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

**ACTS-064. HOW TO SECURE A PROSPEROUS VOYAGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10.* *And after [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them. 11. Therefore ... we came with a straight course."*

*Acts 16:10-11*

This book of the Acts is careful to point out how each fresh step in the extension of the Church's work was directed and commanded by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus Philip was sent by specific injunction to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian statesman. Thus Peter on the house-top at Joppa, looking out over the waters of the western sea, had the vision of the great sheet, knit at the four corners. And thus Paul, in singularly similar circumstances, in the little seaport of Troas, looking out over the narrower sea which there separates Asia from Europe, had the vision of the man of Macedonia, with his cry, Come over and help us! The whole narrative before us bears upon the one point, that Christ Himself directs the expansion of His kingdom. And there never was a more fateful moment than that at which the Gospel, in the person of the Apostle, crossed the sea, and effected a lodgment in the progressive quarter of the world.

Now what I wish to do is to note how Paul and his little company behaved themselves when they had received Christ's commandment. For I think there are lessons worth the gathering to be found there. There was no doubt about the vision; the question was what it meant. So note three stages. First, careful consideration, with one's own common sense, of what God wants us to do--Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us. Then, let no grass grow under our feet-- immediate obedience--Straightway we endeavoured to go into Macedonia. And then, patient pondering and instantaneous submission get the reward--We came with a straight course. He gave the winds and the waves charge concerning them. Now there are three lessons for us. Taken together, they are patterns of what ought to be in our experience, and will be, if the conditions are complied with.

**I. First, Careful Consideration.**

Paul had no doubt that what he saw was a vision from Christ, and not a mere dream of the night, born of the reverberation of waking thoughts and anxieties, that took the shape of the plaintive cry of the man of Macedonia. But then the next step was to be quite sure of what the vision meant. And so, wisely, he does not make up his mind himself, but calls in the three men who were with him. And what a significant little group it was! There were Timothy, Silas, and Luke --Silas, from Jerusalem; Timothy, half a Gentile; Luke, altogether a Gentile; and Paul himself--and these four shook the world. They come together, and they talk the matter over. The word of my text rendered assuredly gathering is a picturesque one. It literally means laying things together. They set various facts side by side, or as we say in our colloquial idiom, They put this and that together, and so they came to understand what the vision meant.

What had they to help them to understand it? Well, they had this fact, that in all the former part of their journey they had been met by hindrances; that their path had been hedged up here, there, and everywhere. Paul set out from Antioch, meaning a quiet little tour of visitation amongst the churches that had been already established. Jesus Christ meant Philippi and Athens and Corinth and Ephesus, before Paul got back again. So we read in an earlier portion of the chapter that the Spirit of Jesus forbade them to speak the Word in one region, and checked and hindered them when, baffled, they tried to go to another. There then remained only one other road open to them, and that led to the coast. Thus putting together their hindrances and their stimuluses, they came to the conclusion that unitedly the two said plainly, Go across the sea, and preach the word there.

Now it is a very commonplace and homely piece of teaching to remind you that time is not wasted in making quite sure of the meaning of providences which seem to declare the will of God, before we begin to act. But the commonest duties are very often neglected; and we preachers, I think, would very often do more good by hammering at commonplace themes than by bringing out original and fresh ones. And so I venture to say a word about the immense importance to Christian life and Christian service of this preliminary step--assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us. What have we to do in order to be quite sure of God's intention for us?

Well, the first thing seems to me to make quite sure that we want to know it, and that we do not want to force our intentions upon Him, and then to plume ourselves upon being obedient to His call, when we are only doing what we like. There is a vast deal of unconscious insincerity in us all; and especially in regard to Christian work there is an enormous amount of it. People will say, Oh, I have such a strong impulse in a given direction, to do certain kinds of Christian service, that I am quite sure that it is God's will. How are you sure? A strong impulse may be a temptation from the devil as well as a call from God. And men who simply act on untested impulses, even the most benevolent which spring directly from large Christian principles, may be making deplorable mistakes. It is not enough to have pure motives. It is useless to say, Such and such a course of action is clearly the result of the truths of the Gospel. That may be all perfectly true, and yet the course may not be the course for you. For there may be practical considerations, which do not come into our view unless we carefully think about them, which forbid us to take such a path. So remember that strong impulses are not guiding lights; nor is it enough to vindicate our pursuing some mode of Christian service that it is in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. Circumstances alter cases is a very homely old saying; but if Christian people would only bring the common sense to bear upon their religious life which they need to bring to bear upon their business life, unless they are going into the Gazette, there would be less waste work in the Christian Church than there is to-day. I do not want less zeal; I want that the reins of the fiery steed shall be kept well in hand. The difference between a fanatic, who is a fool, and an enthusiast, who is a wise man, is that the one brings calm reason to bear, and an open-eyed consideration of circumstances all round; and the other sees but one thing at a time, and shuts his eyes, like a bull in a field, and charges at that. So let us be sure, to begin with, that we want to know what God wants us to do; and that we are not palming our wishes upon Him, and calling them His providences.

