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

**PHILIPPIANS-018**. **LAID HOLD OF AND LAYING HOLD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I follow after if that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended of Christ Jesus."*

*Philippians 3:12*

I was laid hold of by Jesus Christ. That is how Paul thinks of what we call his conversion. He would never have turned unless a hand had been laid upon him. A strong loving grasp had gripped him in the midst of his career of persecution, and all that he had done was to yield to the grip, and not to wriggle out of it. The strong expression suggests, as it seems to me, the suddenness of the incident. Possibly impressions may have been working underground, ever since the martyrdom of Stephen, which were undermining his convictions, and the very insanity of his zeal may have been due to an uneasy consciousness that the ground was yielding beneath his feet. That may have been so, but, whether it were so or not, the crisis came like a bolt out of the blue, and he was checked in full career, as if a voice had spoken to the sea in its wildest storm, and frozen its waves into immobility.

There is suggested in the word, too, distinctly, our Lord's personal action in the matter. No doubt, the fact of His supernatural appearance gives emphasis to the phrase here. But every Christian man and woman has been, as truly as ever Paul was, laid hold of by the personal action of Jesus Christ. He is present in His Word, and, by multitudes of inward impulses and outward providences, He is putting out a gentle and a firm hand, and laying it upon the shoulders of all of us. Have we yielded? Have we resisted, when we were laid hold of? Did we try to get away? Did we plant our feet and say, I will not be drawn, or did we simply neglect the pressure? If we have yielded, my text tells us what we have to do next. For that hand is laid upon a man for a purpose, and that purpose is not secured by the hand being laid upon him, unless he, in his turn, will put out a hand and grasp. Our activity is needed; that activity will not be put forth without very distinct effort, and that effort has to be life-long, because our grasp at the best is incomplete. So then, we have here, first of all, to consider--

**I. What Christ has laid His grip on us for.**

Now, the immediate result of that grasp, when it is yielded to, is the sense of the removal of guilt, forgiveness of sins, acceptance with God. But these, the immediate results, are by no means the whole results, although a great many of us live as if we thought that the only thing that Christianity is meant to do to us is that it bars the gates of some future hell, and brings to us the message of forgiveness. We cannot think too nobly or too loftily of that gift of forgiveness, the initial gift that is laid in every Christian man's hands, but we may think too exclusively of it, and a great many of us do think of it as if it were all that was to be given. A painter has to clear away the old paint off a door, or a wall, before he lays on the new. The initial gift that comes from being laid hold of by Jesus Christ is the burning off of the old coat of paint. But that is only the preliminary to the laying on of the new. A man away in the backwoods will spend a couple of years after he has got his bit of land in felling and burning the trees, and rooting out and destroying the weeds. But is that what he got the clearing for? That is only a preliminary to sowing the seed. My friend! If Jesus Christ has laid hold of you, and you have let Him keep hold of you, it is not only that you may be forgiven, not only that you may sun yourself in the light of God's countenance, and feel that a new blessed relation is set up between you and Him, but there are great purposes lying at the back of that, of which all that is only the preliminary and the preparation.

Conversion. Yes; but what is the good of turning a man round unless he goes in the direction in which his face is turned? And so here the Apostle having for years lived in the light of that great thought, that God was reconciled in Jesus Christ, and that he was God's friend, discerns far beyond that, in dim perspective, towering high above the land in the front, the snowy sunlit summits of a great range to which he has yet to climb, and says, I press on to lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Jesus Christ.

And what was that? On the road to Damascus Paul was only told one thing, that Christ had grasped him and drawn him to Himself in order that He might make him a chosen vessel to bear the Word far hence amongst the Gentiles. The bearing of His conversion upon Paul himself was never mentioned. The bearing of His conversion on the world was the only subject that Jesus spoke of at first. But here Paul has nothing to say about his world-wide mission. He does not think of himself as being called to be an Apostle, but as being summoned to be a Christian. And so, forgetting for the time all the glorious and yet burdensome obligations which were laid upon him, and the discharge of which was the very life of his life, he thinks only of what affects his own character, the perfecting of which he regards as being the one thing for which he was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. The purpose is twofold. No Christian man is made a Christian only in order that he may secure his own salvation; there is the world to think of. No Christian man is made a Christian only in order that he may be Christ's instrument for carrying the Word to other people; there is himself to think of. And these two phases of the purpose for which Jesus Christ lays hold upon us are very hard to unite in practice, giving to each its due place and prominence, and they are often separated, to the detriment of both the one that is attended to, and the one that is neglected. The monastic life has not produced the noblest Christians; and there are pitfalls lying in the path of every man who, like me, has for his profession to preach the Gospel, which, if they are fallen into, the inward life is utterly wrecked.

The two sides of Christ's purpose have, in our practice, to be held together, but for the present I only wish to say a word or two about that which, as I have indicated, is but one hemisphere of the completed orb, and that is our personal culture and growth in the divine life. What did Christ lay hold of me for? Paul answers the question very strikingly and beautifully in a previous verse. Here is his conception of the purpose, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. That is what you were forgiven for; that is what you have passed from death unto life for; that is what you have come into the sweet fellowship of God, and can think of Him as your Friend and Helper for.

Let us take the clauses seriatim, and say a word about each of them. That I may know Him. Ah! there is a great deal more in Jesus Christ than a man sees when he first sees Him through his tears and his fears, and apprehends Him as the Saviour of his soul, and the sacrifice on whom the burden and the guilt of his sins were laid. We must begin there, as I believe. But woe to us if we stop there. There is far more in Christ than that; although all that is in Him is included in that, yet you have to dig deep before you find all that is included in it. You have to live with Him day by day, and year by year, and to learn to know Him as we learn to know husbands and wives, by continual intercourse, by continual experience of a sweet and unfailing love, by many a sacred hour of interchange of affection and reception of gifts and counsels. It is only thus that we learn to know what Jesus Christ is. When He lays hold of us, He comes like the angel that came to Peter in the prison in the dark and awoke him out of his sleep and said Rise! and follow me. It is only when we get out into the street, and have been with Him for awhile, and the daylight begins to stream in, that we see clearly the face of our Deliverer, and know Him for all that He is. This knowledge is not the sort of knowledge that you can get by thinking, or out of a book. It is the knowledge of experience. It is the knowledge of love, it is the knowledge of union, and it is in order that we may know Christ that He lays his hand upon us.

The power of His Resurrection. Now, by that I understand a similar knowledge, by experience, of the risen life of Jesus Christ flowing into us, and filling our hearts and minds with its own power. The risen life of Jesus is the nourishment and strengthening and blessing and life of a Christian. Our daily experience ought to be that there comes, wavelet by wavelet, that silent, gentle, and yet omnipotent influx into our empty hearts, the very life of Christ Himself.

I know that this generation says that that is mysticism. I do not know whether it is mysticism or not. I am sure it is truth; and I do not understand Christianity at all, unless there is that kind of mysticism, perfectly wholesome and good, in it. You will never know Jesus Christ until you know Him as pouring into your hearts the power of an endless life, His own life. Christ for us by all means,--Christ's death the basis of our hope, but Christ in us, and Christ's life as the true gift to His Church. Have you got that? Do you know the power of His Resurrection?

The fellowship of His sufferings. Has Paul made a mistake, and deserted the chronological order? Why does he put the fellowship of the sufferings after the power of the Resurrection? For this plain reason, that if we get Christ's life into our hearts, in the measure in which we get it we shall bear a similar relation to the world which He bore to it, and in our measure will fill up that which is behind in the sufferings of Christ, and will understand how true it is that if they hate Me they will hate you also. Brethren, the test of us who have the life of Christ in our hearts is that we shall, in some measure, suffer with Him, because as He is, so are we, in this world, and because we must in that case look upon the world, its sins and its sorrows, with something of the sad gaze with which He looked across the valley to the Temple sparkling in the morning light, and wept over it. So if we know the power of His Resurrection we shall know the fellowship of His sufferings.

And then Paul goes on, in his definition of the purpose for which Christ lays hold upon men, apparently to say the same thing over again, only in the opposite order, that I may be conformable to His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Both of these clauses, I think, refer to the future, to the actual dying of the body, and the actual future resurrection of the same. And the thought is this, that if here, through our earthly lives, we have been recipients of the risen life of Jesus Christ, and so have stood to the world in our degree as He stood to it, then when the moment of death comes to us, we shall, in so far, have our departure shaped after His as that we shall be able to say, Into Thy hands I commit my spirit, and die willingly, and at last shall be partakers of that blessed Resurrection unto life eternal which closes the vista of our earthly history. Stephen's death was conformed to Christ's in outward fashion, in so far as it echoed the Master's prayer, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do, and in so far as it echoed the Master's last words, with the significant alteration that, whilst Jesus commended His spirit to the Father, the first martyr commended his to Jesus Christ.

These, then, are the purposes for which Christ laid His hand upon us, that we might know Him, the power of His Resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death yet by attaining the resurrection of the dead.

**II. Notice, again, our laying hold because we have been laid hold of.**

Christ's laying hold of me, blessed and powerful as it is, does not of itself secure that I shall reach the end which He had in view in His arresting of me. What more is wanted? My effort. I follow after if I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended. Now, notice, in the one case, the Apostle speaks of himself, not as passive, but certainly not as active. I was laid hold of. What did he do? As I have said, he simply yielded to the grasp. But I may lay hold of conveys the idea of personal effort; and so these two expressions, I was apprehended, and I apprehend, suggest this consideration, that, for the initial blessings of the Christian life, forgiveness, acceptance, the sense of God's favour, and of reconciliation with him, nothing is needed but the simple faith that yields itself altogether to the grasp of Christ's hand, but that for my possessing what Christ means that I should possess when He lays His hand on me, there is needed not only faith but effort. I have to put out my hand and tighten my fingers round the thing, if I would make it my own, and keep it.

So--faith, to begin with, and work based on faith, to go on with. It is because a man is sure that Jesus Christ has laid His hand upon him, and meant something when He did it, that he fights on with all his might to realise Christ's purpose, and to get and keep the thing which Christ meant him to have. There is stimulus in the thought, I was laid hold of by Him for a purpose. There is all the difference between striving, however eagerly, however nobly, however strenuously, however constantly, after self-improvement, by one's own effort only, and striving after it because one knows that he is therein fulfilling the purpose for which Jesus Christ drew him to Himself.

And if that be so, then the nature of the thing to be laid hold of determines what we are to do to lay hold of it. And since to know Christ, and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, is the aim and end of our conversion, the way to secure it must be keeping in continual touch with Jesus by meditating upon Him, by holding many a moment of still, sacred, sweet communion with Him, by carefully avoiding whatever might come between us and our knowledge of Him, and the influx of His life into us, and by yielding ourselves, day by day, to the continual influence of His divine grace upon us and by the discipline which shall make our inward natures more and more capable of receiving more and more of that dear Lord. These being the things to do, in regard to the inward life, there must be effort too, in regard to the outward; for we must, if we are to lay hold of that for which we are laid hold of by Jesus Christ, bring all the outward life under the dominion of this inward impulse, and when the flood pours into our hearts we must, by many a sluice and trench, guide it into every corner of the field, that all may be irrigated. The first thing they do when they are going to sow rice in an Eastern field is to flood it, and then they cast in the seed, and it germinates. Flood your lives with Christ, and then sow the seed and you will get a crop.

**III. Lastly, the text suggests the incompleteness of our grasp.**

I follow that, says Paul, if that I may apprehend. This letter was written far on in his career, in the time of his imprisonment in Rome, which all but ended his ministerial activity; and was many years after that day on the road to Damascus. And yet, matured Christian and exercised Apostle as he was, with all that past behind him, he says, I follow after, that I may apprehend. Ah, brother, our experience must be incomplete, for we have an infinite aim set before us, and there is no end to the possibilities of plunging deeper and deeper and deeper into the knowledge of Christ, and having larger and larger and larger draughts of the fulness of His life. We have only been like goldseekers, who have contented themselves as yet with washing the precious grains out of the gravel of the river. There are great reefs filled with the ore that we have not touched. Thank God for the necessary incompleteness of our apprehending. It is the very salt of life. To have realised our aims, to have fulfilled our ideals, to have sucked dry the cluster of the grapes is the death of aspiration, of hope, of blessedness; and to have the distance beckoning, and all experience an arch, wherethro gleams the untravelled world to which we move, is the secret of perpetual youth and energy.

Because incomplete, our experience should be progressive; and that is a truth that needs hammering into Christian people to-day. About how many of us can it be said that our light shineth more and more unto the noonday. Alas! about an enormous number of us it must be said, When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you. All our churches have many grown babies, and cases of arrested development--people that ought to be living on strong meat, and are unable to masticate or digest it, and by their own fault have still need of the milk of infancy. There is an old fable about a strange animal that fastened itself to the keel of sailing ships, and by some uncanny power was able to arrest them in mid-ocean, though the winds were filling all their sails. There is a remora, as they called it, of that sort adhering to a great many Christian people, and keeping them fixed on one spot, instead of following after, if that they may apprehend.

Dear friends--and especially you younger Christians--Christ has laid hold of you. Well and good! that is the beginning. He has laid hold of you for an end. That end will not be reached without your effort, and that effort must be perpetual. It is a life-long task. Ay! and even up yonder the apprehending will be incomplete. Like those mathematical lines that ever approximate to a point which they never reach, we shall through Eternity be, as it were, rising, in ascending and ever-closer drawing spirals, to that great Throne, and to Him that sits upon it. So that, striking out the humble may from our text, the rest of it describes the progressive blessedness of the endless life in the heavens, as truly as it does the progressive duty of the Christian life here, and the glorified flock that follows the Lamb in the heavenly pastures may each say: I follow after in order to apprehend that for which, long ago and down amidst the dim shadows of earth, I was apprehended of Christ Jesus.