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

**ROMANS-033**. **ANOTHER TRIPLET OF GRACES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer."*

*Romans 12:12*

These three closely connected clauses occur, as you all know, in the midst of that outline of the Christian life with which the Apostle begins the practical part of this Epistle. Now, what he omits in this sketch of Christian duty seems to me quite as significant as what he inserts. It is very remarkable that in the twenty verses devoted to this subject, this is the only one which refers to the inner secrets of the Christian life. Paul's notion of deepening the spiritual life was Behave yourself better in your relation to other people. So all the rest of this chapter is devoted to inculcating our duties to one another. Conduct is all-important. An orthodox creed is valuable if it influences action, but not otherwise. Devout emotion is valuable, if it drives the wheels of life, but not otherwise. Christians should make efforts to attain to clear views and warm feelings, but the outcome and final test of both is a daily life of visible imitation of Jesus. The deepening of spiritual life should be manifested by completer, practical righteousness in the market-place and the street and the house, which non-Christians will acknowledge.

But now, with regard to these three specific exhortations here, I wish to try to bring out their connection as well as the force of each of them.

**I. So I remark first, that the Christian life ought to be joyful because it is hopeful.**

Now, I do not suppose that many of us habitually recognise it as a Christian duty to be joyful. We think that it is a matter of temperament and partly a matter of circumstance. We are glad when things go well with us. If we have a sunny disposition, and are naturally light-hearted, all the better; if we have a melancholy or morose one, all the worse. But do we recognise this, that a Christian who is not joyful is not living up to his duty; and that there is no excuse, either in temperament or in circumstances, for our not being so, and always being so? Rejoice in the Lord alway, says Paul; and then, as if he thought, Some of you will be thinking that that is a very rash commandment, to aim at a condition quite impossible to make constant, he goes on--and, to convince you that I do not say it hastily, I will repeat it--"and again I say, rejoice." Brethren, we shall have to alter our conceptions of what true gladness is before we can come to understand the full depth of the great thought that joy is a Christian duty. The true joy is not the kind of joy that a saying in the Old Testament compares to the crackling of thorns under a pot, but something very much calmer, with no crackle in it; and very much deeper, and very much more in alliance with whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, than that foolish, short-lived, and empty mirth that burns down so soon into black ashes.

To be glad is a Christian duty. Many of us have as much religion as makes us sombre, and impels us often to look upon the more solemn and awful aspects of Christian truth, but we have not enough to make us glad. I do not need to dwell upon all the sources in Christian faith and belief, of that lofty and imperatively obligatory gladness, but I confine myself to the one in my text, Rejoicing in hope.

Now, we all know--from the boy that is expecting to go home for his holidays in a week, up to the old man to whose eye the time-veil is wearing thin--that hope, if it is certain, is a source of gladness. How lightly one's bosom's lord sits upon its throne, when a great hope comes to animate us! how everybody is pleasant, and all things are easy, and the world looks different! Hope, if it is certain, will gladden, and if our Christianity grasps, as it ought to do, the only hope that is absolutely certain, and as sure as if it were in the past and had been experienced, then our hearts, too, will sing for joy. True joy is not a matter of temperament, so much as a matter of faith. It is not a matter of circumstances. All the surface drainage may be dry, but there is a well in the courtyard deep and cool and full and exhaustless, and a Christian who rightly understands and cherishes the Christian hope is lifted above temperament, and is not dependent upon conditions for his joys.

The Apostle, in an earlier part of this same letter, defines for us what that hope is, which thus is the secret of perpetual gladness, when he speaks about rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. Yes, it is that great, supreme, calm, far off, absolutely certain prospect of being gathered into the divine glory, and walking there, like the three in the fiery furnace, unconsumed and at ease; it is that hope that will triumph over temperament, and over all occasions for melancholy, and will breathe into our life a perpetual gladness. Brethren, is it not strange and sad that with such a treasure by our sides we should consent to live such poor lives as we do?

But remember, although I cannot say to myself, Now I will be glad, and cannot attain to joy by a movement of the will or direct effort, although it is of no use to say to a man--which is all that the world can ever say to him--Cheer up and be glad, whilst you do not alter the facts that make him sad, there is a way by which we can bring about feelings of gladness or of gloom. It is just this--we can choose what we will look at. If you prefer to occupy your mind with the troubles, losses, disappointments, hard work, blighted hopes of this poor sin-ridden world, of course sadness will come over you often, and a general grey tone will be the usual tone of your lives, as it is of the lives of many of us, broken only by occasional bursts of foolish mirth and empty laughter. But if you choose to turn away from all these, and instead of the dim, dismal, hard present, to sun yourselves in the light of the yet unrisen sun, which you can do, then, having rightly chosen the subjects to think about, the feeling will come as a matter of course. You cannot make yourselves glad by, as it were, laying hold of yourselves and lifting yourselves into gladness, but you can rule the direction of your thoughts, and so can bring around you summer in the midst of winter, by steadily contemplating the facts--and they are present facts, though we talk about them collectively as the future--the facts on which all Christian gladness ought to be based. We can carry our own atmosphere with us; like the people in Italy, who in frosty weather will be seen sitting in the market-place by their stalls with a dish of embers, which they grasp in their hands, and so make themselves comfortably warm on the bitterest day. You can bring a reasonable degree of warmth into the coldest weather, if you will lay hold of the vessel in which the fire is, and keep it in your hand and close to your heart. Choose what you think about, and feelings will follow thoughts.

