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

**PHILIPPIANS-029**. **HOW TO SAY THANK YOU by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But I rejoice in the Lord greatly, that now at length ye have revived your thought for me; wherein ye did indeed take thought, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound: in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me. Howbeit ye did well, that ye had fellowship with my affliction."*

*Philippians 4:10-14 (R.V.)*

It is very difficult to give money without hurting the recipient. It is as difficult to receive it without embarrassment and sense of inferiority. Paul here shows us how he could handle a delicate subject with a feminine fineness of instinct and a noble self-respect joined with warmest gratitude. He carries the weight of obligation, is profuse in his thanks, and yet never crosses the thin line which separates the expression of gratitude from self-abasing exaggeration, nor that other which distinguishes self-respect in the receiver of benefits from proud unwillingness to be obliged to anybody. Few words are more difficult to say rightly than Thank you. Some people speak them reluctantly and some too fluently: some givers are too exacting in the acknowledgments they expect, and do not so much give as barter so much help for so much recognition of superiority.

The Philippians had sent to Paul some money help by Epaphroditus as we heard before in Chapter ii., and this gift he now acknowledges in a paragraph full of autobiographical interest which may be taken as a very model of the money relations between teachers and taught in the church. It is besides an exquisite illustration of the fineness and delicacy of Paul's nature, and it includes large spiritual lessons.

The stream of the Apostle's thoughts takes three turns here. There is first the exuberant and delicate expression of his thanks, then, as fearing that they might misunderstand his joy in their affection as if it were only selfish gladness that his wants had been met, he gives utterance to his triumphant and yet humble consciousness of his Christ-given independence in, and of, all circumstances, and then feeling in a moment that such words, if they stood alone, might sound ungrateful, he again returns to thanks, but not for their gift so much as for the sympathy expressed in it. We may follow these movements of feeling now.

**I. The exuberant expression of thanks, I rejoice in the Lord greatly.**

There is an instance of his following his own twice-given precept, Rejoice in the Lord always. The Philippians care of him was the source of the joy, and yet it was joy in the Lord. So we learn the perfect consistency of that joy in Christ with the full enjoyment of all other sources of joy, and especially of the joy that arises from Christian love and friendship. Union with Christ heightens and purifies all earthly relations. Nobody should be so tender and so sweet in these as a Christian. His faith should be like the sunshine blazing out over the meadows making them greener. It should, and does in the measure of its power, destroy selfishness and guard us against the evils which sap love and the anxieties which torment it, against the dread that it may end, and our hopeless desolation when it does. There is a false ascetic idea of Christian devotion as if it were a regard to Christ which made our hearts cold to others, which is clean against Paul's experience here. His joy went out in fuller stream towards the Philippians because it was joy in the Lord.

We may just note in passing the tender metaphor by which the Philippians renewed thought of him is likened to a tree's putting forth its buds in a gracious springtide, and may link with it the pretty fancy of an old commentator whom some people call prosaic and puritanical (Bengel), that the stormy winter had hindered communication, and that Epaphroditus and the gifts came with the opening spring.

Paul's inborn delicacy and quick considerateness comes beautifully forward in his addition, to remove any suspicion of his thinking that his friends in Philippi had been negligent or cold. Therefore he adds that he knew that they had always had the will. What had hindered them we do not know. Perhaps they had no one to send. Perhaps they had not heard that such help would be welcome, but whatever frost had kept the tree from budding, he knew that the sap was in it all the same.

We may note that trait of true friendship, confidence in a love that did not express itself. Many of us are too exacting in always wanting manifestations of our friend's affection. What cries out for these is not love so much as self-importance which has not had the attention which it thinks its due. How often there have been breaches of intimacy which have no better reason than He didn't come to see me often enough; He hasn't written to me for ever so long; He does not pay me the attention I expect. It is a poor love which is always needing to be assured of another's. It is better to err in believing that there is a store of goodwill in our friends hearts to us which only needs occasion to be unfolded. One often hears people say that they were quite surprised at the proofs of affection which came to them when they were in trouble. They would have been happier and more nearly right if they had believed in them when there was no need to show them.

**II. Consciousness of Christ-given independence and of content is scarcely Paul's whole idea here, though that, no doubt, is included.**

We have no word which exactly expresses the meaning. Self-sufficient is a translation, but then it has acquired a bad meaning as connoting a false estimate of one's own worth and wisdom. What Paul means is that whatever be his condition he has in himself enough to meet it. He does not depend on circumstances, and he does not depend on other people for strength to face them. Many words are not needed to insist that only the man of whom these things are true is worth calling a man at all. It is a miserable thing to be hanging on externals and so to be always exposed to the possibility of having to say, They have taken away my Gods. It is as wretched to be hanging on people. The good man shall be satisfied for himself. The fortress that has a deep well in the yard and plenty of provisions within, is the only one that can hold out.

This independence teaches the true use of all changing circumstances. The consequence of learning therewith to be content is further stated by the Apostle in terms which perhaps bear some reference to the mysteries of Greek religion, since the word rendered I have learned the secret means I have been initiated. He can bear either of the two extremes of human experience, and can keep a calm and untroubled mind whichever of them he has to front. He has the same equable spirit when abased and when abounding. He is like a compensation pendulum which corrects expansions and contractions and keeps time anywhere. I remember hearing of a captain in an Arctic expedition who had been recalled from the Tropics and sent straight away to the North Pole. Sometimes God gives His children a similar experience.

