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

**MARK-042**. **THE OMNIPOTENCE OF FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus said unto him, If them canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth."*

*Mark 9:23*

The necessity and power of faith is the prominent lesson of this narrative of the healing of a demoniac boy, especially as it is told by the Evangelist Mark, The lesson is enforced by the actions of all the persons in the group, except the central figure, Christ. The disciples could not cast out the demon, and incur Christ's plaintive rebuke, which is quite as much sorrow as blame: O faithless generation I how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?And then, in the second part of the story, the poor father, heart-sick with hope deferred, comes into the foreground. The whole interest is shifted to him, and more prominence is given to the process by which his doubting spirit is led to trust, than to that by which his son is healed.

There is something very beautiful and tender in Christ's way of dealing with him, so as to draw him to faith. He begins with the question, How long is it ago since this came unto him?and so induces him to tell all the story of the long sorrow, that his burdened heart might get some ease in speaking, and also that the feeling of the extremity of the necessity, deepened by the very dwelling on all his boy's cruel sufferings, might help him to the exercise of faith. Truly He knew what was in man, and with tenderness born of perfect knowledge and perfect love, He dealt with sore and sorrowful hearts. This loving artifice of consolation, which drew all the story from willing lips, is one more little token of His gentle mode of healing. And it is profoundly wise, as well as most tender. Get a man thoroughly to know his need, and vividly to feel his helpless misery, and you have carried him a long way towards laying hold of the refuge from it.

How wise and how tender the question is, is proved by the long circumstantial answer, in which the pent-up trouble of a father's heart pours itself out at the tiny opening which Christ has made for it. He does not content himself with the simple answer, Of a child, but with the garrulousness of sorrow that has found a listener that sympathises, goes on to tell all the misery, partly that he may move his hearer's pity, but more in sheer absorption with the bitterness that had poisoned the happiness of his home all these years. And then his graphic picture of his child's state leads him to the plaintive cry, in which his love makes common cause with his son, and unites both in one wretchedness. If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

Our Lord answers that appeal in the words of our text. There are some difficulties in the rendering and exact force of these words with which I do not mean to trouble you. We may accept the rendering as in our Bible, with a slight variation in the punctuation. If we take the first clause as an incomplete sentence, and put a break between it and the last words, the meaning will stand out more clearly: If thou canst believe--all things are possible to him that believeth. We might paraphrase it somewhat thus: Did you say If thou canst do anything? That is the wrong if. There is no doubt about that. The only ifin the question is another one, not about me, but about you. If thou canst believe--and then the incomplete sentence might be supposed to be ended with some such phrase as That is the only question. If thou canst believe--all depends on that. If thou canst believe, thy son will be healed, or the like. Then, in order to explain and establish what He had meant in the half-finished saying, He adds the grand, broad statement, on which the demand for the man's faith as the only condition of his wish being answered reposes: All things are possible to him that believeth.

That wide statement is meant, I suppose, for the disciples as well as for the father. All things are possibleboth in reference to benefits to be received, and in reference to power to be exercised. If thou canst believe, poor suppliant father, thou shalt have thy desire. If thou canst believe, poor devil-ridden son, thou shalt be set free. If ye can believe, poor baffled disciples, you will be masters of the powers of evil.

Do you remember another ifwith which Christ was once besought? There came a leper to Him, beseeching Him, and kneeling down to Him, and saying unto Him, If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean. In some respects that man had advanced beyond the father in our story, for he had no doubt at all about Christ's power, and he spoke to Him as Lord. But he was somehow not quite sure about Christ's heart of pity. On the other hand, the man in our narrative has no doubt about Christ's compassion. He may have seen something of His previous miracles, or there may still have been lying on our Lord's countenance some of the lingering glory of the Transfiguration--as indeed the narrative seems to hint, in its emphatic statement of the astonishment and reverential salutations of the crowd when He approached--or the tenderness of our Lord's listening sympathy may have made him feel sure of His willingness to help. At any rate, the leper's ifhas answered itself for him. His own lingering doubt, Christ waives aside as settled. His ifis answered for ever. So these two ifsin reference to Christ are beyond all controversy; His power is certain, and His love. The third ifremains, the one that refers to us--If thou canst believe; all hinges on that, for all things are possible to him that believeth.

