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

**ACTS-057. FULL OF THE HOLY GHOST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost."*

*Acts 13:52*

That joy was as strange as a garden full of flowers would be in bitter winter weather. For everything in the circumstances of these disciples tended to make them sad. They had been but just won from heathenism, and they were raw, ignorant, unfit to stand alone. Paul and Barnabas, their only guides, had been hunted out of Antioch by a mob, and it would have been no wonder if these disciples had felt as if they had been taken on to the ice and then left, when they most needed a hand to steady them. Luke emphasises the contrast between what might have been expected, and what was actually the case, by that eloquent and at the beginning of our verse, which links together the departure of the Apostles and the joy of the disciples. But the next words explain the paradox. These new converts, left in a great heathen city, with no helpers, no guides, to work out as best they might a faith of which they had but newly received the barest rudiments, were full of joy because they were full of the Holy Ghost.

Now that latter phrase, so striking here, is characteristic of this book of the Acts, and especially of its earlier chapters, which are all, as it were, throbbing with wonder at the new gift which Pentecost had brought. Let me for a moment, in the briefest possible fashion, try to recall to you the instances of its occurrence, for they are very significant and very important.

You remember how at Pentecost all the disciples were filled with the Holy Ghost. Then when the first persecution broke over the Church, Peter before the Council is filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore he beards them, and speaks with all boldness. When he goes back to the Church and tells them of the threatening cloud that was hanging over them, they too are filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore rise buoyantly upon the tossing wave, as a ship might do when it passes the bar and meets the heaving sea. Then again the Apostles lay down the qualifications for election to the so-called office of deacon as being that the men should be full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom; and in accordance therewith, we read of the first of the seven, Stephen, that he was full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and therefore full of grace and power. When he stood before the Council he was full of the Holy Ghost, and therefore looked up into heaven and saw it opened, and the Christ standing ready to help him. In like manner we read of Barnabas that he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith. And finally we read in our text that these new converts, left alone in Antioch of Pisidia, were full of joy and of the Holy Ghost.

Now these are the principal instances, and my purpose now is rather to deal with the whole of these instances of the occurrence of this remarkable expression than with the one which I have selected as a text, because I think that they teach us great truths bearing very closely on the strength and joyfulness of the Christian life which are far too much neglected, obscured, and forgotten by us to-day.

I wish then to point you, first, to the solemn thought that is here, as to what should be--

**I. The experience of every Christian,**

Note the two things, the universality and the abundance of this divine gift. I have often had occasion to say to you, and so I merely repeat it again in the briefest fashion, that we do not grasp the central blessedness of the Christian faith unless, beyond forgiveness and acceptance, beyond the mere putting away of the dread of punishment either here or hereafter, we see that the gift of God in Jesus Christ is the communication to every believing soul of that divine life which is bestowed by the Spirit of Christ granted to every believing heart. But I would have you notice how the universality of the gift is unmistakably taught us by the instances which I have briefly gathered together in my previous remarks. It was no official class on which, on the day of Pentecost, the tongues of fire fluttered down. It was to the whole Church that courage to front the persecutor was imparted. When in Samaria the preaching of Philip brought about the result of the communication of the Holy Spirit, it was to all the believers that it was granted, and when, in the Roman barracks at Caesarea, Cornelius and his companion listened to Peter, it was upon them all that that Divine Spirit descended.

I suppose I need not remind you of how, if we pass beyond this book of the Acts into the Epistles of Paul, his affirmations do most emphatically insist upon the fact that we are all made to drink into one Spirit; and so convinced is he of the universality of the possession of that divine life by every Christian, that he does not hesitate to say that if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His, and to clear away all possibility of misunderstanding the depth and wonderfulness of the gift, he further adds in another place, Know ye not that the Spirit is in you, except ye be reprobates? Similarly another of the New Testament writers declares, in the broadest terms, that this spake he of the Holy Spirit, which--Apostles? no; office-bearers? no; ordained men? no; distinguished and leading men? No--they that believe on Him should receive. Christianity is the true democracy, because it declares that upon all, handmaidens and servants, young men and old men, there comes the divine gift. The world thinks of a divine inspiration in a more or less superficial fashion, as touching only the lofty summits, the great thinkers and teachers and artists and mighty men of light and leading of the race. The Old Testament regarded prophets and kings, and those who were designated to important offices, as the possessors of the Divine Spirit. But Christianity has seen the sun rising so high in the heavens that the humblest floweret, in the deepest valley, basks in its beams and opens to its light. We have all been made to drink into the one Spirit.

