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

**PHILIPPIANS-026**. **HOW TO OBEY AN IMPOSSIBLE INJUNCTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God."*

*Philippians 4:6*

It is easy for prosperous people, who have nothing to trouble them, to give good advices to suffering hearts; and these are generally as futile as they are easy. But who was he who here said to the Church at Philippi, Be careful for nothing? A prisoner in a Roman prison; and when Rome fixed its claws it did not usually let go without drawing blood. He was expecting his trial, which might, so far as he knew, very probably end in death. Everything in the future was entirely dark and uncertain. It was this man, with all the pressure of personal sorrows weighing upon him, who, in the very crisis of his life, turned to his brethren in Philippi, who had far fewer causes of anxiety than he had, and cheerfully bade them be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make their requests known unto God. Had not that bird learned to sing when his cage was darkened? And do you not think that advice of that sort, coming not from some one perched up on a safe hillock to the strugglers in the field below, but from a man in the thick of the fight, would be like a trumpet-call to them who heard it?

Now, here are two things. There is an apparently perfectly impossible advice, and there is the only course that will make it possible.

**I. An apparently impossible advice.**

Be careful for nothing. I do not need to remind you--for I suppose that we all know it--that that word careful, in a great many places in the New Testament, does not mean what, by the slow progress of change in the significance of words, it has come to mean to-day; but it means what it should still mean, full of care, and care meant, not prudent provision, forethought, the occupation of a man's common-sense with his duty and his work and his circumstances, but it meant the thing which of all others unfits a man most for such prudent provision, and that is, the nervous irritation of a gnawing anxiety which, as the word in the original means, tears the heart apart and makes a man quite incapable of doing the wise thing, or seeing the wise thing to do, in the circumstances. We all know that; so that I do not need to dwell upon it. Careful here means neither more nor less than anxious.

But I may just remind you how harm has been done, and good has been lost and missed, by people reading that modern meaning into the word. It is the same word which Christ employed in the exhortation Take no thought for to-morrow. It is a great pity that Christian people sometimes get it into their heads that Christ prohibited what common-sense demands, and what everybody practises. Taking thought for the morrow is not only our duty, but it is one of the distinctions which make us much better than the fowls of the air, that have no barns in which to store against a day of need. But when our Lord said, Take no thought for the morrow, he did not mean Do not lay yourselves out to provide for common necessities and duties, but Do not fling yourselves into a fever of anxiety, nor be too anxious to anticipate the "fashion of uncertain evils."

But even with that explanation, is it not like an unreachable ideal that Paul puts forward here? Be anxious about nothing--how can a man who has to face the possibilities that we all have to face, and who knows himself to be as weak to deal with them as we all are: how can he help being anxious? There is no more complete waste of breath than those sage and reverend advices which people give us, not to do the things, nor to feel the emotions, which our position make absolutely inevitable and almost involuntary. Here, for instance, is a man surrounded by all manner of calamity and misfortune; and some well-meaning but foolish friend comes to him, and, without giving him a single reason for the advice, says, Cheer up! my friend. Why should he cheer up? What is there in his circumstances to induce him to fall into any other mood? Or some unquestionable peril is staring him full in the face, coming nearer and nearer to him, and some well-meaning, loose-tongued friend, says to him, Do not be afraid!--but he ought to be afraid. That is about all that worldly wisdom and morality have to say to us, when we are in trouble and anxiety. Shut your eyes very hard, and make believe very much, and you will not fear. An impossible exhortation! Just as well bid a ship in the Bay of Biscay not to rise and fall upon the wave, but to keep an even keel. Just as well tell the willows in the river-bed that they are not to bend when the wind blows, as come to me, and say to me, Be careful about nothing. Unless you have a great deal more than that to say, I must be, and I ought to be, anxious, about a great many things. Instead of anxiety being folly, it will be wisdom; and the folly will consist in not opening our eyes to facts, and in not feeling emotions that are appropriate to the facts which force themselves against our eyeballs. Threadbare maxims, stale, musty old commonplaces of unavailing consolation and impotent encouragement say to us, Do not be anxious. We try to stiffen our nerves and muscles in order to bear the blow; or some of us, more basely still, get into a habit of feather-headed levity, making no forecasts, nor seeing even what is plainest before our eyes. But all that is of no use when once the hot pincers of real trouble, impending or arrived, lay hold of our hearts. Then of all idle expenditures of breath in the world there is none to the wrung heart more idle and more painful than the one that says, Be anxious about nothing.

**II. So we turn to the only course that makes the apparent impossibility possible.**

Paul goes on to direct to the mode of feeling and action which will give exemption from the else inevitable gnawing of anxious forethought. He introduces his positive counsel with an eloquent But, which implies that what follows is the sure preservative against the temper which he deprecates; But in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

There are, then, these alternatives. If you do not like to take the one, you are sure to have to take the other. There is only one way out of the wood, and it is this which Paul expands in these last words of my text. If a man does not pray about everything, he will be worried about most things. If he does pray about everything, he will not be troubled beyond what is good for him, about anything. So there are these alternatives; and we have to make up our minds which of the two we are going to take. The heart is never empty. If not full of God, it will be full of the world, and of worldly care. Luther says somewhere that a man's heart is like a couple of millstones; if you don't put something between them to grind, they will grind each other. It is because God is not in our hearts that the two stones rub the surface off one another. So the victorious antagonist of anxiety is trust, and the only way to turn gnawing care out of my heart and life is to usher God into it, and to keep him resolutely in it.

