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

**PHILIPPIANS-019**. **THE RACE AND THE GOAL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize."*

*Philippians 3:13-14*

This buoyant energy and onward looking are marvellous in Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Forgetfulness of the past and eager anticipation for the future are, we sometimes think, the child's prerogatives. They may be ignoble and puerile, or they may be worthy and great. All depends on the future to which we look. If it be the creation of our fancies, we are babies for trusting it. If it be, as Paul's was, the revelation of God's purposes, we cannot do a wiser thing than look.

The Apostle here is letting us see the secret of his own life, and telling us what made him the sort of Christian that he was. He counsels wise obliviousness, wise anticipation, strenuous concentration, and these are the things that contribute to success in any field of life. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. Men become mature Christians by no other means than those by which they become good artisans, ripe scholars, or the like. But the misery is that, though people know well enough that they cannot be good carpenters, or doctors, or fiddlers without certain habits and practices, they seem to fancy that they can be good Christians without them.

So the words of my text may suggest appropriate thoughts on this first Sunday of a new year. Let us listen, then, to Paul telling us how he came to be the sort of Christian man he was.

**I. First, then, I would say, make God's aim your aim.**

Paul distinguishes here between the mark and the prize. He aims at the one for the sake of the other. The one is the object of effort; the other is the sure result of successful effort. If I may so say, the crown hangs on the winning post; and he who touches the goal clutches the garland.

Then, mark that he regards the aim towards which he strains as being the aim which Christ had in view in his conversion. For he says in the preceding context, I labour if that I may lay hold of that for which also I have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ. In the words that follow the text he speaks of the prize as being the result and purpose of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. So then he took God's purpose in calling, and Christ's purpose in redeeming him, as being his great object in life. God's aims and Paul's were identical.

What, then, is the aim of God in all that He has done for us? The production in us of God-like and God-pleasing character. For this suns rise and set; for this seasons and times come and go; for this sorrows and joys are experienced; for this hopes and fears and loves are kindled. For this all the discipline of life is set in motion. For this we were created; for this we have been redeemed. For this Jesus Christ lived and suffered and died. For this God's Spirit is poured out upon the world. All else is scaffolding; this is the building which it contemplates, and when the building is reared the scaffolding may be cleared away. God means to make us like Himself, and so pleasing to Himself, and has no other end in all the varieties of His gifts and bestowments but only this, the production of character.

Such is the aim that we should set before us. The acceptance of that aim as ours will give nobleness and blessedness to our lives as nothing else will. How different all our estimates of the meaning and true nature of events would be, if we kept clearly before us that their intention was not merely to make us blessed and glad, or to make us sorrowful, but that, through the blessedness, through the sorrow, through the gift, through the withdrawal, through all the variety of dealings, the intention was one and the same, to mould us to the likeness of our Lord and Saviour! There would be fewer mysteries in our lives, we should seldomer have to stand in astonishment, in vain regret, in miserable and weakening looking back upon vanished gifts, and saying to ourselves, Why has this darkness stooped upon my path? if we looked beyond the darkness and the light to that for which both were sent. Some plants require frost to bring out their savour, and men need sorrow to test and to produce their highest qualities. There would be fewer knots in the thread of our lives, and fewer mysteries in our experience, if we made God's aim ours, and strove through all variations of condition to realise it.

How different all our estimate of nearer objects and aims would be, if once we clearly recognised what we are here for! The prostitution of powers to obviously unworthy aims and ends is the saddest thing in humanity. It is like elephants being set to pick up pins; it is like the lightning being harnessed to carry all the gossip and filth of one capital of the world to the prurient readers in another. Men take these great powers which God has given them, and use them to make money, to cultivate their intellects, to secure the gratification of earthly desires, to make a home for themselves here amidst the illusions of time; and all the while the great aim which ought to stand out clear and supreme is forgotten by them.

There is nothing that needs more careful examination by us than our accepted schemes of life for ourselves; the roots of our errors mostly lie in these things that we take to be axioms, and that we never examine into. Let us begin this new year by an honest dealing with ourselves, asking ourselves this question, What am I living for? And if the answer, first of all, be, as, of course, it will be, the accomplishment of the nearer and necessary aims, such as the conduct of our business, the cultivating of our understandings, the love and peace of our homes, then let us press the investigation a little further, and say, What then? Suppose I make a fortune, what then? Suppose I get the position I am striving for, what then? Suppose I cultivate my understanding and win the knowledge that I am nobly striving after, what then? Let us not cease to ask the question until we can say, Thy aim, O Lord, is my aim, and I press toward the mark, the only mark which will make life noble, elastic, stable, and blessed, that I may be found in Christ, not having mine own righteousness, but that which is of God by faith. For this we have all been made, guided, redeemed. If we carry this treasure out of life we shall carry all that is worth carrying. If we fail in this we fail altogether, whatever be our so-called success. There is one mark, one only, and every arrow that does not hit that target is wasted and spent in vain.

