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

**PHILIPPIANS-025**. **REJOICE EVERMORE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, rejoice!"*

*Philippians 4:4*

It has been well said that this whole epistle may be summed up in two short sentences: I rejoice; Rejoice ye! The word and the thing crop up in every chapter, like some hidden brook, ever and anon sparkling out into the sunshine from beneath the shadows. This continual refrain of gladness is all the more remarkable if we remember the Apostle's circumstances. The letter shows him to us as a prisoner, dependent on Christian charity for a living, having no man like-minded to cheer his solitude; uncertain as to how it shall be with me, and obliged to contemplate the possibility of being offered, or poured out as a libation, on the sacrifice and service of your faith. Yet out of all the darkness his clear notes ring jubilant; and this sunny epistle comes from the pen of a prisoner who did not know but that to-morrow he might be a martyr.

The exhortation of my text, with its urgent reiteration, picks up again a dropped thread which the Apostle had first introduced in the commencement of the previous chapter. He had there evidently been intending to close his letter, for he says: Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord; but he is drawn away into that precious personal digression which we could so ill spare, in which he speaks of his continual aspiration and effort towards things not yet attained. And now he comes back again, picks up the thread once more, and addresses himself to his parting counsels. The reiteration in the text becomes the more impressive if we remember that it is a repetition of a former injunction. Rejoice in the Lord alway; and then he seems to hear one of his Philippian readers saying: Why! you told us that once before! Yes, he says, and you shall hear it once again; so important is my commandment that it shall be repeated a third time. So I again say, "rejoice!" Christian gladness is an important element in Christian duty; and the difficulty and necessity of it are indicated by the urgent repetition of the injunction.

**I. So, then, the first thought that suggests itself to me from these words is this, that close union with Jesus Christ is the foundation of real gladness.**

Pray note that the Lord here, as is usually the case in Paul's Epistles, means, not the Divine Father, but Jesus Christ. And then observe, again, that the phrase Rejoice in the Lord has a deeper meaning than we sometimes attach to it. We are accustomed to speak of rejoicing in a thing or a person, which, or who, is thereby represented as being the occasion or the object of our gladness. And though that is true, in reference to our Lord, it is not the whole sweep and depth of the Apostle's meaning here. He is employing that phrase, in the Lord, in the profound and comprehensive sense in which it generally appears in his letters, and especially in those almost contemporaneous with this Epistle to the Philippians. I need only refer you, in passing, without quoting passages, to the continual use of that phrase in the nearly contemporaneous letter to the Ephesians, in which you will find that in Christ Jesus is the signature stamped upon all the gifts of God, and upon all the possible blessings of the Christian life. In Him we have the inheritance; in Him we obtain redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins; in Him we are blessed with all spiritual blessings. And the deepest description of the essential characteristic of a Christian life is, to Paul, that it is a life in Christ.

It is this close union which the Apostle here indicates as being the foundation and the source of all that gladness which he desires to see spreading its light over the Christian life. Rejoice in the Lord--being in Him be glad.

Now that great thought has two aspects, one deep and mysterious, one very plain and practical. As to the former, I need not spend much time upon it. We believe, I suppose, in the superhuman character and nature of Jesus Christ. We believe in His divinity. We can therefore believe reasonably in the possibility of a union between Him and us, transcending all the forms of human association, and being really like that which the creature holds to its Creator in regard to its physical being. In him we live, and move, and have our being is the very foundation truth in regard to the constitution of the universe. In Him we live, and move, and have our being is the very foundation truth in regard to the relation of the Christian soul to Jesus Christ. All earthly unions are but poor adumbrations from afar of that deep, transcendent, mysterious, but most real union, by which the Christian soul is in Christ, as the branch is in the vine, the member in the body, the planet in its atmosphere, and by which Christ is in the Christian soul as the life sap is in every twig, as the mysterious vital power is in every member. Thus abiding in Him, in a manner which admits of no parallel nor of any doubt, we may, and we shall, be glad.

But then, passing from the mysterious, we come to the plain. To be in Christ which is commended to us here as the basis of all true blessedness, means that the whole of our nature shall be occupied with, and fastened upon, Him; thought turning to Him, the tendrils of the heart clinging and creeping around Him, the will submitting itself in glad obedience to His beloved and supreme commandments, the aspirations, and desires feeling out after Him as the sufficient and eternal good, and all the current of our being setting towards Him in earnestness of desire, and resting in Him in tranquillity of possession. Thus in Christ we may all be.

And, says Paul, in the great words of my text, such a union, reciprocal and close, is the secret of all blessedness. If thus we are wedded to that Lord, and His life is in us and ours enclosed in Him, then there is such correspondence between our necessities and our supplies as that there is no room for aching emptiness; no gnawing of unsatisfied longings, but the blessedness that comes from having found that which we seek, and in the finding being stimulated to a still closer, happier, and not restless search after fuller possession. The man that knows where to get anything and everything that he needs, and to whom desires are but the prophets of instantaneous fruition; surely that man has in his possession the talismanic secret of perpetual gladness. They who thus dwell in Christ by faith, love, obedience, imitation, aspiration, and enjoyment, are like men housed in some strong fortress, who can look out over all the fields alive with enemies, and feel that they are safe. They who thus dwell in Christ gain command over themselves; and because they can bridle passions, and subdue hot and impossible desires, and keep themselves well in hand, have stanched one chief source of unrest and sadness, and have opened one pure and sparkling fountain of unfailing gladness. To rule myself because Christ rules me is no small part of the secret of blessedness. And they who thus dwell in Christ have the purest joy, the joy of self-forgetfulness. He that is absorbed in a great cause; he whose pitiful, personal individuality has passed out of his sight; he who is swallowed up by devotion to another, by aspiration after something afar from the sphere of our sorrow, has found the secret of gladness. And the man who thus can say, I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, this is the man who will ever rejoice. The world may not call such a temper gladness. It is as unlike the sputtering, flaring, foul-smelling joys which it prizes--like those filthy but bright Lucigens that they do night work by in great factories--it is as unlike the joy of the world as these are to the calm, pure moonlight which they insult. The one is of heaven, and the other is the foul product of earth, and smokes to extinction swiftly.

**II. So, secondly, notice that this joy is capable of being continuous.**

Rejoice in the Lord always, says Paul. That is a hard nut to crack. I can fancy a man saying, What is the use of giving me such exhortations as this? My gladness is largely a matter of temperament, and I cannot rule my moods. My gladness is largely a matter of circumstances, and I do not determine these. How vain it is to tell me, when my heart is bleeding, or beating like a sledge-hammer, to be glad! Yes! Temperament has a great deal to do with joy; and circumstances have a great deal to do with it; but is not the mission of the Gospel to make us masters of temperament, and independent of circumstances? Is not the possibility of living a life that has no dependence upon externals, and that may persist permanently through all varieties of mood, the very gift that Christ Himself has come to bestow upon us--bringing us into communion with Himself, and so making us lords of our own inward nature and of externals: so that though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vine, yet we may rejoice in the Lord, and be glad in the God of our salvation. If a ship has plenty of water in its casks or tanks in its hold, it does not matter whether it is sailing through fresh water or salt. And if you and I have that union with Jesus Christ of which my text speaks, then we shall be, not wholly, but with indefinite increase of approximation towards the ideal, independent of circumstances and masters of our temperaments. And so it is possible, if not absolutely to reach this fair achievement of an unbroken continuity of gladness, at least to bring the lucent points so close to one another as that the intervals of darkness between shall be scarcely visible, and the whole will seem to form one continuous ring of light.

Brother, if you and I can keep near Jesus Christ always--and I suppose we can do that in sorrow as in joy--He will take care that our keeping near Him will not want its reward in that blessed continuity of felt repose which is very near the sunniness of gladness. For, if we in the Lord sorrow, we may, then, simultaneously, in the Lord rejoice. The two things may go together, if in the one mood and the other we are in union with Him. The bitterness of the bitterest calamity is taken away from it when it does not separate us from Jesus Christ. And just as the mother is specially tender with her sick child, and just as we have often found that the sympathy of friends comes to us, when need and grief are upon us, in a fashion that would have been incredible beforehand, so it is surely true that Jesus Christ can, and does, soften His tone, and select the tokens of His presence with especial tenderness for a wounded heart; so as that sorrow in the Lord passes into joy in the Lord. And if that be so, then the pillar which was cloud in the sunshine brightens into fire as night falls on the desert.

But it is not only that this divine gladness is consistent with the sorrow that is often necessary for us, but also that the continuity of such gladness is secured, because in Christ there are open for us sources of blessedness in what is else a dry and thirsty land. If you would take this epistle at your leisure, and run over it in order to note the various occasions of joy which the Apostle expresses for himself, and commends to his brethren, you would see how beautifully they reveal to us the power of communion with Jesus Christ, to find honey in the rock, good in everything, and a reason for thankful gladness in all events.

I have not time, at this stage of my sermon, to do more than just glance at these. We find, for instance, that a very large portion of the joy which he declares fills his own heart, and which he commends to these Philippians, arises from the recognition of good in others. He speaks to them of being his joy and crown. He tells them that in his sorrows and imprisonment, their fellowship in the Gospel, from the first day until now, had brought a whiff of gladness into the close air of the prison cell. He begs them to be Christlike in order that they may fulfil his joy; and he may lose himself in others blessings, and therein find gladness. A large portion of his joy came from very common things. A large portion of the joy that he commends to them he contemplates as coming to them from small matters. They were to be glad because Timothy came with a message from the Apostle. He is glad because he hears of their well-being, and receives a little contribution from them for his daily necessities. A large portion of his gladness came from the spread of Christ's kingdom. Christ is preached, says he, with a flash of triumph, and I therein do rejoice; yea, and will rejoice. And, most beautiful of all, no small portion of his gladness came from the prospect of martyrdom. If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all; and do ye joy and rejoice with me.

Now, put all these things together and they just come to this, that a heart in union with Jesus Christ can find streams in the desert, joys blossoming as the rose, in places that to the un-Christlike eye are wilderness and solitary, and out of common things it can bring the purest gladness and draw a tribute and revenue of blessedness even from the prospect of God-sent sorrows. Dear brethren, if you and I have not learned the secret of modest and unselfish delights, we shall vainly seek for joy in the vulgar excitements and coarse titillations of appetites and desires which the world offers. Calm pleasures there abide in Christ. The northern lights are weird and bright, but they belong to midwinter, and they come from electric disturbances, and portend rough weather afterwards. Sunshine is silent, steadfast, pure. Better to walk in that light than to be led astray by fantastic and perishable splendours. Rejoice in the Lord always.

**III. Lastly, such gladness is an important part of Christian duty.**

As I have said, the urgency of the command indicates both its importance and its difficulty. It is important that professing Christians should be glad Christians (with the joy that is drawn from Jesus Christ, of course, I mean), because they thereby become walking advertisements and living witnesses for Him. A gloomy, melancholy, professing Christian is a poor recommendation of his faith. If you want to adorn the doctrine of Christ you will do it a great deal more by a bright face, that speaks of a calm heart, calm because filled with Christ, than by many more ambitious efforts. This gladness is important because, without it, there will be little good work done, and little progress made. It is important, surely, for ourselves, for it can be no small matter that we should be able to have travelling with us all through the desert that mystical rock which follows with its streams of water, and ever provides for us the joys that we need. In every aspect, whether as regards men who take their notions of Christ and of Christianity, a great deal more from the concrete examples of both in human lives than from books and sermons, or from the Bible itself--or as regards the work which we have to do, or as regards our own inward life, it is all-important that we should have that close union with Jesus Christ which cannot but result in pure and holy gladness.

But the difficulty, as well as the importance, of the obligation, are expressed by the stringent repetition of the commandment, And again I say, Rejoice. When objections arise, when difficulties present themselves, I repeat the commandment again, in the teeth of them all; and I know what I mean when I am saying it. Thus, thought Paul, we need to make a definite effort to keep ourselves in touch with Jesus Christ, or else gladness, and a great deal besides, will fade away from our grasp.

And there are two things that you have to do if you would obey the commandment. The one is the direct effort at fostering and making continuous your fellowship with Jesus Christ, through your life; and the other is looking out for the bright bits in your life, and making sure that you do not sullenly and foolishly, perhaps with vain regrets after vanished blessings, or perhaps with vain murmurings about unattained good, obscure to your sight the mercies that you have, and so cheat yourselves of the occasions for thankfulness and joy. There are people who, if there be ever such a little bit of a fleecy film of cloud low down on their horizon, can see nothing of the sparkling blue arch above them for looking at that, and who behave as if the whole sky was one roof of doleful grey. Do not you do that! There is always enough to be thankful for. Lay hold of Christ, and be sure that you open your eyes to His gifts.

Surely, dear friends, if there be offered to us, as there is, a gladness which is perfect in the two points in which all other gladness fails, it is wise for us to take it. The commonplace which all men believe, and most men neglect, is that nothing short of an infinite Person can fill a finite soul. And if we look for our joys anywhere but to Jesus Christ, there will always be some bit of our nature which, like the sulky elder brother in the parable, will scowl at the music and dancing, and refuse to come in. All earthly joys are transient as well as partial. Is it not better that we should have gladness that will last as long as we do, that we can hold in our dying hands, like a flower clasped in some cold palm laid in the coffin, that we shall find again when we have crossed the bar, that will grow and brighten and broaden for evermore? My joy shall remain ... full.