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

**ACTS-101. THE LAST GLIMPSE OF PAUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17.* *And it came to pass, that, after three days, Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans; 18. Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. 19. But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. 20. For this cause therefore have I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain. 21. And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of thee. 22. But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. 23. And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. 24. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. 25. And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esias the prophet unto our fathers, 26. Saying, Go unto this people, and say. Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: 27. For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. 28. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. 29. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves. 30. And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, 31. Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."*

*Acts 28:17-31*

We have here our last certain glimpse of Paul. His ambition had long been to preach in Rome, but he little knew how his desire was to be fulfilled. We too are often surprised at the shape which God's answers to our wishes take. Well for us if we take the unexpected or painful events which accomplish some long-cherished purpose as cheerfully and boldly as did Paul. We see him in this last glimpse as the centre of three concentric widening circles.

**I.** We have Paul and the leaders of the Roman synagogue. He was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet. After such a voyage a pause would have been natural for a less eager worker; but three days were all that he allowed himself, and these would, no doubt, be largely occupied by intercourse with the Roman Christians, and with the multitude of little things to be looked after on entering on his new lodging. Paul had gifts that we have not, he exemplified many heroic virtues which we are not called on to repeat; but he had eminently the prosaic virtue of diligence and persistence in work, and the humblest life affords a sphere in which that indispensable though homely excellence of his can be imitated. What a long holiday some of us would think we had earned, if we had come through what Paul had encountered since he left Caesarea!

The summoning of the chief of the Jews to him was a prudent preparation for his trial rather than an evangelistic effort. It was important to ascertain their feelings, and if possible to secure their neutrality in regard to the approaching investigation. Hence the Apostle seeks to put his case to them so as to show his true adherence to the central principles of Judaism, insisting that he is guiltless of revolt against either the nation or the law and traditional observances; that he had been found innocent by the Palestinian representatives of Roman authority; that his appeal to Caesar, which would naturally seem hostile to the rulers in Jerusalem, was not meant as an accusation of the nation to which he felt himself to belong, and so was no sign of deficient patriotism, but had been forced on him as his only means of saving his life.

It was a difficult course which he had to steer, and he picked his way between the shoals with marvellous address. But his explanation of his position is not only a skilful piece of apologia, but it embodies one of his strongest convictions, which it is worth our while to grasp firmly; namely, that Christianity is the true fulfilment and perfecting of the old revelation. His declaration that, so far from his being a deserter from Israel, he was a prisoner just because he was true to the Messianic hope which was Israel's highest glory, was not a clever piece of special pleading meant for the convincing of the Roman Jews, but was a principle which runs through all his teaching. Christians were the true Jews. He was not a recreant in confessing, but they were deserters in denying, the fulfilment in Jesus of the hope which had shone before the generation of the fathers. The chain which bound him to the legionary who kept him, and which he held forth as he spoke, was the witness that he was still an Hebrew of the Hebrews.

The heads of the Roman synagogue went on the tack of non-committal, as was quite natural. They were much too astute to accept at once an *ex parte* statement, and so took refuge in professing ignorance. Probably they knew a good deal more than they owned. Their statement has been called unhistorical, and, oddly enough, has been used to discredit Luke's narrative. It is a remarkable canon of criticism that a reporter is responsible for the truthfulness of assertions which he reports, and that, if he has occasion to report truthfully an untruth, he is convicted of the untruth which he truthfully reports. Luke is responsible for telling what these people found it convenient to say; they are responsible for its veracity. But they did not say quite as much as is sometimes supposed. As the Revised Version shows, they simply said that they had not had any official deputation or report about Paul, which is perfectly probable, as it was extremely unlikely that any ship leaving after Paul's could have reached Italy. They may have known a great deal about him, but they had no information to act upon about his trial. Their reply is plainly shaped so as to avoid expressing any definite opinion or pledging themselves to any course of action till they do hear from home.

They are politely cautious, but they cannot help letting out some of their bile in their reference to this sect. Paul had said nothing about it, and their allusion betrays a fuller knowledge of him and it than it suited their plea for delay to own. Their wish to hear what he thought sounded very innocent and impartial, but was scarcely the voice of candid seekers after truth. They must have known of the existence of the Roman Church, which included many Jews, and they could scarcely be ignorant of the beliefs on which it was founded; but they probably thought that they would hear enough from Paul in the proposed conference to enable them to carry the synagogue with them in doing all they could to procure his condemnation. He had hoped to secure at least their neutrality; they seem to have been preparing to join his enemies. The request for full exposition of a prisoner's belief has often been but a trap to ensure his martyrdom. But we have to be ready to give to every man a reason for the hope that is in us, even when the motive for asking it may be anything but the sincere desire to learn.