**II. Secondly, let me say, concentrate all effort on this one aim.**

This one thing I do, says the Apostle, I press toward the mark. That aim is the one which God has in view in all circumstances and arrangements. Therefore, obviously, it is one which may be pursued in all of these, and may be sought whatsoever we are doing. All occupations of life except only sin are consistent with this highest aim. It needs not that we should seek any remote or cloistered form of life, nor sheer off any legitimate and common interests and occupations, but in them all we may be seeking for the one thing, the moulding of our characters into the shapes that are pleasing to Him. One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; wheresoever the outward days of my life may be passed. Whatsoever we are doing in business, in shop, at a study table, in the kitchen, in the nursery, by the road, in the house, we may still have the supreme aim in view, that from all occupations there may come growth in character and in likeness to Jesus Christ.

Only, to keep this supreme aim clear there will require far more frequent and resolute effort of what the old mystics used to call recollection than we are accustomed to put forth. It is hard, amidst the din of business, and whilst yielding to other lower, legitimate impulses and motives, to set this supreme one high above them all. But it is possible if only we will do two things: keep ourselves close to God, and be prepared to surrender much, laying our own wills, our own fancies, purposes, eager hopes and plans in His hands, and asking Him to help us, that we may never lose sight of the harbour light because of any tossing waves that rise between us and it, nor may ever be so swallowed up in ends, which are only means after all, as to lose sight of the only end which is an end in itself. But for the attainment of this aim in any measure, the concentration of all our powers upon it is absolutely needful. If you want to bore a hole you take a sharp point; you can do nothing with a blunt one. Every flight of wild ducks in the sky will tell you the form that is most likely to secure the maximum of motion with the minimum of effort. The wedge is that which pierces through all the loosely-compacted textures against which it is pressed. The Roman strategy forced the way of the legion through the loose-ordered ranks of barbarian foes by arraying it in that wedge-like form. So we, if we are to advance, must gather ourselves together and put a point upon our lives by compaction and concentration of effort and energy on the one purpose. The conquering word is, This one thing I do. The difference between the amateur and the artist is that the one pursues an art at intervals by spurts, as a parergon--a thing that is done in the intervals of other occupations--and that the other makes it his life's business. There are a great many amateur Christians amongst us, who pursue the Christian life by spurts and starts. If you want to be a Christian after God's pattern--and unless you are you are scarcely a Christian at all--you have to make it your business, to give the same attention, the same concentration, the same unwavering energy to it which you do to your trade. The man of one book, the man of one idea, the man of one aim is the formidable and the successful man. People will call you a fanatic; never mind. Better be a fanatic and get what you aim at, which is the highest thing, than be so broad that, like a stream spreading itself out over miles of mud, there is no scour in it anywhere, no current, and therefore stagnation and death. Gather yourselves together, and amidst all the side issues and nearer aims keep this in view as the aim to which all are to be subservient--that, whether I eat or drink, or whatsoever I do, I may do all to the glory of God. Let sorrow and joy, and trade and profession, and study and business, and house and wife and children, and all home joys, be the means by which you may become like the Master who has died for this end, that we may become partakers of His holiness.

**III. Pursue this end with a wise forgetfulness.**

Forgetting the things that are behind. The art of forgetting has much to do with the blessedness and power of every life. Of course, when the Apostle says Forgetting the things that are behind, he is thinking of the runner, who has no time to cast his eye over his shoulder to mark the steps already trod. He does not mean, of course, either, to tell us that we are so to cultivate obliviousness as to let God's mercies to us lie forgotten in unthankfulness, or without praises die. Nor does he mean to tell us that we are to deny ourselves the solace of remembering the mercies which may, perhaps, have gone from us. Memory may be like the calm radiance that fills the western sky from a sun that has set, sad and yet sweet, melancholy and lovely. But he means that we should so forget as, by the oblivion, to strengthen our concentration.

