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

**PHILIPPIANS-023**. **A TENDER EXHORTATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."*

*Philippians 4:1*

The words I have chosen set forth very simply and beautifully the bond which knit Paul and these Philippian Christians together, and the chief desire which his Apostolic love had for them. I venture to apply them to ourselves, and I speak now especially to the members of my own church and congregation.

**I. Let us note, then, first, the personal bond which gives force to the teacher's words.**

That Church at Philippi was, if Paul had any favourites amongst his children, his favourite child. The circumstances of its formation may have had something to do with that. It was planted by himself; it was the first Church in Europe; perhaps the Philippian gaoler and Lydia were amongst the beloved and longed for ones who were his joy and crown. But be that as it may, all through the letter we can feel the throbbing of a very loving heart, and the tenderness of a strong man, which is the most tender of all things.

Note how he addresses them. There is no assumption of Apostolic authority, but he puts himself on their level, and speaks to them as brethren. Then he lets his heart out, and tells them how they lived in his love, and how, of course, when he was parted from them, he had desired to be with them. And then he touches a deeper and a sacreder chord when he contemplates the results of the relation between them, if he on his side, and they on theirs, were faithful to it. It says much for the teacher, and for the taught, if he can truly say My joy,--I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in the truth. And not only were they his joy, but they who, by their faithfulness, have become his joy, will on that one day in the far future, be his crown. That metaphor carries on the thoughts to the great Judgment Day, and introduces a solemn element, which is as truly present, dear friends, in our relation to one another, little of an Apostle as I am, as it was in the relation between Paul and the Philippians. They who turn many to righteousness shine as the brightness of the firmament, because those whom they have turned, shine as lights in the world. And at that last august and awful tribunal, where you will have to give an account for your listening, as I for my speaking, the crown of victory laid on the locks of a faithful teacher is the characters of those whom he has taught. Who is my joy and hope, and crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Now, notice, further, how such mutual affection is needed to give force to the teacher's exhortation. Preaching from unloved lips never does any good. It irritates, or leaves untouched. Affection melts and opens the heart to the entrance of the word. And preaching from unloving lips does very little good either. So speaking, I condemn myself. There are men who handle God's great, throbbing message of love so coldly as that they ice even the Gospel. There are men who have a strange gift of taking all the sap and the fervour out of the word that they proclaim, making the very grapes of Eshcol into dried raisins. And I feel for myself that my ministry may well have failed in this respect. For who is there that can modulate his voice so as to reproduce the music of that great message, or who can soften and open his heart so as that it shall be a worthy vehicle of the infinite love of God?

But, dear brethren, though conscious of many failures in this respect, I yet thank God that here, at the end of nearly forty years of a ministry, I can look you in the face and believe that your look responds to mine, and that I can take these words as the feathers for my arrow, as that which will make words otherwise weak go further, and may help to write the precepts upon hearts, and to bring them to bear in practice--My beloved and longed for; my joy and my crown.

Such feelings do not need to be always spoken. There is very little chance of us Northerners erring on the side of letting our hearts speak too fully and frequently. Perhaps we should be all the better if we were a little less reticent, but at any rate you and I can surely trust each other after so many years, and now and then, as to-day, let our hearts speak.

**II. Secondly, notice the all-sufficient precept which such love gives. So stand fast in the Lord.**

That is a very favourite figure of Paul's, as those of you who have any reasonable degree of familiarity with his letters will know. Here it carries with it, as it generally does, the idea of resistance against antagonistic force. But the main thought of it is that of continuous steadfastness in our union with Jesus Christ. It applies, of course, to the intellect, but not mainly, and certainly not exclusively to intellectual adherence to the truths spoken in the Gospel. It covers the whole ground of the whole man; will, conscience, heart, practical effort, as well as understanding. And it is really Paul's version, with a characteristic dash of pugnacity in it, of our Lord's yet deeper and calmer words, Abide in Me and I in you. It is the same exhortation as Barnabas gave to the infantile church at Antioch, when, to these men just rescued from heathenism and profoundly ignorant of much which we suppose it absolutely necessary that Christians should know, he had only one thing to say, exhorting them all, that with purpose of heart they should cleave to the Lord.