Let me remind you too of how, from the usage of this book, as well as from the rest of the New Testament teaching, there rises the other thought of the abundance of the gift. Full of the Holy Spirit--the cup is brimming with generous wine. Not that that fulness is such as to make inconsistencies impossible, as, alas, the best of us know. The highest condition for us is laid down in the sad words which yet have triumph in their sadness--The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. But whilst the fulness is not such as to exclude the need of conflict, it is such as to bring the certainty of victory.

Again if we turn to the instances to which I have already referred, we shall find that they fall into two classes, which are distinguished in the original by a slight variation in the form of the words employed. Some instances refer to a habitual possession of an abundant spiritual life moulding the character constantly, as in the cases of Stephen and Barnabas. Others refer rather to occasional and special influxes of special power on account of special circumstances, and drawn forth by special exigencies, as when there poured into Peter's heart the Divine Spirit that made him bold before the Council; or as when the dying martyr's spirit was flooded with a new clearness of vision that pierced the heavens and beheld the Christ. So then there may be and ought to be, in each of us, a fulness of the Spirit, up to the edge of our capacity, and yet of such a kind as that it may be reinforced and increased when special needs arise.

Not only so, but that which fills me to-day should not fill me to-morrow, because, as in earthly love, so in heavenly, no man can tell to what this thing shall grow. The more of fruition the more there will be of expansion, and the more of expansion the more of desire, and the more of desire the more of capacity, and the more of capacity the more of possession. So, brethren, the man who receives a spark of the divine life, through his most rudimentary and tremulous faith, if he is a faithful steward of the gift that is given to him, will find that it grows and grows, and that there is no limit to its growth, and that in its limitless growth there lies the surest prophecy of an eternal growth in the heavens.

A universal gift, that is to say, a gift to each of us if we are Christians, an abundant gift that fills the whole nature of a man, according to the measure of his present power to receive--that is the ideal, that is what God means, that is what these first believers had. It did not make them perfect, it did not save them from faults or from errors, but it was real, it was influential, it was moulding their characters, it was progressive. And that is the ideal for all Christians. Is it our actual? We are meant to be full of the Holy Ghost. Ah! how many of us have never realised that there is such a thing as being thus possessed with a divine life, partly because we do not understand that such a fulness will not be distinguishable from our own self, except by bettering of the works of self, and partly because of other reasons which I shall have to touch upon presently! Brethren, we may, every one of us, be filled with the Spirit. Let each of us ask, Am I? and if I am not, why this emptiness in the presence of such abundance?

And now let me ask you to look, in the second place, at what we gather from these instances as to--

**II. The results of that universal, abundant life.**

Do not let us run away with the idea that the New Testament, or any part of it, regards miracles and tongues and the like as being the normal and chiefest gifts of that Divine Spirit. People read this book of the Acts of the Apostles and, averse from the supernatural, exaggerate the extent to which the primitive gift of the Holy Spirit was manifested by signs and wonders, tongues of fire, and so on. We have only to look at the instances to which I have already referred to see that far more lofty and far more conspicuous than any such external and transient manifestations, which yet have their place, are the permanent and inward results, moulding character, and making men. And Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians goes as far in the way of setting the moral and spiritual effects of the divine influence above the merely miraculous and external ones, as the most advanced opponent of the supernatural could desire.

