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

**ACTS-072. CONSTRAINED BY THE WORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified."*

*Acts 18:5*

The Revised Version, in concurrence with most recent authorities, reads, instead of pressed in the spirit, constrained by the word. One of these alterations depends on a diversity of reading, the other on a difference of translation. The one introduces a significant difference of meaning; the other is rather a change of expression. The word rendered here pressed, and by the Revised Version constrained, is employed in its literal use in Master, the multitude throng Thee and press Thee, and in its metaphorical application in The love of Christ constraineth us. There is not much difference between constrained and pressed, but there is a large difference between in the spirit and by the word. Pressed in the spirit simply describes a state of feeling or mind; constrained by the word declares the force which brought about that condition of pressure or constraint. What then does constrained by the word refer to? It indicates that Paul's message had a grip of him, and held him hard, and forced him to deliver it.

One more preliminary remark is that our text evidently brings this state of mind of the Apostle, and the coming of his two friends Silas and Timothy, into relation as cause and effect. He had been alone in Corinth. His work of late had not been encouraging. He had been comparatively silent there, and had spent most of his time in tent-making. But when his two friends came a cloud was lifted off his spirit, and he sprang back again, as it were, to his old form and to his old work.

Now if we take that point of view with regard to the passage before us, I think we shall find that it yields valuable lessons, some of which I wish to try to enforce now.

**I. Let me ask you to look with me at the downcast Apostle.**

Downcast, you say; is not that an unworthy word to use about a minister of Jesus Christ inspired as Paul was? By no means. We shall very much mistake both the nature of inspiration and the character of this inspired Apostle, if we do not recognise that he was a man of many moods and tremulously susceptible to external influences. Such music would never have come from him if his soul had not been like an Aeolian harp, hung in a tree and vibrating in response to every breeze. And so we need not hesitate to speak of the Apostle's mood, as revealed to us in the passage before us, as being downcast.

Now notice that in the verses preceding my text his conduct is extremely abnormal and unlike his usual procedure. He goes into Corinth, and he does next to nothing in evangelistic work. He repairs to the synagogue once a week, and talks to the Jews there. But that is all. The notice of his reasoning in the synagogue is quite subordinate to the notice that he was occupied in finding a lodging with another pauper Jew and stranger in the great city, and that these two poor men went into a kind of partnership, and tried to earn a living by hard work. Such procedure makes a singular contrast to Paul's usual methods in a strange city.

Now the reason for that slackening of impulse and comparative cessation of activity is not far to seek. The first Epistle to Thessalonica was written immediately after these two brethren rejoined Paul. And how does the Apostle describe in that letter his feelings before they came? He speaks of all our distress and affliction. He tells that he was tortured by anxiety as to how the new converts in Thessalonica were getting on, and could not forbear to try to find out whether they were still standing steadfast. Again in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, you will find that there, looking back to this period, he describes his feelings in similar fashion and says: I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And if you look forward a verse or two in our chapter you will see that a vision came to Paul, which presupposes that some touch of fear, and some temptation to silence, were busy in his heart. For God shapes His communications according to our need, and would not have said, Do not be afraid, and hold not thy peace, but speak, unless there had been a danger both of Paul's being frightened and of his being dumb.

And what thus brought a cloud over his sky? A little exercise of historical imagination will very sufficiently answer that. A few weeks before, in obedience, as he believed, to a direct divine command, Paul had made a plunge, and ventured upon an altogether new phase of work. He had crossed into Europe, and from the moment that he landed at the harbour of Philippi, up to the time when he took refuge in some quiet little room in Corinth, he had had nothing but trouble and danger and disappointment. The prison at Philippi, the riots that hounded him out of Thessalonica, the stealthy, hurried escape from Beroea, the almost entire failure of his first attempt to preach the Gospel to Greeks in Athens, his loneliness, and the strangeness of his surroundings in the luxurious, wicked, wealthy Greek city of Corinth--all these things weighed on him, and there is no wonder that his spirits went down, and he felt that now he must lie fallow for a time and rest, and pull himself together again.

So here we have, in this great champion of the faith, in this strong runner of the Christian race, in this chief of men, an example of the fluctuation of mood, the variation in the way in which we look at our duties and our obligations and our difficulties, the slackening of the impulse which dominates our lives, that are too familiar to us all. It brings Paul nearer us to feel that he, too, knew these ups and downs. The force that drove this meteor through the darkness varied, as the force that impels us varies to our consciousness. It is the prerogative of God to be immutable; men have their moods and their fluctuations. Kindled lights flicker; the sun burns steadily. An Elijah to-day beards Ahab and Jezebel and all their priests, and to-morrow hides his head in his hands, and says, Take me away, I am not better than my fathers. There will be ups and down in the Christian vigour of our lives, as well as in all other regions, so long as men dwell in this material body and are surrounded by their present circumstances.

Brethren, it is no small part of Christian wisdom and prudence to recognise this fact, both in order that it may prevent us from becoming unduly doubtful of ourselves when the ebb tide sets in on our souls, and also in order that we may lay to heart this other truth, that because these moods and changes of aspect and of vigour will come to us, therefore the law of life must be effort, and the duty of every Christian man be to minimise, in so far as possible, the fluctuations which, in some degree, are inevitable. No human hand has ever drawn an absolutely straight line. That is the ideal of the mathematician, but all ours are crooked. But we may indefinitely diminish the magnitude of the curves. No two atoms are so close together as that there is no film between them. No human life has ever been an absolutely continuous, unbroken series of equally holy and devoted thoughts and acts, but we may diminish the intervals between kindred states, and may make our lives so far uniform as that to a bystander they shall look like the bright circle, which a brand whirled round in the air makes the impression of, on the eye that beholds. We shall have times of brightness and of less brilliancy, of vigour and of consequent reaction and exhaustion. But Christianity has, for one of its objects, to help us to master our moods, and to bring us nearer and nearer, by continual growth, to the steadfast, immovable attitude of those whose faith is ever the same.

Do not forget the plain lesson which comes from the incident before us--viz., that the wisest thing that a man can do, when he feels that the wheels of his religious being are driving heavily, is to set himself doggedly to the plain, homely work of daily life. Paul did not sit and bemoan himself because he felt this slackening of impulse, but he went away to Aquila, and said, Let us set to work and make camel's-hair cloth and tents. Be thankful for your homely, prosaic, secular, daily task. You do not know from how many sickly fancies it saves you, and how many breaches in the continuity of your Christian feeling it may bridge over. It takes you away from thinking about yourselves, and sometimes you cannot think about anything less profitably. So stick to your work; and if ever you feel, as Paul did, cast down, be sure that the workshop, the office, the desk, the kitchen will prevent you from being destroyed, if you give yourselves to the plain duties which no moods alter, but which can alter a great many moods.

**II. And now note the constraining word.**

I have already said that the return of the two, who had been sent to see how things were going with the recent converts in the infant Churches, brought the Apostle good tidings, and so lifted off a great load of anxiety from his heart. No wonder! He had left raw recruits under fire, with no captain, and he might well doubt whether they would keep their ranks. But they did. So the pressure was lifted off, and the pressure being lifted off, spontaneously the old impulse gripped him once more; like a spring which leaps back to its ancient curve when some alien force is taken from it. It must have been a very deep and a very habitual impulse, which thus instantly reasserted itself the moment that the pressure of anxiety was taken out of the way.

The word constrained him. What to do? To declare it. Paul's example brings up two thoughts--that that impulse may vary at times, according to the pressure of circumstances, and may even be held in abeyance for a while; and that if a man is honestly and really a Christian, as soon as the incumbent pressure is taken away, he will feel, Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel. For though Paul's sphere of work was different from ours, his obligation to work and his impulse to work were such as are, or should be, common to all Christians. The impulse to utter the word that we believe and live by seems to me to be, in its very nature, inseparable from earnest Christian faith. All emotion demands expression; and if a man has never felt that he must let his Christian faith have vent, it is a very bad sign. As certainly as fermentation or effervescence demands outgush, so certainly does emotion demand expression. We all know that. The same impulse that makes a mother bend over her babe with unmeaning words and tokens that seem to unsympathetic onlookers foolish, ought to influence all Christians to speak the Name they love. All conviction demands expression. There may be truths which have so little bearing upon human life that he who perceives them feels little obligation to say anything about them. But these are the exceptions; and the more weighty and the more closely affecting human interests anything that we have learned to believe as truth is, the more do we feel in our hearts that, in making us its believers, it has made us its apostles. Christ's saying, What ye hear in the ear, that preach ye on the housetops, expresses a universal truth which is realised in many regions, and ought to be most emphatically realised in the Christian. For surely of all the truths that men can catch a glimpse of, or grapple to their hearts, or store in their understandings, there are none which bring with them such tremendous consequences, and therefore are of so solemn import to proclaim to all the children of men, as the truth, which we profess we have received, of personal salvation through Jesus Christ.

If there never had been a single commandment to that effect, I know not how the Christian Church or the Christian individual could have abstained from declaring the great and sweet Name to which it and he owe so much. I do not care to present this matter as a commandment, nor to speak now of obligation or responsibility. The impulse is what I would fix your attention upon. It is inseparable from the Christian life. It may vary in force, as we see in the incident before us. It will vary in grip, according as other circumstances and duties insist upon being attended to. The form in which it is yielded to will vary indefinitely in individuals. But if they are Christian people it is always there.

Well then, what about the masses of so-called Christians who feel nothing of any such constraining force? And what about the many who feel enough of it to make them also feel that they are wrong in not yielding to it, but not enough to make their conduct be influenced by it? Brethren, I venture to believe that the measure in which this impulse to speak the word and use direct efforts for somebody's conversion is felt by Christians, is a very fair test of the depth of their own religion. If a vessel is half empty it will not run over. If it is full to the brim, the sparkling treasure will fall on all sides. A weak plant may never push its green leaves above the ground, but a strong one will rise into the light. A spark may be smothered in a heap of brushwood, but a steady flame will burn its way out. If this word has not a grip of you, impelling you to its utterance, I would have you not to be too sure that you have a grip of it.

**III. Lastly, we have here the witness to the word.**

He was constrained by the word, testifying. Now I do not know whether it is imposing too much meaning upon a non-significant difference of expression, if I ask you to note the difference between that phrase and the one which describes his previous activity: He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade the Jews and the Greeks, but when the old impulse came back in new force, reasoning was far too cold a method, and Paul took to testifying. Whether that be so or no, mark that the witness of one's own personal conviction and experience is the strongest weapon that a Christian can use. I do not despise the place of reasoning, but arguments do not often change opinions; they never change hearts. Logic and controversial discoursing may prepare the way of the Lord, but it is in the wilderness. But when a man calls aloud, Come and hear all ye, and I will declare what God hath done for my soul; or when he tells his brother, We have found the Messias; or when he sticks to One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see, it is difficult for any one to resist, and impossible for any one to answer, that way of testifying,

It is a way that we can all adopt if we will. Christian men and women can all say such things. I do not forget that there are indirect ways of spreading the Gospel. Some of you think that you do enough when you give your money and your interest in order to diffuse it. You can buy a substitute in the militia, but you cannot buy a substitute in Christ's service. You have each some congregation to which you can speak, if it is no larger than Paul's--namely, two people, Aquila and Priscilla. What talks they would have in their lodging, as they plaited the wisps of black hair into rough cloth, and stitched the strips into tents! Aquila was not a Christian when Paul picked him up, but he became one very soon; and it was the preaching in the workshop, amidst the dust, that made him one. If we long to speak about Christ we shall find plenty of people to speak to. Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.

Now, dear friends, I have only one word more. I have no doubt there are some among us who have been saying, This sermon does not apply to me at all. Does it not? If it does not, what does that mean? It means that you have not the first requisite for spreading the word-- viz. personal faith in the word. It means that you have put away, or at least neglected to take in, the word and the Saviour of whom it speaks, into your own lives. But it does not mean that you have got rid of the word thereby. It will not in that case lay the grip of which I have been speaking upon you, but it will not let you go. It will lay on you a far more solemn and awful clutch, and like a jailer with his hand on the culprit's shoulder, will constrain you into the presence of the Judge. You can make it a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. And though you do not grasp it, it grasps and holds you. The word that I speak unto him, the same shall judge him at the last day.