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

**JOSHUA-002. THE CHARGE TO THE SOLDIER OF THE LORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"7. Only be then strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded thee... that thou mayest prosper wheresoever thou goest. 8. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shall meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success."*

*Joshua 1:7-8*

This is the central portion of the charge given to the successor of Moses. Joshua was a very small man in comparison with his predecessor. He was no prophet nor constructive genius; he was not capable of the heights of communion and revelation which the lofty spirit of Moses was able to mount. He was only a plain, fiery soldier, with energy, swift decision, promptitude, self-command, and all the military virtues in the highest degree. The one thing that he needed was to be strong and courageous; and over and over again in this chapter you will find that injunction pealed into his ears. He is the type of the militant servant of the Lord, and the charge to him embodies the duties of all such.

**I. We have here the duty of courageous strength.**

Christianity has altered the perspective of human virtues, has thrown the gentler ones into prominence altogether unknown before, and has dimmed the brilliancy of the old heroic type of character; but it has not struck those virtues out of its list. Whilst the perspective is altered, there is as much need in the lowliest Christian life for the loftiest heroism as ever there was. For in no mere metaphor, but in grim earnest, all Christian progress is conflict, and we have to fight, not only with the evils that are within, but, if we would be true to the obligations of our profession and loyal to the commands of our Master, we have to take our part in the great campaign which He has inaugurated and is ever carrying on against every abuse and oppression, iniquity and sin, that grinds down the world and makes our brethren miserable and servile. So, then, in these words we have directions in regard to a side of the Christian character, indispensable to-day as ever, and the lack of which cannot be made up for by any amount of sweet and contemplative graces.

Jesus Christ is the type of both. The Conqueror of Canaan and the Redeemer of the world bear the same name. The Jesus whom we trust was a Joshua. And let us learn the lesson that neither the conqueror of the typical and material land of promise nor the Redeemer who has won the everlasting heaven for our portion could do their work without the heroic side of human excellence being manifestly developed. Do you remember He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem? Do you remember that the Apostle whom a hasty misconception has thought of as the gentlest of the Twelve, because he had most to say about love, is the Apostle that more emphatically than any other rings into our ears over and over again the thought of the Christ, militant and victorious, the Hero as well as the patient Sufferer, the Captain of our salvation? And so let us recognise how both the gentler and the stronger graces, the pacific and the warlike side of human excellence, have their highest development in Jesus Christ, and learn that the firmest strength must be accompanied with the tenderest love and swathed in meekest gentleness. As another Apostle has it in his pregnant, brief injunctions, ringing and laconic like a general's word of command, Quit you like men I be strong! let all your deeds be done in love! Braid the two things together, for the mightiest strength is the love that conquers hate, and the only love that is worthy of a man is the love that is strong to contend and to overcome.

Be strong. Then strength is a duty; then weakness is a sin. Then the amount of strength that we possess and wield is regulated by ourselves. We have our hands on the sluice. We may open it to let the whole full tide run in, or we may close it till a mere dribble reaches us. For the strength which is strength, and not merely weakness in a fever, is a strength derived, and ours because derived. The Apostle gives the complete version of the exhortation when he says: Finally, my brethren, that Omega of command which is the Alpha of performance, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Let Christ's strength in. Open the heart wide that it may come. Keep yourself in continual touch with God, the fountain of all power. Trust is strength, because trust touches the Rock of Ages.

For this reason the commandment to be strong and of good courage is in the text based upon this: As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Our strength depends on ourselves, because our strength is the fruit of our faith. And if we live with Him, grasping His hand and, in the realising consciousness of our own weakness, looking beyond ourselves, then power will come to us above our desire and equal to our need. The old victories of faith will be reproduced in us when we say with the ancient king, Lord! We know not what to do, but our eyes are up unto Thee. Then He will come to us, to make us strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Wait on the Lord and He will strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord.

But courage is duty, too, as well as strength. Power and the consciousness of power do not always go together. In regard to the strength of nature, courage and might are quite separable. There may be a strong coward and a weak hero. But in the spiritual region, strength and courage do go together. The consciousness of the divine power with us, and that alone, will make us bold with a boldness that has no taint of levity and presumption mingled with it, and never will overestimate its own strength. The charge to Joshua, then, not only insists upon the duty of strength, but on the duty of conscious strength, and on the duty of measuring the strength that is at my back with the weakness that is against me, and of being bold because I know that more and greater is He that is with me than are they that be with them.

**II. So much, then, for the first of the exhortations here. Now look next at the duty of implicit obedience to the word of command.**

That is another soldierly virtue, the exercise of which sheds a nobility over the repulsive horrors of the battlefield. Joshua had to be fitted to command by learning to obey, and, like that other soldier whose rough trade had led him to some inkling of Christ's authority by its familiarising him with the idea of the strange power of the word of command, had to realise that he himself was under authority before he could issue his orders.