Then there is another plain, practical consideration that comes out of this story, and that is, Do not be above being taught by failures and hindrances. You know the old proverb, It is waste time to flog a dead horse. There is not a little well-meant work flung away, because it is expended on obviously hopeless efforts to revivify, perhaps, some moribund thing or to continue, perhaps, in some old, well-worn rut, instead of striking out into a new path. Paul was full of enthusiasm for the evangelisation of Asia Minor, and he might have said a great deal about the importance of going to Ephesus. He tried to do it, but Christ said No. and Paul did not knock his head against the stone wall that lay between him and the accomplishment of his purpose, but he gave it up and tried another tack. He next wished to go up into Bithynia, and he might have said a great deal about the needs of the people by the Euxine; but again down came the barrier, and he had once more to learn the lesson, Not as thou wilt, but as I will. He was not above being taught by his failures. Some of us are; and it is very difficult, and needs a great deal of Christian wisdom and unselfishness, to distinguish between hindrances in the way of work which are meant to evoke larger efforts, and hindrances which are meant to say, Try another path, and do not waste time here any longer.

But if we wish supremely to know God's will, He will help us to distinguish between these two kinds of difficulties. Some one has said, Difficulties are things to be overcome. Yes, but not always. They very often are, and we should thank God for them then; but they sometimes are God's warnings to us to go by another road. So we need discretion, and patience, and suspense of judgment to be brought to bear upon all our purposes and plans.

Then, of course, I need not remind you that the way to get light is to seek it in the Book and in communion with Him whom the Book reveals to us as the true Word of God: He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. So careful consideration is a preliminary to all good Christian work. And, if you can, talk to some Timothy and Silas and Luke about your course, and do not be above taking a brother's advice.

**II. The next step is Immediate Submission.**

When they had assuredly gathered that the Lord had called them, immediately--there is great virtue in that one word--we endeavoured to go into Macedonia. Delayed obedience is the brother-- and, if I may mingle metaphors, sometimes the father--of disobedience. It sometimes means simple feebleness of conviction, indolence, and a general lack of fervour. It means very often a reluctance to do the duty that lies plainly before us. And, dear brethren, as I have said about the former lesson, so I say about this. The homely virtue, which we all know to be indispensable to success in common daily life and commercial undertakings, is no less indispensable to all vigour of Christian life and to all nobleness of Christian service. We have no hours to waste; the time is short. In the harvest-field, especially when it is getting near the end of the week, and the Sunday is at hand, there are little leisure and little tolerance of slow workers. And for us the fields are white, the labourers are few, the Lord of the harvest is imperative, the sun is hurrying to the west, and the sickles will have to be laid down before long. So, immediately we endeavoured.

Delayed duty is present discomfort. As long as a man has a conscience, so long will he be restless and uneasy until he has, as the Quakers say, cleared himself of his burden, and done what he knows that he ought to do, and got done with it. Delayed obedience means wasted possibilities of service, and so is ever to be avoided. The more disagreeable anything is which is plainly a duty, the more reason there is for doing it right away. I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.

Did you ever count how many straightways there are in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel? If you have not, will you do it when you go home; and notice how they come in? In the story of Christ's opening ministry every fresh incident is tacked on to the one before it, in that chapter, by that same word straightway. Straightway He does that; anon He does this; immediately He does the other thing. All is one continuous stream of acts of service. The Gospel of Mark is the Gospel of the servant, and it sets forth the pattern to which all Christian service ought to be conformed.

So if we take Jesus Christ for our Example, unhasting and unresting in the work of the Lord, we shall let no moment pass burdened with undischarged duty; and we shall find that all the moments are few enough for the discharge of the duties incumbent upon us.

**III. So, lastly, careful consideration and unhesitating obedience lead to a Straight Course.**

Well, it is not so always, but it is so generally. There is a wonderful power in diligent doing of God's known will to smooth away difficulties and avoid troubles. I do not, of course, mean that a man who thus lives, patiently ascertaining and then promptly doing what God would have him do, has any miraculous exemption from the ordinary sorrows and trials of life. But sure I am that a very, very large proportion of all the hindrances and disappointments, storms and quicksands, calms which prevent progress and headwinds that beat in our faces, are directly the products of our negligence in one or other of these two respects, and that although by no means absolutely, yet to an extent that we should not believe if we had not the experience of it, the wish to do God's will and the doing of it with our might when we know what it is have a talismanic power in calming the seas and bringing us to the desired haven.

But though this is not always absolutely true in regard of outward things, it is, without exception or limitation, true in regard of the inward life. For if my supreme will is to do God's will then nothing which is His will, and comes to me because it is can be a hindrance in my doing that.

As an old proverb says, Travelling merchants can never be out of their road. And a Christian man whose path is simple obedience to the will of God can never be turned from that path by whatever hindrances may affect his outward life. So, in deepest truth, there is always a calm voyage for the men whose eyes are open to discern, and whose hands are swift to fulfil, the commandments of their Father in heaven. For them all winds blow them to their port; for them all things work together for good; with them God's servants who hearken to the voice of His commandments, and are His ministers to do His pleasure, can never be other than in amity and alliance. He who is God's servant is the world's master. All things are yours if ye are Christ's.

So, brethren, careful study of providences and visions, of hindrances and stimulus, careful setting of our lives side by side with the Master's, and a swift delight in doing the will of the Lord, will secure for us, in inmost truth, a prosperous voyage, till all storms are hushed, and they are glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them to their desired haven.