Steadfast continuance of personal union with Jesus Christ, extending through all the faculties of our nature, and into every corner of our lives, is the kernel of this great exhortation. And he who fulfils it has little left unfulfilled. Of course, as I said, there is a very strong suggestion that such standing is by no means an easy thing, or accomplished without much antagonism; and it may help us if, just for a moment, we run over the various forms of resistance which they have to overcome who stand fast. Nothing stands where it is without effort. That is true in the moral world, although in the physical world the law of motion is that nothing moves without force being applied to it.

What are the things that would shake our steadfastness, and sweep us away? Well, there are, first, the tiny, continuously acting, and therefore all but omnipotent forces of daily life--duties, occupations, distractions of various kinds--which tend to move us imperceptibly away, as by the slow sliding of a glacier, from the hope of the Gospel. There is nothing so strong as a gentle pressure, equably and unintermittently applied. It is far mightier than thrusts and hammerings and sudden assaults. I stood some time ago looking at the Sphinx. The hard stone--so hard that it turns the edge of a sculptor's chisel--has been worn away, and the solemn features all but obliterated. What by? The continual attrition of multitudinous grains of sand from the desert. The little things that are always at work upon us are the things that have most power to sweep us away from our steadfastness in Jesus Christ.

Then there are, besides, the sudden assaults of strong temptations, of sense and flesh, or of a more subtle and refined character. If a man is standing loosely, in some careless dégagé attitude, and a sudden impact comes upon him, over he goes. The boat upon a mountain-locked lake encounters a sudden gust when opposite the opening of a glen, and unless there be a very strong hand and a watchful eye at the helm, is sure to be upset. Upon us there come, in addition to that silent continuity of imperceptible but most real pressure, sudden gusts of temptation which are sure to throw us over, unless we are well and always on our guard against them.

In addition to all these, there are ups and downs of our own nature, the fluctuations which are sure to occur in any human heart, when faith seems to ebb and falter, and love to die down almost into cold ashes. But, dear brethren, whilst we shall always be liable to these fluctuations of feeling, it is possible for us to have, deep down below these, a central core of our personality, in which unchanging continuity may abide. The depths of the ocean know nothing of the tides on the surface that are due to the mutable moon. We can have in our inmost hearts steadfastness, immovableness, even though the surface may be ruffled. Make your spirits like one of those great cathedrals whose thick walls keep out the noises of the world, and in whose still equability there is neither excessive heat nor excessive cold, but an approximately uniform temperature, at midsummer and at midwinter. Stand fast in the Lord.

Now, my text not only gives an exhortation, but, in the very act of giving it, suggests how it is to be fulfilled. For that phrase in the Lord not only indicates where we are to stand, but also how. That is to say--it is only in proportion as we keep ourselves in union with Christ, in heart and mind, and will, and work, that we shall stand steadfast. The lightest substances may be made stable, if they are glued on to something stable. You can mortice a bit of thin stone into the living rock, and then it will stand four-square to every wind that blows. So it is only on condition of our keeping ourselves in Jesus Christ, that we are able to keep ourselves steadfast, and to present a front of resistance that does not yield one foot, either to imperceptible continuous pressure, to sudden assaults, or to the fluctuations of our own changeful dispositions and tempers. The ground on which a man stands has a great deal to do with the firmness of his footing. You cannot stand fast upon a bed of slime, or upon a sand-bank which is being undermined by the tides. And if we, changeful creatures, are to be steadfast in any region, our surest way of being so is to knit ourselves to Him who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever, and from whose immortality will flow some copy and reflection of itself into our else changeful natures.

Still further, in regard to this commandment, I would pray you to notice that very eloquent little word which stands at the beginning of it. So stand fast in the Lord. So. How? That throws us back to what the Apostle has been saying in the previous context. And what has he been saying there? The keynote of the previous chapter is progress--I follow after; I press toward the mark, forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth to the things that are before. To these exhortations to progress he appends this remarkable exhortation: So--that is, by progress--stand fast in the Lord, which being turned into other words is just this--if you stand still, you will not stand fast. There can be no steadfastness without advancement. If a man is not going forward, he is going backward. The only way to ensure stability is pressing toward the mark. Why, a child's top only stands straight up as long as it is revolving. If a man on a bicycle stops, he tumbles. And so, in the depths of a Christian life, as in all science, and all walks of human activity, the condition of steadfastness is advance. Therefore, dear brethren, let no man deceive himself with the notion that he can keep at the same point of religious experience and of Christian character. You are either more of a Christian, or less of one, than you were at a past time. So, stand fast, and remember that to stand still is not to stand fast.