Courage and strength come first, and on them follows the command to do all according to the law, to keep it without deflection to right or left, and to meditate on it day and night. These two virtues make the perfect soldier-courage and obedience. Daring and discipline must go together, and to know how to follow orders is as essential as to know how to despise dangers.

But the connection between these two, as set forth in this charge, is not merely that they must co-exist, but that courage and strength are needed for, and are to find their noblest field of exercise in, absolute acceptance of, and unhesitating, swift, complete, unmurmuring obedience to, everything that is discerned to be God's will and our duty.

For the Christian soldier, then, God's law is his marching orders. The written word, and especially the Incarnate Word, are our law of conduct. The whole science of our warfare and plan of campaign are there. We have not to take our orders from men's lips, but we must often disregard them, that we may listen to the Captain of our salvation. The soldier stands where his officer has posted him, and does what he was bid, no matter what may happen. Only one voice can relieve him. Though a thousand should bid him flee, and his heart should echo their advices, he is recreant if he deserts his post at the command of any but him who set him there. Obedience to others is mutiny. Nor does the Christian need another law to supplement that which Christ has given him in His pattern and teaching. Men have appended huge comments to it, and have softened some of its plain precepts which bear hard on popular sins. But the Lawgiver's law is one thing, and the lawyers explanations which explain it away or darken what was clear enough, however unwelcome, are quite another. Christ has given us Himself, and therein has given a sufficient directory for conduct and conflict which fits close to all our needs, and will prove definite and practical enough if we honestly try to apply it.

The application of Christ's law to daily life takes some courage, and is the proper field for the exercise of Christian strength. Be very courageous that thou mayest observe. If you are not a bold Christian you will very soon get frightened out of obedience to your Master's commandments. Courage, springing from the realisation of God's helping strength, is indispensable to make any man, in any age, live out thoroughly and consistently the principles of the law of Jesus Christ. No man in this generation will work out a punctual obedience to what he knows to be the will of God, without finding out that all the Canaanites are not dead yet; but that there are enough of them left to make a very thorny life for the persistent follower of Jesus Christ.

And not only is there courage needed for the application of the principles of conduct which God has given us, but you will never have them handy for swift application unless, in many a quiet hour of silent, solitary, patient meditation you have become familiar with them. The recruit that has to learn on the battle-field how to use his rifle has a good chance of being dead before he has mastered the mysteries of firing. And Christian people that have their Christian principles to dig out of the Bible when the necessity comes, will likely find that the necessity is past before they have completed the excavation. The actual battle-field is no place to learn drill. If a soldier does not know how his sword hangs, and cannot get at it in a moment, he will probably draw it too late.

I am afraid that the practice of such meditation as is meant here has come to be, like the art of making ecclesiastical stained glass, almost extinct in modern times. You have all so many newspapers and magazines to read that the Bible has a chance of being shoved out of sight, except on Sundays and in chapels. The meditating that is enjoined in my text is no mere intellectual study of Scripture, either from an antiquarian or a literary or a theological point of view, but it is the mastering of the principles of conduct as laid down there, and the appropriating of all the power for guidance and for sustaining which that word of the Lord gives. Meditation, the familiarising ourselves with the ethics of Scripture, and with the hopes and powers that are treasured in Jesus Christ, so that our minds are made up upon a great many thorny questions as to what we ought to do, and that when crises or dangers come, as they have a knack of coming, very suddenly, and are sprung upon us unexpectedly, we shall be able, without much difficulty, or much time spent in perplexed searching, to fall back upon the principles that decide our conduct--that is essential to all successful and victorious Christian life.

And it is the secret of all blessed Christian life. For there is a lovely echo of these vigorous words of command to Joshua in a very much more peaceful form in the 1st Psalm: Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, ... but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night--the very words that are employed in the text to describe the duty of the soldier--therefore all that he doeth shall prosper.

**III. That leads to the last thought here--the sure victory of such bold obedience.**

Thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest; Thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success, or, as the last word might be rendered, then shalt thou act wisely You may not get victory from an earthly point of view, for many a man that lives strong and courageous and joyfully obeying God's law, as far as he knows it and because he loves the Lawgiver, goes through life, and finds that, as far as the world's estimate is concerned, there is nothing but failure as his portion. Ah I but the world's way is not the true way of estimating victory. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world, said Jesus Christ when within arm's-length of the Cross. And His way is the way in which we must conquer the world, if we conquer it at all. The success which my text means is the carrying out of conscientious convictions of God's will into practice. That is the only success that is worth talking about or looking for. The man that succeeds in obeying and translating God's will into conduct is the victor, whatever be the outward fruits of his life. He may go out of the field beaten, according to the estimate of men that can see no higher than their own height, and little further than their own finger tips can reach; he may himself feel that the world has gone past him, and that he has not made much of it; he may have to lie down at last unknown, poor, with all his bright hopes that danced before him in childhood gone, and sore beaten by the enemies; but if he is able to say in the strength that Christ gives, I have finished my course; I have kept the faith, his way has prospered, and he has had good success. We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.