Here, then, we have our Lord telling us that faith is omnipotent. That is a bold word; He puts no limitations; all things are possible. I think that to get the true force of these words we should put alongside of them the other saying of our Lord's, With God all things are possible. That is the foundation of the grand prerogative in our text. The power of faith is the consequence of the power of God. All things are possible to Him; therefore, all things are possible to me, believing in Him. If we translate that into more abstract words, it just comes to the principle that the power of faith consists in its taking hold of the power of God. It is omnipotent because it knits us to Omnipotence. Faith is nothing in itself, but it is that which attaches us to God, and then His power flows into us. Screw a pipe on to a water main and turn a handle, and out flows the water through the pipe and fills the empty vessel. Faith is as impotent in itself as the hollow water pipe is, only it is the way by which the connection is established between the fulness of God and the emptiness of man. By it divinity flows into humanity, and we have a share even in the divine Omnipotence. My strength is made perfect in weakness. In itself nothing, it yet grasps God, and therefore by it we are strong, because by it we lay hold of His strength. Great and wonderful is the grace thus given to us, poor, struggling, sinful men, that, looking up to the solemn throne, where He sits in His power, we have a right to be sure that a true participation in His greatness is granted to us, if once our hearts are fastened to Him.

And there is nothing arbitrary nor mysterious in this flowing of divine power into our hearts on condition of our faith. It is the condition of possessing Christ, and in Christ, salvation, righteousness, and strength, not by any artificial appointment, but in the very nature of things. There is no other way possible by which God could give men what they receive through their faith, except only their faith.

In all trust in God there are two elements: a sense of need and of evil and weakness, and a confidence more or less unshaken and strong in Him, His love and power and all-sufficiency; and unless both of these two be in the heart, it is, in the nature of things, impossible, and will be impossible to all eternity, that purity and strength and peace and joy, and all the blessings which Christ delights to give to faith, should ever be ours.

Unbelief, distrust of Him, which separates us from Him and closes the heart fast against His grace, must cut us off from that which it does not feel that it needs, nor cares to receive; and must interpose a non-conducting medium between us and the electric influences of His might. When Christ was on earth, man's want of faith dammed back His miracle-working power, and paralysed His healing energy. How strange that paradox sounds at first hearing, which brings together Omnipotence and impotence, and makes men able to counter-work the loving power of Christ. He could there do no mighty work. The Evangelist intends a paradox, for he uses two kindred words to express the inability and the mighty work; and we might paraphrase the saying so as to bring out the seeming contradiction: He there had no power to do any work of power. The same awful, and in some sense mysterious, power of limiting and restraining the influx of His love belongs to unbelief still, whether it take the shape of active rejection, or only of careless, passive non-reception. For faith makes us partakers of divine power by the very necessity of the case, and that power can attach itself to nothing else. So, if thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

Still further, we may observe that there is involved here the principle that our faith determines the amount of our power. That is true in reference to our own individual religious life, and it is true in reference to special capacities for Christ's service. Let me say a word or two about each of these. They run into each other, of course, for the truest power of service is found in the depth and purity of our own personal religion, and on the other hand our individual Christian character will never be deep or pure unless we are working for the Master. Still, for our present purpose, these two inseparable aspects of the one Christian life may be separated in thought.

As to the former, then, the measure of my trust in Christ is the measure of all the rest of my Christian character. I shall have just as much purity, just as much peace, just as much wisdom or gentleness or love or courage or hope, as my faith is capable of taking up, and, so to speak, holding in solution. The point of saturationin a man's soul, the quantity of God's grace which he is capable of absorbing, is accurately measured by his faith. How much do I trust God? That will settle how much I can take in of God.

So much as we believe, so much can we contain. So much as we can contain, so much shall we receive. And in the very act of receiving the portion of our Father's goods that fallethto us, we shall feel that there is a boundless additional portion ready to come as soon as we are ready for it, and thereby we shall be driven to larger desires and a wider opening of the lap of faith, which will ever be answered by good measure, pressed together and running over, measured into our bosoms. But there will be no waste by the bestowment of what we cannot take. According to your faith, be it unto you. That is the accurate thermometer which measures the temperature of our spiritual state. It is like the steam-gauge outside the boiler, which tells to a fraction the pressure of steam within, and so the power which can at the moment be exerted.

May I make a very simple, close personal application of this thought? We have as much religious life as we desire; that is, we have as much as our faith can take. There is the reason why such hosts of so-called Christians have such poor, feeble Christianity. We dare not say of any, They have a name to live, and are dead. There is only one Eye who can tell when the heart has ceased to beat. But we may say that there are a mournful number of people who call themselves Christians, who look so like dead that no eye but Christ's can tell the difference. They are in a syncope that will be death soon, unless some mighty power rouse them.