Now, whilst all these things that I have been trying to say have reference to Christian people at all stages of their spiritual history, they have a very especial reference to those in the earlier part of Christian life.

And I want to say to those who have only just begun to run the Christian life, very lovingly and very earnestly, that this is a text for them. For, alas! there is nothing more frequent than that, after the first dawnings of a Christian life in a heart, there should come a period of overclouding; or that, as John Bunyan has taught us, when Christian has gone through the wicket-gate, he should fall very soon into the Slough of Despond. One looks round, and sees how many professing Christians there are who, perhaps, were nearer Jesus Christ on the day of their conversion than they have ever been since, and how many cases of arrested development there are amongst professing and real Christians; so that when for the time they ought to be teachers, they have need to be taught again; and when, after the number of years that have passed, they ought to be full-grown men, they are but babes yet. And so I say to you, dear young friends, stand fast. Do not let the world attract you again. Keep near to Jesus. Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.

**III. Lastly, we have here a great motive which encourages obedience to this command.**

People generally pass over that Therefore which begins my text, but it is full of significance and of importance. It links the precept which we have been considering with the immediately preceding hope which the Apostle has so triumphantly proclaimed, when he says that we look for the Saviour from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change the body of our humiliation that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

So there rises before us that twofold great hope; that the Master Himself is coming to the succour of His servants, and that when He comes, He will perfect the incomplete work which has been begun in them by their faith and steadfastness, and will change their whole humanity so that it shall become participant of, and conformed to, the glory of His own triumphant manhood.

That hope is presented by the Apostle as having its natural sequel in the steadfastness of my text, and that steadfastness is regarded by the Apostle as drawing its most animating motives from the contemplation of that great hope. Blessed be God! The effort of the Christian life is not one which is extorted by fear, or by the cold sense of duty. There are no taskmasters with whips to stand over the heart that responds to Christ and to His love. But hope and joy, as well as love, are the animating motives which make sacrifices easy, soften the yoke that is laid upon our shoulders, and turn labour into joy and delight.

So, dear brethren, we have to set before us this great hope, that Jesus Christ is coming, and that, therefore, our labour on ourselves is sure not to be in vain. Work that is done hopelessly is not done long, and there is no heart in it whilst it is being done. But if we know that Christ will appear, and that when He who is our life shall appear, we also shall appear with Him in glory, then we may go to work in keeping ourselves steadfast in Him, with cheery hearts, and with full assurance that what we have been doing will have a great result.

You have read, no doubt, about some little force in North-West India, hemmed in by enemies. They may well hold out resolutely and hopefully when they know that three relieving armies are converging upon their stronghold. And we, too, know that our Emperor is coming to raise the siege. We may well stand fast with such a prospect. We may well work at our own sanctifying when we know that our Lord Himself--like some master-sculptor who comes to his pupil's imperfectly blocked-out work, and takes his chisel in his hand, and with a touch or two completes it--will come and finish what we, by His grace, imperfectly began. So stand fast in the Lord, because you have hope that the Lord is about to come, and that when He comes you will be like Him.

One last word. That steadfastness is the condition without which we have no right to entertain that hope.

If we keep ourselves near Christ, and if by keeping ourselves near Him, we are becoming day by day liker Him, then we may have calm confidence that He will perfect that which concerns us. But I, for my part, can find nothing, either in Scripture or in the analogy of God's moral dealings with us in the world, to warrant the holding out of the expectation to a man that, if he has kept himself apart from Jesus Christ and his quickening and cleansing power all his life long, Jesus Christ will take him in hand after he dies, and change him into His likeness. Don't you risk it! Begin by standing fast in the Lord. He will do the rest then, not else. The cloth must be dipped into the dyer's vat, and lie there, if it is to be tinged with the colour. The sensitive plate must be patiently kept in position for many hours, if invisible stars are to photograph themselves upon it. The vase must be held with a steady hand beneath the fountain, if it is to be filled. Keep yourselves in Jesus Christ. Then here you will begin to be changed into the same image, and when He comes He will come as your Saviour, and complete your uncompleted work, and make you altogether like Himself.

Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, dearly beloved.