Let us look, and it can only be briefly, at the various results which are presented in the instances to which I have referred. The most general expression for all, which is the result of the Divine Spirit dwelling in a man, is that it makes him good. Look at one of the instances to which we have referred. Barnabas was a good man--was he? How came he to be so? Because he was full of the Holy Ghost. And how came he to be full of the Holy Ghost? Because he was full of faith. Get the divine life into you, and that will make you good; and, brethren, nothing else will. It is like the bottom heat in a green-house, which makes all the plants that are there, whatever their orders, grow and blossom and be healthy and strong. Therein is the difference between Christian morality and the world's ethics. They may not differ much, they do in some respects, in their ideal of what constitutes goodness, but they differ in this, that the one says, Be good, be good, be good! but, like the Pharisees of old, puts out not a finger to help a man to bear the burdens that it lays upon him. The other says, Be good, but it also says, take this and it will make you good. And so the one is Gospel and the other is talk, the one is a word of good tidings, and the other is a beautiful speculation, or a crushing commandment that brings death rather than life. If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness had been by the law. But since the clearest laying down of duty brings us no nearer to the performance of duty, we need and, thank God! we have, a gift bestowed which invests with power. He in whom the Spirit of Holiness dwells, and he alone, will be holy. The result of the life of God in the heart is a life growingly like God's, manifested in the world.

Then again let me remind you of how, from another of our instances, there comes another thought. The result of this majestic, supernatural, universal, abundant, divine life is practical sagacity in the commonest affairs of life. Look ye out from among you seven men, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom. What to do? To meet wisely the claims of suspicious and jealous poverty, and to distribute fairly a little money. That was all. And are you going to invoke such a lofty gift as this, to do nothing grander than that? Yes. Gravitation holds planets in their orbits, and keeps grains of dust in their places. And one result of the inspiration of the Almighty, which is granted to Christian people, is that they will be wise for the little affairs of life. But Stephen was also full of grace and power, two things that do not often go together--grace, gentleness, loveliness, graciousness, on the one side, and strength on the other, which divorced, make wild work of character, and which united, make men like God. So if we desire our lives to be full of sweetness and light and beauty, the best way is to get the life of Christ into them; and if we desire our lives not to be made placid and effeminate by our cult of graciousness and gracefulness, but to have their beauty stiffened and strengthened by manly energy, then the best way is to get the life of the strong Son of God, immortal love, into our lives.

The same Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost, looked up into heaven and saw the Christ. So one result of that abundant life, if we have it, will be that even though as with him, when he saw the heavens opened, there may be some smoke-darkened roof above our heads, we can look through all the shows of this vain world, and our purged eyes can behold the Christ. Again the disciples in our text were full of joy, because they were full of the Holy Spirit, and we, if we have that abundant life within us, shall not be dependent for our gladness on the outer world, but like explorers in the Arctic regions, even if we have to build a hut of snow, shall be warm within it when the thermometer is far below zero; and there will be light there when the long midnight is spread around the dwelling. So, dear friends, let us understand what is the main thing for a Christian to endeavour after,--not so much the cultivation of special graces as the deepening of the life of Christ in the spirit.

We gather from some of these instances--

**III. The way by which we may be thus filled.**

We read that Stephen was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and that Barnabas was full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, and it is quite clear from the respective contexts that, though the order in which these fulnesses are placed is different in the two clauses, their relation to each other is the same. Faith is the condition of possessing the Spirit. And what do we mean in this connection by faith? I mean, first, a belief in the truth of the possible abiding of the divine Spirit in our spirits, a truth which the superficial Christianity of this generation sorely needs to have forced upon its consciousness far more than it has it. I mean aspiration and desire after; I mean confident expectation of. Your wish measures your possession. You have as much of God as you desire. If you have no more, it is because you do not desire any more. The Christian people of to-day, many of whom are so empty of God, are in a very tragic sense, full, because they have as much as they can take in. If you bring a tiny cup, and do not much care whether anything pours into it or not, you will get it filled, but you might have had a gallon vessel filled if you had chosen to bring it. Of course there are other conditions too. We have to use the life that is given us. We have to see that we do not quench it by sin, which drives the dove of God from a man's heart. But the great truth is that if I open the door of my heart by faith, Christ will come in, in His Spirit. If I take away the blinds the light will shine into the chamber. If I lift the sluice the water will pour in to drive my mill. If I deepen the channels, more of the water of life can flow into them, and the deeper I make them the fuller they will be.

Brethren, we have wasted much time and effort in trying to mend our characters. Let us try to get that into them which will mend them. And let us remember that, if we are full of faith, we shall be full of the Holy Spirit, and therefore full of wisdom, full of grace and power, full of goodness, full of joy, whatever our circumstances. And when death comes, though it may be in some cruel form, we shall be able to look up and see the opened heavens and the welcoming Christ.