry, and the other end is his deliverance. The moving spring of the divine manifestation was an individual's prayer; the aim of it was the individual's deliverance. A little water is put into a hydraulic ram at the right place, and the outcome is the lifting of tons. So the helpless men who could only pray are stronger than Herod and his quaternions and his chains and his gates. Prayer was made, therefore all that happened was brought to pass, and Peter was delivered.

Peter's companion, James, was killed off, as we read in a verse or two before. Did not the Church pray for him? Surely they did. Why was their prayer not answered, then? God has not any step-children. James was as dear to God as Peter was. One prayer was answered; was the other left unanswered? It was the divine purpose that Peter, being prayed for, should be delivered; and we may reverently say that, if there had not been the many in Mary's house praying, there would have been no angel in Peter's cell.

So here are revealed the strength of the weak, the armour of the unarmed, the defence of the defenceless. If the Christian Church in its times of persecution and affliction had kept itself to the one weapon that is allowed it, it would have been more conspicuously victorious. And if we, in our individual lives--where, indeed, we have to do something else besides pray--would remember the lesson of that eloquent but, we should be less frequently brought to perplexity and reduced to something bordering on despair. So my first lesson is the strength of the weak.

**II. My next is the delay of deliverance.**

Peter had been in prison for some time before the Passover, and the praying had been going on all the while, and there was no answer. Day after day of the unleavened bread and of the festival was slipping away. The last night had come; and the same night the light shone, and the angel appeared. Why did Jesus Christ not hear the cry of these poor suppliants sooner? For their sakes; for Peter's sake; for our sakes; for His own sake. For the eventual intervention, at the very last moment, and yet at a sufficiently early moment, tested faith. And look how beautifully all bore the test. The Apostle who was to be killed to-morrow is lying quietly sleeping in his cell. Not a very comfortable pillow he had to lay his head upon, with a chain on each arm and a legionary on each side of him. But he slept; and whilst he was asleep Christ was awake, and the brethren were awake. Their faith was tested, and it stood the test, and thereby was strengthened. And Peter's patience and faith, being tested in like manner and in like manner standing the test, were deepened and confirmed. Depend upon it, he was a better man all his days, because he had been brought close up to Death and looked it in the fleshless eye-sockets, unwinking and unterrified. And I dare say if, long after, he had been asked, Would you not have liked to have escaped those two or three days of suspense, and to have been let go at an earlier moment? he would have said, Not for worlds! For I learned in those days that my Lord's time is the best. I learned patience--a lesson which Peter especially needed--and I learned trust.

Do you remember another incident, singularly parallel in essence, though entirely unlike in circumstances, to this one? The two weeping sisters at Bethany send their messenger across the Jordan, grudging every moment that he takes to travel to the far-off spot where Jesus is. The message sent is only this: He whom Thou lovest is sick. What an infinite trust in Christ's heart that form of the message showed! They would not say Come!; they would not ask Him to do anything; they did not think that to do so was needful: they were quite sure that what He would do would be right.

And how was the message received? Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Well, did that not make Him hurry as fast as He could to the bedside? No; it rooted Him to the spot. He abode, therefore-- because He loved them--two days still in the same place where He was, to give him plenty of time to die, and the sisters plenty of time to test their confidence in Him. Their confidence does not seem to have altogether stood the test. Lord, if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died. And why wast Thou not here? is implied. Christ's time was the best time. It was better to get a dead brother back to their arms and to their house than that they should not have lost him for those dreary four days. So delay tests faith, and makes the deliverance, when it comes, not only the sweeter, but the more conspicuously divine. So, brother, men ought always to pray, and not to faint--always to trust that the Lord will help them, and that right early.

**III. The next lesson that I would suggest is the leisureliness of the deliverance.**

A prisoner escaping might be glad to make a bolt for it, dressed or undressed, anyhow. But when the angel comes into the cell, and the light shines, look how slowly and, as I say, leisurely, he goes about it. Put on thy shoes. He had taken them off, with his girdle and his upper garment, that he might lie the less uncomfortably. Put on thy shoes; lace them; make them all right. Never mind about these two legionaries; they will not wake. Gird thyself; tighten thy girdle. Put on thy garment. Do not be afraid. Do not be in a hurry; there is plenty of time. Now, are you ready? Come! It would have been quite as easy for the angel to have whisked him out of the cell and put him down at Mary's door; but that was not to be the way. Peter was led past all the obstacles--the first ward, and the soldiers at it; the second ward, and the soldiers at it; and the third gate that leads into the city, which was no doubt bolted and barred. There was a leisurely procession through the prison.

Why? Because Omnipotence is never in a hurry, and God, not only in His judgments but in His mercies, very often works slowly, as becomes His majesty. Ye shall not go out with haste; nor go by flight, for the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel shall be your rereward. We are impatient, and hurry our work over; God works slowly; for He works certainly. That is the law of the divine working in all regions; and we have to regulate the pace of our eager expectation so as to fall in with the slow, solemn march of the divine purposes, both in regard to our individual salvation and the providences that affect us individually, and in regard to the world's deliverance from the world's evils. An inheritance may be gotten hastily in the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed. He that believeth shall not make haste.

**IV. We see here, too, the delivered prisoner left to act for himself as soon as possible.**

As long as the angel was with Peter, he was dazed and amazed. He did not know--and small blame to him--whether he was sleeping or waking; but he gets through the gates, and out into the empty street, glimmering in the morning twilight, and the angel disappears, and the slumbering city is lying around him. When he is left to himself, he comes to himself. He could not have passed the wards without a miracle, but he can find his way to Mary's house without one. He needed the angel to bring him as far as the gate and down into the street, but he did not need him any longer. So the angel vanished into the morning light, and then he felt himself, and steadied himself, when responsibility came to him. That is the thing to sober a man. So he stood in the middle of the unpeopled street, and he considered the thing, and found in his own wits sufficient guidance, so that he did not miss the angel. He said to himself, I will go to Mary's house. Probably he did not know that there were any praying there, but it was near, and it was, no doubt, convenient in other respects that we do not know of. The economy of miraculous power is a remarkable feature in Scriptural miracles. God never does anything for us that we could do for ourselves. Not but that our doing for ourselves is, in a deeper sense, His working on us and in us, but He desires us to take the share that belongs to us in completing the deliverance which must begin by supernatural intervention of a Mightier than the angel, even the Lord of angels.

And so this little picture of the angel leading Peter through the prison, and then leaving him to his own common sense and courage as soon as he came out into the street, is just a practical illustration of the great text, Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.