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

**ACTS-081. DRAWING NEARER TO THE STORM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And it came to pass, that, after we were gotten from them, and had launched, we came with a straight course unto Coos, and the day following unto Rhodes, and from thence unto Patara: 2. And finding a ship sailing over unto Phenicia, we went aboard, and set forth. 3. Now when we had discovered Cyprus, we left it on the left hand, and sailed into Syria, and landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden. 4. And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem. 5. And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed. 6. And when we had taken our leave one of another, we took ship; and they returned home again. 7. And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day. 8. And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him. 9. And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. 10. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. 11. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. 12. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. 14. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. 15. And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem."*

*Acts 21:1-15*

Paul's heroic persistency in disregarding the warnings of bonds and afflictions which were pealed into his ears in every city, is the main point of interest in this section. But the vivid narrative abounds with details which fill it with life and colour. We may gather it all round three points--the voyage, Tyre, and Caesarea.

**I.** The log of the voyage, as given in verses 1-3, shows the leisurely way of navigation in those days and in that sea. Obviously the coaster tied up or anchored in port at night. Running down the coast from Miletus, they stayed overnight, first at the small island of Coos, then stretched across the next day to Rhodes, and on the third struck back to the mainland at Patara, from which, according to one reading, they ran along the coast a little further east to Myra, the usual port of departure for Syria. Ramsay explains that the prevalent favourable wind for a vessel bound for Syria blows steadily in early morning, and dies down towards nightfall, so that there would have been no use in keeping at sea after sundown.

At Patara (or Myra) Paul and his party had to tranship, for their vessel was probably of small tonnage, and only fit to run along the coast. In either port they would have no difficulty in finding some merchantman to take them across to Syria. Accordingly they shifted into one bound for Tyre, and apparently ready to sail. The second part of their voyage took them right out to sea, and their course lay to the west, and then to the south of Cyprus, which Luke mentions as if to remind us of Paul's visit there when he was beginning his missionary work. How much had passed since that day at Paphos (which they might have sighted from the deck)! He had left Paphos with Barnabas and John Mark--where were they? He had sailed away from Cyprus to carry the Gospel among Gentiles; he sails past it, accompanied by a group of these whom he had won for Christ. There he had begun his career; now the omens indicated that possibly its end was near. Many a thought would be in his mind as he looked out over the blue waters and saw the glittering roofs and groves of Paphos.

Tyre was the first port of call, and there the cargo was to be landed. The travellers had to wait till that was done, and probably another one shipped. The seven days stay is best understood as due to that cause; for we find that Paul re-embarked in the same ship, and went in her as far as Ptolemais, at all events, perhaps to Caesarea.

We note that no brethren are mentioned as having been met at any of the ports of call, and no evangelistic work as having been done in them. The party were simple passengers, who had to shape their movements to suit the convenience of the master of the vessel, and were only in port at night, and off again next morning early. No doubt the leisure at sea was as restorative to them as it often is to jaded workers now.

**II.** Tyre was a busy seaport then, and in its large population the few disciples would make but little show. They had to be sought out before they were found. One can feel how eagerly the travellers would search, and how thankfully they would find themselves again among congenial souls. Since Miletus they had had no Christian communion, and the sailors in such a ship as theirs would not be exactly kindred spirits. So that week in Tyre would be a blessed break in the voyage. We hear nothing of visiting the synagogue, nor of preaching to the non-Christian population, nor of instruction to the little Church.

The whole interest of the stay at Tyre is, for Luke, centred on the fact that here too the same message which had met Paul everywhere was repeated to him. It was through the Spirit. Then was Paul flying in the face of divine prohibitions when he held on his way in spite of all that could be said? Certainly not. We have to bring common sense to bear on the interpretation of the words in verse 4, and must suppose that what came from the Spirit was the prediction of persecutions waiting Paul, and that the exhortation to avoid these by keeping clear of Jerusalem was the voice of human affection only. Such a blending of clear insight and of mistaken deductions from it is no strange experience.

No word is said as to the effect of the Tyrian Christians' dissuasion. It had none. Luke mentions it in order to show how continuous was the repetition of the same note, and his silence as to the manner of its reception is eloquent. The parting scene at Tyre is like, and yet very unlike, that at Miletus. In both the Christians accompany Paul to the beach, in both they kneel down and pray. It would scarcely have been a Christian parting without that. In both loving farewells are said, and perhaps waved when words could no longer be heard. But at Tyre, where there were no bonds of old comradeship nor of affection to a spiritual father, there was none of the yearning, clinging love that could not bear to part, none of the hanging on Paul's neck, none of the deep sorrow of final separation. The delicate shades of difference in two scenes so similar tell of the hand of an eye-witness. The touch that all the Tyrian Christians went down to the beach, and took their wives and children with them, suggests that they can have been but a small community, and so confirms the hint given by the use of the word found in verse 4.

**III.** The vessel ran down the coast to Ptolemais where one day's stop was made, probably to land and ship cargo, if, as is possible, the further journey to Caesarea was by sea. But it may have been by land; the narrative is silent on that point. At Ptolemais, as at Tyre, there was a little company of disciples, the brevity of the stay with whom, contrasted with the long halt in Caesarea, rather favours the supposition that the ship's convenience ruled the Apostle's movements till he reached the latter place. There he found a haven of rest, and, surrounded by loving friends, no wonder that the burdened Apostle lingered there before plunging into the storm of which he had had so many warnings.

The eager haste of the earlier part of the journey, contrasted with the delay in Caesarea at the threshold of his goal, is explained by supposing that at the beginning Paul's one wish had been to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast, and that at Caesarea he found that, thanks to his earlier haste and his good passages, he had a margin to spare. He did not wish to get to the Holy City much before the Feast.

Two things only are told as occurring in Caesarea--the intercourse with Philip and the renewed warnings about going to Jerusalem. Apparently Philip had been in Caesarea ever since we last heard of him (chap. viii.). He had brought his family there, and settled down in the headquarters of Roman government. He had been used by Christ to carry the Gospel to men outside the Covenant, and for a time it seemed as if he was to be the messenger to the Gentiles; but that mission soon ended, and the honour and toil fell to another. But neither did Philip envy Paul, nor did Paul avoid Philip. The Master has the right to settle what each slave has to do, and whether He sets him to high or low office, it matters not.

Philip might have been contemptuous and jealous of the younger man, who had been nobody when he was chosen as one of the Seven, but had so far outrun him now. But no paltry personal feeling marred the Christian intercourse of the two, and we can imagine how much each had to tell the other, with perhaps Cornelius for a third in company, during the considerably extended stay in Caesarea. No doubt Luke too made good use of the opportunity of increasing his knowledge of the first days, and probably derived much of the material for the first chapters of Acts from Philip, either then or at his subsequent longer residence in the same city.

We have heard of the prophet Agabus before (chap. xi. 28). Why he is introduced here, as if a stranger, we cannot tell, and it is useless to guess, and absurd to sniff suspicion of genuineness in the peculiarity. His prophecy is more definite than any that preceded it. That is God's way. He makes things clearer as we go on, and warnings more emphatic as danger approaches. The source of the afflictions was now for the first time declared, and the shape which they would take. Jews would deliver Paul to Gentiles, as they had delivered Paul's Master.

But there the curtain falls. What would the Gentiles do with him? That remained unrevealed. Half the tragedy was shown, and then darkness covered the rest. That was more trying to nerves and courage than full disclosure to the very end would have been. Imagination had just enough to work on, and was stimulated to shape out all sorts of horrors. Similarly incomplete and testing to faith are the glimpses of the future which we get in our own lives. We see but a little way ahead, and then the road takes a sharp turn, and we fancy dreadful shapes hiding round the corner.

Paul's courage was unmoved both by Agabus's incomplete prophecy and by the tearful implorings of his companions and of the Caesarean Christians. His pathetic words to them are misunderstood if we take break my heart in the modern sense of that phrase, for it really means to melt away my resolution, and shows that Paul felt that the passionate grief of his brethren was beginning to do what no fear for himself could do--shake even his steadfast purpose. No more lovely blending of melting tenderness and iron determination has ever been put into words than that cry of his, followed by the great utterance which proclaimed his readiness to bear all things, even death itself, for the name of the Lord Jesus. What kindled and fed that noble flame of self-devotion? The love of Jesus Christ, built on the sense that He had redeemed the soul of His servant, and had thereby bought him for His own.

If we feel that we have been bought with a price, we too, in our small spheres, shall be filled with that ennobling passion of devoted love which will not count life dear if He calls us to give it up. Let us learn from Paul how to blend the utmost gentleness and tender responsiveness to all love with fixed determination to glorify the Name. A strong will and a loving heart make a marvellously beautiful combination, and should both abide in every Christian.