And then, how many more of us there are, not so bad as that, but still feeble and languid, whose Christian history is a history of weakness, while God's power is open before us, of starving in the midst of abundance, broken only by moments of firmer faith, and so of larger, happier possession, that make the poverty-stricken ordinary days appear ten times more poverty-stricken. The channel lies dry, a waste chaos of white stones and driftwood for long months, and only for an hour or two after the clouds have burst on the mountains does the stream fill it from bank to bank. Do not many of us remember moments of a far deeper and more earnest trust in Christ than marks our ordinary days? If such moments were continuous, should not we be the happy possessors of beauties of character and spiritual power, such as would put our present selves utterly to shame? And why are they not continuous? Why are our possessions in God so small, our power so weak? Dear friends! ye are not straitened in yourselves. The only reason for defective spiritual progress and character is defective faith.

Then look at this same principle as it affects our faculties for Christian service. There, too, it is true that all things are possible to him that believeth. The saying had an application to the disciples who stood by, half-ashamed and half-surprised at their failure to cast out the demon, as well as to the father in his agony of desire and doubt. For them it meant that the measure of Christian service was mainly determined by the measure of their faith. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that in Christ's service a man can do pretty nearly what he believes he can do, if his confidence is built, not on himself, but on Christ.

If those nine Apostles, waiting there for their Master, had thought they could cast out the devil from the boy, do you not think that they could have done it? I do not mean to say that rash presumption, undertaking in levity and self-confidence unsuitable kinds of work, will be honoured with success. But I do mean to say that, in the line of our manifest duty, the extent to which we can do Christ's work is very much the extent to which we believe, in dependence on Him, that we can do it. If we once make up our minds that we shall do a certain thing by Christ's help and for His sake, in ninety cases out of a hundred the expectation will fulfil itself, and we shall do it. Why could not we cast him out?They need not have asked the question. Why could not you cast him out? Why, because you did not think you could, and with your timid attempt, making an experiment which you were not sure would succeed, provoked the failure which you feared. The Church has never believed enough in its Christ-given power to cast out demons. We have never been confident enough that the victory was in our hands if we knew how to use our powers.

The same thing is true of each one of us. Audacity and presumption are humility and moderation, if only we feel that our sufficiency is of God. I can do all thingsis the language of simple soberness, if we go on to say through Christ which strengthened me.

There is one more point, drawn from these words, viz., our faith can only take hold on the divine promises. Such language as this of my text and other kindred sayings of our Lord's has often been extended beyond its real force, and pressed into the service of a mistaken enthusiasm, for want of observing that very plain principle. The principle of our text has reference to outward things as well as to the spiritual life. But there are great exaggerations and misconceptions as to the province of faith in reference to these temporal things, and consequently there are misconceptions and exaggerations on the part of many very good people as to the province of prayer in regard to them.

It seems to me that we shall be saved from these, if we distinctly recognise a very obvious principle, namely, that faithcan never go further than God's clear promises, and that whatever goes beyond God's word is not faith, but something else assuming its appearance.

For instance, suppose a father nowadays were to say: My child is sore vexed with sickness. I long for his recovery. I believe that Christ can heal him. I believe that He will. I pray in faith, and I know that I shall be answered. Such a prayer goes beyond the record. Has Christ told you that it is His will that your child shall be healed? If not, how can you pray in faith that it is? You may pray in confidence that he will be healed, but such confident persuasion is not faith. Faith lays hold of Christ's distinct declaration of His will, but such confidence is only grasping a shadow, your own wishes. The father in this story was entitled to trust, because Christ told him that his trust was the condition of his son's being healed. So in response to the great word of our text, the man's faith leaped up and grasped our Lord's promise, with Lord, I believe. But before Christ spoke, his desires, his wistful longing, his imploring cry for help, had no warrant to pass into faith, and did not so pass.

Christ's word must go before our faith, and must supply the object for our faith, and where Christ has not spoken, there is no room for the exercise of any faith, except the faith, It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth to Him good. That is the true prayer of faith in regard to all matters of outward providence where we have no distinct word of God's which gives unmistakable indication of His will. The ifof the leper, which has no place in the spiritual region, where we know that this is the will of God, even our sanctification, has full force in the temporal region, where we do not know before the event what the will of the Lord is, If Thou wilt, Thou canst, is there our best prayer.

Wherever a distinct and unmistakable promise of God's goes, it is safe for faith to follow; but to outrun His word is not faith, but self-will, and meets the deserved rebuke, Should it be according to thy mind?There are unmistakable promises about outward things on which we may safely build. Let us confine our expectations within the limits of these, and turn them into the prayer of faith, so shooting back whence they came His winged words, This is the confidence that we have, that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us. Thus coming to Him, submitting all our wishes in regard to this world to His most loving will, and widening our confidence to the breadth of His great and loving purpose in regard to our own inward life, as well as in regard to our practical service, His answer will ever be, Great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt.