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

**ACTS-066. THE RIOT AT PHILIPPI by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, 20. And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, 21. And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans. 22. And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. 23. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely: 24. Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. 25. And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. 26. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. 27. And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. 28. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. 29. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, 30. And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? 31. And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. 32. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. 33. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. 34. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing In God with all his house."*

*Acts 16:19-34*

This incident gives us the Apostle's first experience of purely Gentile opposition. The whole scene has a different stamp from that of former antagonisms, and reminds us that we have passed into Europe. The accusers and the grounds of accusation are new. Formerly Jews had led the attack; now Gentiles do so. Crimes against religion were charged before; now crimes against law and order. Hence the narrative is more extended, in accordance with the prevailing habit of the book, to dilate on the first of a series and to summarise subsequent members of it. We may note the unfounded charge and unjust sentence; the joyful confessors and the answer to their trust; the great light that shone on the jailer's darkness.

**I.** This was a rough beginning of the work undertaken at the call of Christ. Less courageous and faithful men might have thought, Were we right in "assuredly gathering" that His hand pointed us hither, since this is the reception we find? But though the wind meets us as soon as we clear the harbour, the salt spray dashing in our faces is no sign that we should not have left shelter. A difficult beginning often means a prosperous course; and hardships are not tokens of having made a mistake.

The root of the first antagonism to the Gospel in Europe was purely mercenary. The pythoness's masters had no horror of Paul's doctrines. They were animated by no zeal for Apollo. They only saw a source of profit drying up. Infinitely more respectable was Jewish opposition, which was, at all events, the perverted working of noble sentiments. Zeal for religion, even when the zeal is impure and the notions of religion imperfect, is higher than mere anger at pecuniary loss. How much of the opposition since and to-day comes from the same mean source! Lust and appetite organise profitable trades, in which the money has no smell, however foul the cesspool from which it has been brought. And when Christian people set themselves against these abominations, capital takes the command of the mob of drink-sellers and consumers, or of those from haunts of fleshly sin, and shrieks about interfering with honest industry, and seeking to enforce sour-faced Puritanism on society. The Church may be very sure that it is failing in some part of its duty, if there is no class of those who fatten on providing for sin howling at its heels, because it is interfering with the hope of their gains.

The charge against the little group took no heed of the real character of their message. It artfully put prominent their nationality. These early anti-Semitic agitators knew the value of a good solid prejudice, and of a nickname. Jews--that was enough. The rioters were Romans--of a sort, no doubt, but it was poor pride for a Macedonian to plume himself on having lost his nationality. The great crime laid to Paul's charge was--troubling the city. So it always is. Whether it be George Fox, or John Wesley, or the Salvation Army, the disorderly elements of every community attack the preachers of the Gospel in the name of order, and break the peace in their eagerness to have it kept. There was no trouble in Philippi, but the uproar which they themselves were making. The quiet praying-place by the riverside, and the silencing of the maiden's shout in the streets, were not exactly the signs of disturbers of civic tranquillity.

The accuracy of the charge may be measured by the ignorance of the accusers that Paul and his friends were in any way different from the run of Jews. No doubt they were supposed to be teaching Jewish practices, which were supposed to be inconsistent with Roman citizenship. But if the magistrates had said, What customs? the charge would have collapsed. Thank God, the Gospel has a witness to bear against many customs; but it does not begin by attacking even these, much less by prescribing illegalities. Its errand was and is to the individual first. It sets the inner man right with God, and then the new life works itself out, and will war against evils which the old life deemed good; but the conception of Christianity as a code regulating actions is superficial, whether it is held by friends or foes.

There is always a mob ready to follow any leader, especially if there is the prospect of hurting somebody. The lovers of tranquillity showed how they loved it by dragging Paul and Silas into the forum, and bellowing untrue charges against them. The mob seconded them; they rose up together [with the slave-owners] against Paul and Silas. The magistrates, knowing the ticklish material that they had to deal with, and seeing only a couple of Jews from nobody knew where, did not think it worth while to inquire or remonstrate. They were either cowed or indifferent; and so, to show how zealous they and the mob were for Roman law, they drove a coach-and-six clean through it, and without the show of investigation, scourged and threw into prison the silent Apostles. It was a specimen of what has happened too often since. How many saints have been martyred to keep popular feeling in good tune! And how many politicians will strain conscience to-day, because they are afraid of what Luke here unpolitely calls the multitude, or as we might render it, the mob, but which we now fit with a much more respectful appellation!

The jailer, on his part, in the true spirit of small officials, was ready to better his instructions. It is dangerous to give vague directions to such people. When the judge has ordered unlawful scourging, the turnkey is not likely to interpret the requirement of safe keeping too leniently. One would not look for much human kindness in a Philippian jail. So it was natural that the deepest, darkest, most foul-smelling den should he chosen for the two, and that they should he thrust, bleeding backs and all, into the stocks, to sleep if they could.