So I would say, let us remember, and yet forget, our past failures and faults. Let us remember them in order that the remembrance may cultivate in us a wise chastening of our self-confidence. Let us remember where we were foiled, in order that we may be the more careful of that place hereafter. If we know that upon any road we fell into ambushes, not once nor twice, like the old king of Israel, we should guard ourselves against passing by that road again. He who has not learned, by the memory of his past failures, humility and wise government of his life, and wise avoidance of places where he is weak, is an incurable fool.

But let us forget our failures in so far as these might paralyse our hopes, or make us fancy that future success is impossible where past failures frown. Ebenezer was a field of defeat before it rang with the hymns of victory. And there is no place in your past life where you have been shamefully baffled and beaten, but there, and in that, you may yet be victorious. Never let the past limit your hopes of the possibilities and your confidence in the certainties and victories of the future. And if ever you are tempted to say to yourselves, I have tried it so often, and so often failed, that it is no use trying it any more. I am beaten and I throw up the sponge, remember Paul's wise exhortation, and forgetting the things that are behind ... press toward the mark.

In like manner I would say, remember and yet forget past successes and achievements. Remember them for thankfulness, remember them for hope, remember them for counsel and instruction, but forget them when they tend, as all that we accomplish does tend, to make us fancy that little more remains to be done; and forget them when they tend, as all that we accomplish ever does tend, to make us think that such and such things are our line, and of other virtues and graces and achievements of culture and of character, that these are not our line, and not to be won by us.

Our line! Astronomers take a thin thread from a spider's web and stretch it across their object glasses to measure stellar magnitudes. Just as is the spider's line in comparison with the whole shining surface of the sun across which it is stretched, so is what we have already attained to the boundless might and glory of that to which we may come. Nothing short of the full measure of the likeness of Jesus Christ is the measure of our possibilities.

There is a mannerism in Christian life, as there is in everything else, which is to be avoided if we would grow into perfection. There was a great artist in the last century who never could paint a picture without sticking a brown tree in the foreground. We have all got our brown trees, which we think we can do well, and these limit our ambition to secure other gifts which God is ready to bestow upon us. So forget the things that are behind. Cultivate a wise obliviousness of past sorrows, past joys, past failures, past gifts, past achievements, in so far as these might limit the audacity of our hopes and the energy of our efforts.

**IV. So, lastly, pursue the aim with a wise, eager reaching forward.**

The Apostle employs a very graphic word here, which is only very partially expressed by that reaching forth. It contains a condensed picture which it is scarcely possible to put into any one expression. Reaching out over is the full though clumsy rendering of the word, and it gives us the picture of the runner with his whole body thrown forward, his hand extended, and his eye reaching even further than his hand, in eager anticipation of the mark and the prize. So we are to live, with continual reaching out of confidence, clear recognition, and eager desire to make our own the unattained.

What is that which gives an element of nobleness to the lives of great idealists, whether they be poets, artists, students, thinkers, or what not? Only this, that they see the unattained burning ever so clearly before them that all the attained seems as nothing in their eyes. And so life is saved from commonplace, is happily stung into fresh effort, is redeemed from flagging, monotony, and weariness.

The measure of our attainments may be fairly estimated by the extent to which the unattained is clear in our sight. A man down in the valley sees the nearer shoulder of the hill, and he thinks it the top. The man up on the shoulder sees all the heights that lie beyond rising above him. Endeavour is better than success. It is more to see the Alpine heights unscaled than it is to have risen so far as we have done. They who thus have a boundless future before them have an endless source of inspiration, of energy, of buoyancy granted to them.

No man has such an absolutely boundless vision of the future which may be his as we have, if we are Christian people, as we ought to be. We only can thus look forward. For all others a blank wall stretches at the end of life, against which hopes, when they strike, fall back stunned and dead. But for us the wall may be overleaped, and, living by the energy of a boundless hope, we, and only we, can lay ourselves down to die, and say then, Reaching forth unto the things that are before.

So, dear friends, make God's aim your aim; concentrate your life's efforts upon it; pursue it with a wise forgetfulness; pursue it with an eager confidence of anticipation that shall not be put to shame. Remember that God reaches His aim for you by giving to you Jesus Christ, and that you can only reach it by accepting the Christ who is given and being found in Him. Then the years will take away nothing from us which it is not gain to lose. They will neither weaken our energy nor flatten our hopes, nor dim our confidence, and, at the last we shall reach the mark, and, as we touch it, we shall find dropping on our surprised and humble heads the crown of life which they receive who have so run, not as uncertainly, but doing this one thing, pressing towards the mark for the prize.