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

**PHILIPPIANS-003**. **A PRISONER'S TRIUMPH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12. Now I would have you know, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel; 13. So that my bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the whole Praetorian guard, and to all the rest; 14. And that most of the brethren in the Lord, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God without fear. 15. Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: 16. The one do it of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel: 17. But the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds. 18. What then? only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. 19. For I know that this shall turn to my salvation, through your supplication and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20. According to my earnest expectation and hope, that in nothing shall I be put to shame, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death."*

*Philippians 1:12-20 (R.V.)*

Paul's writings are full of autobiography, that is partly owing to temperament, partly to the profound interpenetration of his whole nature with his religion. His theology was but the generalisation of his experience. He has felt and verified all that he has to say. But the personal experiences of this sunny letter to his favourite church have a character all their own. In that atmosphere of untroubled love and sympathy a shyer heart than Paul's would have opened: his does so in tenderness, gladness, and trust. We have here the unveiling of his inmost self in response to what he knew would be an eager desire for news of his welfare. This whole section appears to me to be a wonderful revelation of his prison thoughts, an example of what we may call the ennobling power of a passionate enthusiasm for Christ. Remember that he is a prisoner, shut out from his life's work, waiting to be tried before Nero, whose reign had probably, by this time, passed from its delusive morning of dewy promise to its lurid noon. The present and the future were dark for him, and yet in spite of them all comes forth this burst of undaunted courage and noble gladness. We simply follow the course of the words as they lie, and we find in them,

**I. An absorbing purpose which bends all circumstances to its service and values them only as instruments.**

The things which happened unto me; that is Paul's minimising euphemism for the grim realities of imprisonment, or perhaps for some recent ominous turns in his circumstances. To him they are not worth dwelling on further, nor is their personal incidence worth taking into account; the only thing which is important is to say how these things have affected his life's work. It is enough for him, and he believes that it will be enough even for his loving friends at Philippi to know that, instead of their being as they might have feared, and as he sometimes when he was faithless expected, hindrances to his work, they have turned out rather to the furtherance of the gospel. Whether he has been comfortable or not is a matter of very small importance, the main thing is that Christ's work has been helped, and then he goes on to tell two ways in which his imprisonment had conduced to this end.

My bonds became manifest in Christ. It has been clearly shown why I was a prisoner; all the Praetorian guard had learned what Paul was there for. We know from Acts that he was suffered to abide by himself with the soldier that kept him. He has no word to say of the torture of compulsory association, night and day, with the rude legionaries, or of the horrors of such a presence in his sweetest, sacredest moments of communion with his Lord. These are all swallowed up in the thought as they were in the fact, that each new guard as he came to sit there beside Paul was a new hearer, and that by this time he must have told the story of Christ and His love to nearly the whole corps. That is a grand and wonderful picture of passionate earnestness and absorbed concentration in one pursuit. Something of the same sort is in all pursuits, the condition of success and the sure result of real interest. We have all to be specialists if we would succeed in any calling. The river that spreads wide flows slow, and if it is to have a scour in its current it must be kept between high banks. We have to bring ourselves to a point and to see that the point is red-hot if we mean to bore with it. If our limitations are simply enforced by circumstances, they may be maiming, but if they come of clear insight and free choice of worthy ends, they are noble. The artist, the scholar, the craftsman, all need to take for their motto This one thing I do. I suppose that a man would not be able to make a good button unless he confined himself to button-making. We see round us abundant examples of men who, for material aims and almost instinctively, use all circumstances for one end and appraise them according to their relations to that, and they are quoted as successful, and held up to young souls as patterns to be imitated. Yes! But what about the man who does the same in regard to Christ and His work? Is he thought of as an example to be imitated or as a warning to be avoided? Is not the very same concentration when applied to Christian work and living thought to be fanatical, which is welcomed with universal applause when it is directed to lower pursuits? The contrast of our eager absorption in worldly things and of the ease with which any fluttering butterfly can draw us away from the path which leads us to God, ought to bring a blush to all cheeks and penitence to all hearts. There was no more obligation on Paul to look at the circumstances of his life thus than there is on every Christian to do so. We do not desire that all should be apostles, but the Apostle's temper and way of looking at the things which happened unto him should be our way of looking at the things which happen unto us. We shall estimate them rightly, and as God estimates them, only when we estimate them according to their power to serve our souls and to further Christ's kingdom.

**II. The magnetism or contagion of enthusiasm.**

The second way by which Paul's circumstances furthered the gospel was that most of the brethren, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God. His constancy and courage stirred them up. Moved by good-will and love, they were heartened to preach because they saw in him one appointed by God for the defence of the gospel. A soul all on flame has power to kindle others. There is an old story of a Scottish martyr whose constancy at the stake touched so many hearts that a merry gentleman said to Cardinal Beaton, If ye burn any more you should burn them in low cellars, for the reek (smoke) of Mr. Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon.