But it needs very distinct and continuous effort for a man to keep this great source of Christian joy clear before him. We are like the dwellers in some island of the sea, who, in some conditions of the atmosphere, can catch sight of the gleaming mountain-tops on the mainland across the stormy channel between. But thick days, with a heavy atmosphere and much mist, are very frequent in our latitude, and then all the distant hills are blotted out, and we see nothing but the cold grey sea, breaking on the cold, grey stones. Still, you can scatter the mist if you will. You can make the atmosphere bright; and it is worth an effort to bring clear before us, and to keep high above the mists that cling to the low levels, the great vision which will make us glad. Brethren, I believe that one great source of the weakness of average Christianity amongst us to-day is the dimness into which so many of us have let the hope of the glory of God pass in our hearts. So I beg you to lay to heart this first commandment, and to rejoice in hope.

**II. Now, secondly, here is the thought that life, if full of joyful hope, will be patient.**

I have been saying that the gladness of which my text speaks is independent of circumstances, and may persist and be continuous even when externals occasion sadness. It is possible--I do not say it is easy, God knows it is hard--I do not say it is frequently attained, but I do say it is possible--to realise that wonderful ideal of the Apostle's As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. The surface of the ocean may be tossed and fretted by the winds, and churned into foam, but the great central depths hear not the loud winds when they call, and are still in the midst of tempest. And we, dear brethren, ought to have an inner depth of spirit, down to the disturbance of which no surface-trouble can ever reach. That is the height of attainment of Christian faith, but it is a possible attainment for every one of us.

And if there be that burning of the light under the water, like Greek fire, as it was called, which many waters could not quench--if there be that persistence of gladness beneath the surface-sorrow, as you find a running stream coming out below a glacier, then the joy and the hope, which co-exist with the sorrow, will make life patient.

Now, the Apostle means by these great words, patient and patience, which are often upon his lips, something more than simple endurance. That endurance is as much as many of us can often muster up strength to exercise. It sometimes takes all our faith and all our submission simply to say, I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it; and I will bear what thine hand lays upon me. But that is not all that the idea of Christian patience includes, for it also takes in the thought of active work, and it is perseverance as much as patience.

Now, if my heart is filled with a calm gladness because my eye is fixed upon a celestial hope, then both the passive and active sides of Christian patience will be realised by me. If my hope burns bright, and occupies a large space in my thoughts, then it will not be hard to take the homely consolation of good John Newton's hymn and say--

Though painful at present,

Twill cease before long;

And then, oh, how pleasant

The conqueror's song!

A man who is sailing to America, and knows that he will be in New York in a week, does not mind, although his cabin is contracted, and he has a great many discomforts, and though he has a bout of sea-sickness. The disagreeables are only going to last for a day or two. So our hope will make us bear trouble, and not make much of it.

And our hope will strengthen us, if it is strong, for all the work that is to be done. Persistence in the path of duty, though my heart be beating like a smith's hammer on the anvil, is what Christian men should aim at, and possess. If we have within our hearts that fire of a certain hope, it will impel us to diligence in doing the humblest duty, whether circumstances be for or against us; as some great steamer is driven right on its course, through the ocean, whatever storms may blow in the teeth of its progress, because, deep down in it, there are furnaces and boilers which supply the steam that drives the engines. So a life that is joyful because it is hopeful will be full of calm endurance and strenuous work. Rejoicing in hope; patient, persevering in tribulation.

**III. Lastly, our lives will be joyful, hopeful, and patient, in proportion as they are prayerful.**

Continuing instant--which, of course, just means steadfast--in prayer. Paul uttered a paradox when he said, Rejoice in the Lord alway, as he said long before this verse, in the very first letter that he ever wrote, or at least the first which has come down to us. There he bracketed it along with two other equally paradoxical sayings. Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks. If you pray without ceasing you can rejoice without ceasing.

But can I pray without ceasing? Not if by prayer you mean only words of supplication and petition, but if by prayer you mean also a mental attitude of devotion, and a kind of sub-conscious reference to God in all that you do, such unceasing prayer is possible. Do not let us blunt the edge of this commandment, and weaken our own consciousness of having failed to obey it, by getting entangled in the cobwebs of mere curious discussions as to whether the absolute ideal of perfectly unbroken communion with God is possible in this life. At all events it is possible to us to approximate to that ideal a great deal more closely than our consciences tell us that we ever yet have done. If we are trying to keep our hearts in the midst of daily duty in contact with God, and if, ever and anon in the press of our work, we cast a thought towards Him and a prayer, then joy and hope and patience will come to us, in a degree that we do not know much about yet, but might have known all about long, long ago.

There is a verse in the Old Testament which we may well lay to heart: They cried unto God in the battle, and He was entreated of them. Well, what sort of a prayer do you think that would be? Suppose that you were standing in the thick of battle with the sword of an enemy at your throat, there would not be much time for many words of prayer, would there? But the cry could go up, and the thought could go up, and as they went up, down would come the strong buckler which God puts between His servants and all evil. That is the sort of prayer that you, in the battle of business, in your shops and counting-houses and warehouses and mills, we students in our studies, and you mothers in your families and your kitchens, can send up to heaven. If thus we pray without ceasing, then we shall rejoice evermore, and our souls will be kept in patience and filled with the peace of God.