**II.** Therefore Paul was willing to lay his heart's belief open, whatever doing so might bring. So the second circle forms round him, and we have him preaching the Gospel to many of the Jews. He could not go to the synagogue, so much of the synagogue came to him. The usual method was pursued by Paul in arguing from the old revelation, but we may note the twofold manner of his preaching, testifying and persuading, the former addressed more to the understanding, and the latter to the affections and will, and may learn how Christian teachers should seek to blend both--to work their arguments, not in frost, but in fire, and not to bully or scold or frighten men into the Kingdom, but to draw them with cords of love. Persuasion without a basis of solid reasoning is puerile and impotent; reasoning without the warmth of persuasion is icy cold, and therefore nothing grows from it.

Note too the protracted labour from morning till evening. One can almost see the eager disputants spending the livelong day over the rolls of the prophets, relays of Rabbis, perhaps, relieving one another in the assault on the one opponent's position, and he holding his ground through all the hours--a pattern for us teachers of all degrees.

The usual effects followed. The multitude was sifted by the Gospel, as its hearers always are, some accepting and some rejecting. These double effects ever follow it, and to one or other of these two classes we each belong. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay; the same light is joy to sound eyes and agony to diseased ones; the same word is a savour of life unto life and a savour of death unto death; the same Christ is set for the fall and for the rising of men, and is to some the sure foundation on which they build secure, and to some the stone on which, stumbling, they are broken, and which, falling on them, grinds them to powder.

Paul's solemn farewell takes up Isaiah's words, already used by Jesus. It is his last recorded utterance to his brethren after the flesh, weighty, and full of repressed yearning and sorrow. It is heavy with prophecy, and marks an epoch in the sad, strange history of that strange nation. Israel passes out of sight with that dread sentence fastened to its breast, like criminals of old, on whose front was fixed the record of their crimes and their condemnation. So this tragic self-exclusion from hope and life is the end of all that wondrous history of ages of divine revelation and patience, and of man's rebellion. The Gospel passes to the Gentiles, and the Jew shuts himself out. So it has been for nineteen centuries. Was not that scene in Paul's lodging in Rome the end of an epoch and the prediction of a sad future?

**III.** Not less significant and epoch-making is the glimpse of Paul which closes the Acts. We have the third concentric circle--Paul and the multitudes who came to his house and heard the Gospel. We note two points here. First, that his unhindered preaching in the very heart of the world's capital for two whole years is, in one aspect, the completion of the book. As Bengel tersely says, The victory of the word of God, Paul at Rome. The apex of the Gospel, the end of Acts.

But, second, as clearly, the ending is abrupt, and is not a satisfying close. The lengthened account of the whole process of Paul's imprisonments and hearings before the various Roman authorities is most unintelligible if Luke intended to break off at the very crucial point, and say nothing about the event to which he had been leading up for so many chapters. There is much probability in Ramsay's suggestion that Luke intended to write a third book, containing the account of the trial and subsequent events, but was prevented by causes unknown, perhaps by martyrdom. Be that as it may, these two verses, with some information pieced out of the Epistles written during the imprisonment, are all that we know of Paul's life in Rome. From Philippians we learn that the Gospel spread by reason of the earlier stages of his trial. From the other Epistles we can collect some particulars of his companions, and of the oversight which he kept up of the Churches.

The picture here drawn lays hold, not on anything connected with his trial, but on his evangelistic activity, and shows us how, notwithstanding all hindrances, anxieties about his fate, weariness, and past toils, the flame of evangelistic fervour burned undimmed in Paul the aged, as the flame of mistaken zeal had burned in the young man named Saul, and how the work which had filled so many years of wandering and homelessness was carried on with all the old joyfulness, confidence, and success, from the prisoner's lodging. In such unexpected fashion did God fulfil the Apostle's desire to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also. To preach the word with all boldness is the duty of us Christians who have entered into the heritage of fuller freedom than Paul's, and of whom it is truer than of him that we can do it, no man forbidding us.