In everything. If a thing is great enough to threaten to make me anxious, it is great enough for me to talk to God about. If He and I are on a friendly footing, the instinct of friendship will make me speak. If so, how irrelevant and superficial seem to be discussions whether we ought to pray about worldly things, or confine our prayers entirely to spiritual and religious matters. Why! if God and I are on terms of friendship and intimacy of communication, there will be no question as to what I am to talk about to Him; I shall not be able to keep silent as to anything that interests me. And we are not right with God unless we have come to the point that entire openness of speech marks our communications with Him, and that, as naturally as men, when they come home from business, like to tell their wives and children what has happened to them since they left home in the morning, so naturally we talk to our Friend about everything that concerns us. In everything let your requests be made known unto God. That is the wise course, because a multitude of little pimples may be quite as painful and dangerous as a large ulcer. A cloud of gnats may put as much poison into a man with their many stings as will a snake with its one bite. And if we are not to get help from God by telling Him about little things, there will be very little of our lives that we shall tell Him about at all. For life is a mountain made up of minute flakes. The years are only a collection of seconds. Every man's life is an aggregate of trifles. In everything make your requests known.

By prayer--that does not mean, as a superficial experience of religion is apt to suppose it to mean, actual petition that follows. For a great many of us, the only notion that we have of prayer is asking God to give us something that we want. But there is a far higher region of communion than that, in which the soul seeks and finds, and sits and gazes, and aspiring possesses, and possessing aspires. Where there is no spoken petition for anything affecting outward life, there may be the prayer of contemplation such as the burning seraphs before the Throne do ever glow with. The prayer of silent submission, in which the will bows itself before God; the prayer of quiet trust, in which we do not so much seek as cleave; the prayer of still fruition--these, in Paul's conception of the true order, precede supplication. And if we have such union with God, by realising His presence, by aspiration after Himself, by trusting Him and submission to Him, then we have the victorious antagonist of all our anxieties, and the cares that infest the day shall fold their tents and silently steal away. For if a man has that union with God which is effected by such prayer as I have been speaking about, it gives him a fixed point on which to rest amidst all perturbations. It is like bringing a light into a chamber when thunder is growling outside, which prevents the flashing of the lightning from being seen.

Years ago an ingenious inventor tried to build a vessel in such a fashion as that the saloon for passengers should remain upon one level, howsoever the hull might be tossed by waves. It was a failure, if I remember rightly. But if we are thus joined to God, He will do for our inmost hearts what the inventor tried to do with the chamber within his ship. The hull may be buffeted, but the inmost chamber where the true self sits will be kept level and unmoved. Brethren! prayer in the highest sense, by which I mean the exercise of aspiration, trust, submission--prayer will fight against and overcome all anxieties.

By prayer and supplication. Actual petition for the supply of present wants is meant by supplication. To ask for that supply will very often be to get it. To tell God what I think I need goes a long way always to bringing me the gift that I do need. If I have an anxiety which I am ashamed to speak to Him, that silence is a sign that I ought not to have it; and if I have a desire that I do not feel I can put into a prayer, that feeling is a warning to me not to cherish such a desire.

There are many vague and oppressive anxieties that come and cast a shadow over our hearts, that if we could once define, and put into plain words, we should find that we vaguely fancied them a great deal larger than they were, and that the shadow they flung was immensely longer than the thing that flung it. Put your anxieties into definite speech. It will reduce their proportions to your own apprehension very often. Speaking them, even to a man who may be able to do little to help, eases them wonderfully. Put them into definite speech to God; and there are very few of them that will survive.

By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. That thanksgiving is always in place. If one only considers what he has from God, and realises that whatever he has he has received from the hands of divine love, thanksgiving is appropriate in any circumstances. Do you remember when Paul was in gaol at the very city to which this letter went, with his back bloody with the rod, and his feet fast in the stocks, how then he and Silas prayed and sang praises to God. Therefore the obedient earthquake came and set them loose. Perhaps it was some reminiscence of that night which moved him to say to the Church that knew the story--of which perhaps the gaoler was still a member--By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known unto God.

One aching nerve can monopolise our attention and make us unconscious of the health of all the rest of the body. So, a single sorrow or loss obscures many mercies. We are like men who live in a narrow alley in some city, with great buildings on either side, towering high above their heads, and only a strip of sky visible. If we see up in that strip a cloud, we complain and behave as if the whole heavens, right away round the three hundred and sixty degrees of the horizon, were black with tempest. But we see only a little strip, and there is a great deal of blue in the sky; however, there may be a cloud in the patch that we see above our heads, from the alley where we live. Everything, rightly understood, that God sends to men is a cause of thanksgiving; therefore, in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

Casting all your anxieties upon him, says Peter, for He--not is anxious; that dark cloud does not rise much above the earth--but, He careth for you. And that loving guardianship and tender care is the one shield, armed with which we can smile at the poisoned darts of anxiety which would else fester in our hearts and, perhaps, kill. Be careful for nothing--an impossibility unless in everything we make our requests known unto God.