It is possible for us not only to bear with equal minds both extremes, but to get the good out of both. It is a hard lesson and takes much conning, to learn to bear sorrow or suffering or want. They have great lessons to teach us all, and a character that has not been schooled by one of these dwellers in the dark is imperfect as celery is not in season till frost has touched it. But it is not less difficult to learn how to bear prosperity and abundance, though we think it a pleasanter lesson. To carry a full cup without spilling is proverbially difficult, and one sees instances enough of men who were far better men when they were poor than they have ever been since they were rich, to give a terrible significance to the assertion that it is still more difficult to live a Christian life in prosperity than in sorrow. But while both threaten, both may minister to our growth. Sorrow will drive, and joy will draw, us nearer to God. If we are not tempted by abundance to plunge our desires into it, nor tempted by sorrow to think ourselves hopelessly harmed by it, both will knit us more closely to our true and changeless good. The centrifugal and centripetal forces both keep the earth in its orbit.

It is only when we are independent of circumstances that we are able to get the full good of them. When there is a strong hand at the helm, the wind, though it be almost blowing directly against us, helps us forward, but otherwise the ship drifts and washes about in the trough. We all need the exhortation to be their master, for we can do without them and they serve us.

Paul here lets us catch a glimpse of the inmost secret of his power without which all exhortations to independence are but waste words. He is conscious of a living power flowing through him and making him fit for anything, and he is not afraid that any one who studies him will accuse him of exaggeration even when he makes the tremendous claim I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me. That great word is even more emphatic in the original, not only because, as the Revised Version shows, it literally is in and not through, and so suggests again his familiar thought of a vital union with Jesus, but also because he uses a compound word which literally means strengthening within, so then the power communicated is breathed into the man, and in the most literal sense he is strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. This inward impartation of strength is the true and only condition of that self-sufficingness which Paul has just been claiming. Stoicism breaks down because it tries to make men apart from God sufficient for themselves, which no man is. To stand alone without Him is to be weak. Circumstances will always be too strong for me, and sins will be too strong. A Godless life has a weakness at the heart of its loneliness, but Christ and I are always in the majority, and in the face of all foes, be they ever so many and strong, we can confidently say, They that be with us are more than they that be with them. The old experience will prove true in our lives, and though they compass us about like bees, the worst that they can do is only to buzz angrily round our heads, and their end is in the name of the Lord to be destroyed. In ourselves we are weak, but if we are rooted, grounded, built on Jesus, we partake of the security of the rock of ages to which we are united, and cannot be swept away by the storm, so long as it stands unmoved. I have seen a thin hair-stemmed flower growing on the edge of a cataract and resisting the force of its plunge, and of the wind that always lives in its depths, because its roots are in a cleft of the cliff. The secret of strength for all men is to hold fast by the strong Son of God, and they only are sufficient in whatsoever state they are, to whom this loving and quickening voice has spoken the charter My grace is sufficient for thee.

**III. The renewed thanks for the loving sympathy expressed in the gift.**

We have here again an eager anxiety not to be misunderstood as undervaluing the Philippians gift. How beautifully the sublimity of the previous words lies side by side with the lowliness and gentleness of these.

We note here the combination of that grand independence with loving thankfulness for brotherly help. The self-sufficingness of Stoicism is essentially inhuman and isolating. It is contrary to God's plan and to the fellowship which is meant to knit men together. So we have always to take heed to blend with it a loving welcome to sympathy, and not to fancy that human help and human kindness is useless. We should be able to do without it, but that need not make it the less sweet when it comes. We may be carrying water for the march, but shall not the less prize a brook by the way. Our firm souls should be like the rocking stones in Cornwall, poised so truly that tempests cannot shake them, and yet vibrating at the touch of a little child's soft hand. That lofty independence needs to be humanised by grateful acceptance of the refreshment of human sympathy even though we can do without it.

Paul shows us here what is the true thing in a brother's help for which to be thankful. The reason why he was glad of their help was because it spoke to his heart and told him that they were making themselves sharers with him in his troubles. As he tells us in the beginning of the letter, their fellowship in his labours had been from the beginning a joy to him. It was not so much their material help as their true sympathy that he valued. The high level to which he lifts what was possibly a very modest contribution, if measured by money standards, carries with it a great lesson for all receivers and for all givers of such gifts, teaching the one that they are purely selfish if they are glad of what they get, and bidding the other remember that they may give so as to hurt by a gift more than by a blow, that they may give infinitely more by loving sympathy than by much gold, and that a £5 note does not discharge all their obligations. We have to give after His pattern who does not toss us our alms from a height, but Himself comes to bestow them, and whose gift, though it be the unspeakable gift of eternal life, is less than the love it speaks, in that He Himself has in wondrous manner become partaker of our weakness. The pattern of all sympathy, the giver of all our possessions, is God. Let us hold to Him in faith and love, and all earthly love will be sweeter and sympathy more precious. Our own hearts will be refined and purified to a delicacy of consideration and a tenderness beyond their own. Our souls will be made lords of all circumstances and strengthened according to our need. He will say to us My grace is sufficient for thee, and we, as we feel His strength being made perfect in our weakness, shall be able to say with humble confidence, I can do all things in Christ who strengtheneth me within.