**II.** These birds could sing in a darkened cage. The jailer's treatment of them after his conversion shows what he had neglected to do at first. They had no food; their bloody backs were unsponged; they were thrust into a filthy hole, and put in a posture of torture. No wonder that they could not sleep! But what hindered sleep would, with most men, have sorely dimmed trust and checked praise. Not so with them. God gave them songs in the night. We can hear the strains through all the centuries, and they bid us be cheerful and trustful, whatever befalls. Surely Christian faith never is more noble than when it triumphs over circumstances, and brings praises from lips which, if sense had its way, would wail and groan. This is the victory that overcometh the world. The true anaesthetic is trust in God. No wonder that the baser sort of prisoners--and base enough they probably were--were listening to them, for such sounds had never been heard there before. In how many a prison have they been heard since!

We are not told that the Apostles prayed for deliverance. Such deliverance had not been always granted. Peter indeed had been set free, but Stephen and James had been martyred, and these two heroes had no ground to expect a miracle to free them. But thankful trust is always an appeal to God. And it is always answered, whether by deliverance from or support in trial.

This time deliverance came. The tremor of the earth was the token of God's answer. It does not seem likely that an earthquake could loosen fetters in a jail full of prisoners, but more probably the opening of the doors and the falling off of the chains were due to a separate act of divine power, the earthquake being but the audible token thereof. At all events, here again, the first of a series has distinguishing features, and may stand as type of all its successors. God will never leave trusting hearts to the fury of enemies. He sometimes will stretch out a hand and set them free, He sometimes will leave them to bear the utmost that the world can do, but He will always hear their cry and save them. Paul had learned the lesson which Philippi was meant to teach, when he said, though anticipating a speedy death by martyrdom, The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me into His heavenly Kingdom.

**III.** The jailer behaves as such a man in his position would do. He apparently slept in a place that commanded a view of the doors; and he lay dressed, with his sword beside him, in case of riot or attempted escape. His first impulse on awaking is to look at the gates. They are open; then some of his charge have broken them. His immediate thought of suicide not only shows the savage severity of punishment which he knew would fall on him, but tells a dreary tale of the desperate sense of the worthlessness of life and blank ignorance of anything beyond which then infected the Roman world. Suicide, the refuge of cowards or of pessimists, sometimes becomes epidemic. Faith must have died and hope vanished before a man can say, I will take the leap into the dark.

Paul's words freed the man from one fear, but woke a less selfish and profounder awe. What did all this succession of strange things mean? Here are doors open; how came that? Here are prisoners with the possibility of escape refusing it; how came that? Here is one of his victims tenderly careful of his life and peacefulness, and taking the upper hand of him; how came that? A nameless awe begins to creep over him; and when he gets lights, and sees the two whom he had made fast in the stocks standing there free, and yet not caring to go forth, his rough nature is broken down. He recognises his superiors. He remembers the pythoness's testimony, that they told the way of salvation.

His question seems psychologically impossible to critics, who have probably never asked it themselves. Wonderful results follow from the judicious use of that imposing word psychologically; but while we are not to suppose that this man knew all that salvation meant, there is no improbability in his asking such a question, if due regard is paid to the whole preceding events, beginning with the maiden's words, and including the impression of Paul's personality and the mysterious freeing of the prisoners.

His dread was the natural fear that springs when a man is brought face to face with God; and his question, vague and ignorant as it was, is the cry of the dim consciousness that lies dormant in all men--the consciousness of needing deliverance and healing. It erred in supposing that he had to do anything; but it was absolutely right in supposing that he needed salvation, and that Paul could tell him how to get it. How many of us, knowing far more than he, have never asked the same wise question, or have never gone to Paul for an answer? It is a question which we should all ask; for we all need salvation, which is deliverance from danger and healing for soul-sickness.

Paul's answer is blessedly short and clear. Its brevity and decisive plainness are the glory of the Gospel. It crystallises into a short sentence the essential directory for all men.

See how little it takes to secure salvation. But see how much it takes; for the hardest thing of all is to be content to accept it as a gift, without money and without price. Many people have listened to sermons all their lives, and still have no clear understanding of the way of salvation. Alas that so often the divine simplicity and brevity of Paul's answer are darkened by a multitude of irrelevant words and explanations which explain nothing!

The passage ends with the blessing which we may all receive. Of course the career begun then had to be continued by repeated acts of faith, and by growing knowledge and obedience. The incipient salvation is very incomplete, but very real. There is no reason to doubt that, for some characters, the only way of becoming Christians is to become so by one dead-lift of resolution. Some things are best done slowly; some things best quickly. One swift blow makes a cleaner fracture than filing or sawing. The light comes into some lives like sunshine in northern latitudes, with long dawn and slowly growing brightness; but in some the sun leaps into the sky in a moment, as in the tropics. What matter how long it takes to rise, if it does rise, and climb to the zenith?