It is not only in the case of martyrs that enthusiasm is contagious. However highly we may estimate the impersonal forces that operate for the furtherance of the gospel we cannot but see that in all ages, from the time of Paul down to to-day, the main agents for the spread of the gospel have been individual souls all aflame with the love of God in Christ Jesus and filled with the life of His Spirit. The history of the Church has largely consisted in the biographies of its saints, and every great revival of religion has been the flame kindled round a flaming heart. Paul was impelled by his own love; the brethren in Rome were in a lower state as only reflecting his, and it ought to be the prerogative of every Christian to be a centre and source of kindling influence rather than a mere recipient of it. It is a question which may well be asked by each of us about ourselves--would anybody find quickening impulses to divine life and Christian service coming from us, or do we simply serve to keep others coldness in countenance? It was said of old of Jesus Christ, He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and in fire, and that promise remains effective to-day, however little one looking on the characters of the mass of so-called Christians would believe it. They seem rather to have been plunged into ice-cold water than into fire, and their coldness is as contagious as Paul's radiant enthusiasm was. Let us try, for our parts, to radiate out the warmth of the love of God, that it may kindle in others the flame which it has lighted in ourselves, and not be like icebergs floating southwards and bringing down the temperature of even the very temperate seas in which we find ourselves.

**III. The wide tolerance of such enthusiasm.**

It is stigmatised as narrow, which to-day is the sin of sins, but it is broad with the true breadth. Such enthusiasm lifts a man high enough to see over many hedges and to be tolerant even of intolerance, and of the indifference which tolerates everything but earnestness. Paul here deals with a class amongst the Roman Christians who were preaching of envy and strife, with the malicious calculation that so they would annoy him and add affliction to his bonds. It is generally supposed that these were Judaising Christians against whom Paul fulminates in all his letters, but I confess that, notwithstanding the arguments of authoritative commentators, I cannot believe that they are the same set of men preaching the same doctrines which in other places he treats as destructive of the whole gospel. The change of tone is so great as to require the supposition of a change of subjects, and the Judaisers with whom the Apostle waged a neverending warfare, never did evangelistic work amongst the heathen as these men seem to have done, but confined themselves to trying to pervert converts already made. It was not their message but their spirit that was faulty. With whatever purpose of annoyance they were animated, they did preach Christ, and Paul superbly brushes aside all that was antagonistic to him personally, in his triumphant recognition that the one thing needful was spoken, even from unworthy motives and with a malicious purpose. The situation here revealed, strange though it appears with our ignorance of the facts, is but too like much of what meets us still. Do we not know denominational rivalries which infuse a bitter taint of envy and strife into much evangelistic earnestness, and is the spectacle of a man preaching Christ with a taint of sidelong personal motives quite unknown to this day? We may press the question still more closely home and ask ourselves if we are entirely free from the influence of such a spirit. No man who knows himself and has learned how subtly lower motives blend themselves with the highest will be in haste to answer these questions with an unconditional No, and no man who looks on the sad spectacle of competing Christian communities and knows anything of the methods of competition that are in force, will venture to deny that there are still those who preach Christ of envy and strife.

It comes, then, to be a testing question for each of us, have we learned from Paul this lesson of tolerance, which is not the result of cold indifference, but the outcome of fiery enthusiasm and of a clear recognition of the one thing needful? Granted that there is preaching from unworthy motives and modes of work which offend our tastes and prejudices, and that there are types of evangelistic earnestness which have errors mixed up with them, are we inclined to say Nevertheless Christ is proclaimed, and therein I rejoice, Yea, and will rejoice? Much chaff may be blended with the seeds sown; the chaff will lie inert and the seed will grow. Such tolerance is the very opposite of the carelessness which comes from languid indifference. The one does not mind what a man preaches because it has no belief in any of the things preached, and to it one thing is as good as another, and none are of any real consequence. The other proceeds from a passionate belief that the one thing which sinful men need to hear is the great message that Christ has lived and died for them, and therefore, it puts all else on one side and cares nothing for jangling notes that may come in, if only above them the music of His name sounds out clear and full.

**IV. The calm fronting of life and death as equally magnifying Christ.**

The Apostle is sure that all the experiences of his prison will turn to his ultimate salvation, because he is sure that his dear friends in Philippi will pray for him, and that through their prayers he will receive a supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, which shall be enough to secure his steadfastness. His expectation is not that he will escape from prison or from martyrdom, both of which stand only too clearly before him, but that whatever may be waiting for him in the future, all boldness will be granted him, so that whether he lives he will live to the Lord, or whether he dies, he will die to the Lord. He had so completely accepted it as his life's purpose to magnify Jesus, that the extremest possible changes of condition came to be insignificant to him. He had what we may have, the true anaesthetic which will give us a solemn scorn of ills and make even the last and greatest change from life to death of little account. If we magnify Christ in our lives with the same passionate earnestness and concentrated absorption as Paul had, our lives like some train on well-laid rails will enter upon the bridge across the valley with scarce a jolt. With whatever differences--and the differences are to us tremendous--the same purpose will be pursued in life and in death, and they who, living, live to the praise of Christ, dying will magnify Him as their last act in the body which they leave. What was it that made possible such a passion of enthusiasm for a man whom Paul had never seen in the flesh? What changed the gloomy fuliginous fanaticism of the Pharisee, at whose feet were laid the clothes of the men who stoned Stephen, into this radiant light, all aflame with a divine splendour? The only answer is in Paul's own words, He loved me and gave Himself for me. That answer is as true for each of us as it was for him. Does it produce in us anything like the effects which it produced in him?