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

**ACTS-078. A FULFILLED ASPIRATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"So that I might finish my course... ."*

*Acts 20:24*

*"I have finished my course... ."*

*2 Timothy 4:7*

I do not suppose that Paul in prison, and within sight of martyrdom, remembered his words at Ephesus. But the fact that what was aspiration whilst he was in the very thick of his difficulties came to be calm retrospect at the close is to me very beautiful and significant. So that I may finish my course, said he wistfully; whilst before him there lay dangers clearly discerned and others that had all the more power over the imagination because they were but dimly discerned--Not knowing the things that shall befall me there, said he, but knowing this, that bonds and afflictions abide me. When a man knows exactly what he has to be afraid of he can face it. When he knows a little corner of it, and also knows that there is a great stretch behind that is unknown, that is a state of things that tries his mettle. Many a man will march up to a battery without a tremor who would not face a hole where a snake lay. And so Paul's ignorance, as well as Paul's knowledge, made it very hard for him to say None of these things move me if only I might finish my course.

Now there are in these two passages, thus put together, three points that I touch for a moment. These are, What Paul thought that life chiefly was; what Paul aimed at; and what Paul won thereby.

**I. What he thought that life chiefly was.**

That I may finish my course. Now course, in our modern English, is far too feeble a word to express the Apostle's idea here. It has come to mean with us a quiet sequence or a succession of actions which, taken together, complete a career; but in its original force the English word course, and still more the Greek, of which it is a translation, contain a great deal more than that. If we were to read race, we should get nearer to at least one side of the Apostle's thought. This was the image under which life presented itself to him, as it does to every man that does anything in the world worth doing, whether he be Christian or not--as being not a place for enjoyment, for selfish pursuits, making money, building family, satisfying love, seeking pleasure, or the like; but mainly as being an appointed field for a succession of efforts, all in one direction, and leading progressively to an end. In that image of life as a race, threadbare as it is, there are several grave considerations involved, which it will contribute to the nobleness of our own lives to keep steadily in view.

To begin with, the metaphor regards life as a track or path marked out and to be kept to by us. Paul thought of his life as a racecourse, traced for him by God, and from which it would be perilous and rebellious to diverge. The consciousness of definite duties loomed larger than anything else before him. His first waking thought was, What is God's will for me to-day? What stage of the course have I to pass over to-day? Each moment brought to him an appointed task which at all hazards he must do. And this elevating, humbling, and bracing ever-present sense of responsibility, not merely to circumstances, but to God, is an indispensable part of any life worth the living, and of any on which a man will ever dare to look back.

My course. O brethren! if we carried with us, always present, that solemn, severe sense of all-pervading duty and of obligation laid upon us to pursue faithfully the path that is appointed us, there would be less waste, less selfishness, less to regret, and less that weakens and defiles, in the lives of us all. And blessed be His name! however trivial be our tasks, however narrow our spheres, however secular and commonplace our businesses or trades, we may write upon them, as on all sorts of lives, except weak and selfish ones, this inscription, Holiness to the Lord.

The broad arrow stamped on Crown property gives a certain dignity to whatever bears it, and whatever small duty has the name of God written across it is thereby ennobled. If our days are to be full-fraught with the serenity and purity which it is possible for them to attain, and if we ourselves are to put forth all our powers and make the most of ourselves, we must cultivate the continual sense that life is a course--a series of definite duties marked out for us by God.

Again, the image suggests the strenuous efforts needed for discharge of our appointed tasks. The Apostle, like all men of imaginative and sensitive nature, was accustomed to speak in metaphors, which expressed his fervid convictions more adequately than more abstract expressions would have done. That vigorous figure of a course speaks more strongly of the stress of continual effort than many words. It speaks of the straining muscles, and the intense concentration, and the forward-flung body of the runner in the arena. Paul says in effect, I, for my part, live at high pressure. I get the most that I can out of myself. I do the very best that is in me. And that is a pattern for us.

There is nothing to be done unless we are contented to live on the stretch. Easygoing lives are always contemptible lives. A man who never does anything except what he can do easily never comes to do anything greater than what he began with, and never does anything worth doing at all. Effort is the law of life in all departments, as we all of us know and practise in regard to our daily business. But what a strange thing it is that we seem to think that our Christian characters can be formed and perfected upon other conditions, and in other fashions, than those by which men make their daily bread or their worldly fortunes!

The direction which effort takes is different in these two regions. The necessity for concentration and vigorous putting into operation of every faculty is far more imperative in the Christian course than in any other form of life.

I believe most earnestly that we grow Christlike, not by effort only, but by faith. But I believe that there is no faith without effort, and that the growth which comes from faith will not be appropriated and made ours without it. And so I preach, without in the least degree feeling that it impinges upon the great central truth that we are cleansed and perfected by the power of God working upon us, the sister truth that we must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

Brethren, unless we are prepared for the dust and heat of the race, we had better not start upon the course. Christian men have an appointed task, and to do it will take all the effort that they can put forth, and will assuredly demand continuous concentration and the summoning of every faculty to its utmost energy.

Still further, there is another idea that lies in the emblem, and that is that the appointed task which thus demands the whole man in vigorous exercise ought in fact to be, and in its nature is, progressive. Is the Christianity of the average church member and professing Christian a continuous advance? Is to-day better than yesterday? Are former attainments continually being left behind? Does it not seem the bitterest irony to talk about the usual life of a Christian as a course? Did you ever see a squad of raw recruits being drilled in the barrack-yard? The first thing the sergeants do is to teach them the goose-step, which consists in lifting up one foot and then the other, ad infinitum, and yet always keeping on the same bit of ground. That is the kind of course which hosts of so-called Christians content themselves with running--a vast deal of apparent exercise and no advance. They are just at the same spot at which they stood five, ten, or twenty years ago; not a bit wiser, more like Christ, less like the devil and the world; having gained no more mastery over their characteristic evils; falling into precisely the same faults of temper and conduct as they used to do in the far-away past. By what right can they talk of running the Christian race? Progress is essential to real Christian life.

**II. Turn now to another thought here, and consider what Paul aimed at.**

It is a very easy thing for a man to say, I take the discharge of my duty, given to me by Jesus Christ, as my great purpose in life, when there is nothing in the way to prevent him from carrying out that purpose. But it is a very different thing when, as was the case with Paul, there lie before him the certainties of affliction and bonds, and the possibilities which very soon consolidated themselves into certainties, of a bloody death and that swiftly. To say then, without a quickened pulse or a tremor in the eyelid, or a quiver in the voice, or a falter in the resolution, to say then, none of these things move me, if only I may do what I was set to do--that is to be in Christ indeed; and that is the only thing worth living for.

Look how beautifully we see in operation in these heartfelt and few words of the Apostle the power that there is in an absolute devotion to God-enjoined duty, to give a man a solemn scorn of ills, and to lift him high above everything that would bar or hinder his path. Is it not bracing to see any one actuated by such motives as these? And why should they not be motives for us all? The one thing worth our making our aim in life is to accomplish our course.

Now notice that the word in the original here, finish, does not merely mean end, which would be a very poor thing. Time will do that for us all. It will end our course. But an ended course may yet be an unfinished course. And the meaning that the Apostle attaches to the word in both of our texts is not merely to scramble through anyhow, so as to get to the last of it; but to complete, accomplish the course, or, to put away the metaphor, to do all that it was meant by God that he should do.

Now some very early transcriber of the Acts of the Apostles mistook the Apostle's meaning, and thought that he only said that he desired to end his career; and so, with the best intentions in the world, he inserted, probably on the margin, what he thought was a necessary addition--that unfortunate with joy, which appears in our Authorised Version, but has no place in the true text. If we put it in we necessarily limit the meaning of the word finish to that low, superficial sense which I have already dismissed. If we leave it out we get a far nobler thought. Paul was not thinking about the joy at the end. What he wanted was to do his work, all of it, right through to the very last. He knew there would be joy, but he does not speak about it. What he wanted, as all faithful men do, was to do the work, and let the joy take care of itself.

And so for all of us, the true anaesthetic or painkiller is that all-dominant sense of obligation and duty which lays hold upon us, and grips us, and makes us, not exactly indifferent to, but very partially conscious of, the sorrows or the hindrances or the pains that may come in our way. You cannot stop an express train by stretching a rope across the line, nor stay the flow of a river with a barrier of straw. And if a man has once yielded himself fully to that great conception of God's will driving him on through life, and prescribing his path for him, it is neither in sorrow nor in joy to arrest his course. They may roll all the golden apples out of the garden of the Hesperides in his path, and he will not stop to pick one of them up; or Satan may block it with his fiercest flames, and the man will go into them, saying, When I pass through the fires He will be with me.

**III. Lastly, what Paul won thereby.**

That I may finish my course ... I have finished my course; in the same lofty meaning, not merely ended, though that was true, but completed, accomplished, perfected.

Now some hyper-sensitive people have thought that it was very strange that the Apostle, who was always preaching the imperfection of all human obedience and service, should, at the end of his life, indulge in such a piece of what they fancy was self-complacent retrospect as to say I have kept the faith; I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course. But it was by no means complacent self-righteousness. Of course he did not mean that he looked back upon a career free from faults and flecks and stains. No. There is only one pair of human lips that ever could say, in the full significance of the word, It is finished! ... I have completed the work which Thou gavest Me to do. Jesus Christ's retrospect of a stainless career, without defect or discordance at any point from the divine ideal, is not repeated in any of His servants' experiences. But, on the other hand, if a man in the middle of his difficulties and his conflict pulls himself habitually together and says to himself, Nothing shall move me, so that I may complete this bit of my course, depend upon it, his effort, his believing effort, will not be in vain; and at the last he will be able to look back on a career which, though stained with many imperfections, and marred with many failures, yet on the whole has realised the divine purpose, though not with absolute completeness, at least sufficiently to enable the faithful servant to feel that all his struggle has not been in vain.

Brethren, no one else can. And oh! how different the two courses of the godly man and the worldling look, in their relative importance, when seen from this side, as we are advancing towards them, and from the other as we look back upon them! Pleasures, escape from pains, ease, comfort, popularity, quiet lives--all these things seem very attractive; and God's will often seems very hard and very repulsive, when we are advancing towards some unwelcome duty. But when we get beyond it and look back, the two careers have changed their characters; and all the joys that could be bought at the price of the smallest neglected duty or the smallest perpetrated sin, dwindle and dwindle and dwindle, and the light is out of them, and they show for what they are--nothings, gilded nothings, painted emptinesses, lies varnished over. And on the other hand, to do right, to discharge the smallest duty, to recognise God's will, and with faithful effort to seek to do it in dependence upon Him, that towers and towers and towers, and there seems to be, as there really is, nothing else worth living for.

So let us live with the continual remembrance in our minds that all which we do has to be passed in review by us once more, from another standpoint, and with another illumination falling upon it. And be sure of this, that the one thing worth looking back upon, and possible to be looked back upon with peace and quietness, is the humble, faithful, continual discharge of our appointed tasks for the dear Lord's sake. If you and I, whilst work and troubles last, do truly say, None of these things move me, so that I might finish my course, we too, with all our weaknesses, may be able to say at the last, Thanks be to God! I have finished my course.