

JOY AND PEACE IN BELIEVING

[The Effect of Christianity on the Inward Life]



A sermon by Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910). He was pastor of Union Chapel in Manchester, England for 45 years; there he became known as ‘the prince of expository preachers.’

‘The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost’ - ROMANS 15:13.

With this comprehensive and lofty petition the Apostle closes his exhortation to the factions in the Roman Church to be at unity. The form of the prayer is moulded by the last words of a quotation which he has just made, which says that in the coming Messiah ‘shall the Gentiles hope.’ But the prayer itself is not an instance of being led away by a word—in form, indeed, it is shaped by verbal resemblance; in substance it points to the true remedy for religious controversy. Fill the contending parties with a fuller spiritual life, and the ground of their differences will begin

to dwindle, and look very contemptible. When the tide rises, the little pools on the rocks are all merged into one.

But we may pass beyond the immediate application of these words, and see in them the wish, which is also a promise, and like the exhibition of every ideal is a command. This is Paul's conception of the Christian life as it might and should be, in one aspect. You notice that there is not a word in it about conduct. It goes far deeper than action. It deals with the springs of action in the individual life. It is the depths of spiritual experience here set forth which will result in actions that become a Christian. And in these days, when all around us we see a shallow conception of Christianity, as if it were concerned principally with conduct and men's relations with one another, it is well to go down into the depths, and to remember that whilst 'Do, do, do!' is very important, 'Be, be, be!' is the primary commandment. Conduct is a making visible of personality, and the Scripture teaching which says first faith and then works is profoundly philosophical as well as Christian. So we turn away here from externals altogether, and regard the effect of Christianity on the inward life.

I. I wish to notice man's faith and God's filling as connected, and as the foundation of everything.

'The God of hope fill you . . . '—let us leave out the intervening words for a moment—'in believing.' Now, you notice that Paul does not stay to tell us what or whom we are to believe in, or on. He takes that for granted, and his thought is fastened, for the moment, not on the object but on the act of faith. And he wishes to drive home to us this, that the attitude of trust is the necessary prerequisite condition of God's being able to fill a man's soul, and that God's being able to fill a man's soul is the necessary consequence of a man's trust. Ah, brethren, we cannot altogether shut God out from our spirits. There are loving and

gracious gifts that, as our Lord tells us, He makes to 'fall on the unthankful and the evil.' His rain is not like the summer showers that we sometimes see, that fall in one spot and leave another dry; nor like the destructive thunderstorms, that come down bringing ruin upon one canebreak and leave the plants in the next standing upright. But the best, the highest, the truly divine gifts which He is yearning to give to us all, cannot be given except there be consent, trust, and desire for them. You can shut your hearts or you can open them. And just as the wind will sigh round some hermetically closed chamber in vain search for a cranny, and the man within may be asphyxiated though the atmosphere is surging up its waves all round his closed domicile, so by lack of our faith, which is at once trust, consent, and desire, we shut out the gift with which God would fain fill our spirits. You can take a porous pottery vessel, wrap it up in wax cloth, pitch it all over, and then drop it into mid-Atlantic, and not a drop will find its way in. And that is what we can do with ourselves, so that although in Him 'we live and move and have our being,' and are like the earthen vessel in the ocean, no drop of the blessed moisture will ever find its way into the heart. There must be man's faith before there can be God's filling.

Further, this relation of the two things suggests to us that a consequence of a Christian man's faith is the direct action of God upon him. Notice how the Apostle puts that truth in a double form here, in order that he may emphasize it, using one form of expression, involving the divine, direct activity, at the beginning of his prayer, and another at the end, and so enclosing, as it were, within a great casket of the divine action, all the blessings, the flashing jewels, which he desires his Roman friends to possess. 'The God of hope fill you . . . through the power of the Holy Ghost.' I wish I could find words by which I could bear in upon the ordinary type of the Evangelical Christianity of this generation anything like the depth and earnestness of my own conviction that, for lack of a proportionate devel-

opment of that great truth, of the direct action of the giving God on the believing heart, it is weakened and harmed in many ways. Surely He that made my spirit can touch my spirit; surely He who filleth all things according to their capacity can Himself enter into and fill the spirit which is opened for Him by simple faith. We do not need wires for the telegraphy between heaven and the believing soul, but He comes directly to, and speaks in, and moves upon, and moulds and blesses, the waiting heart. And until you know, by your own experience rightly interpreted, that there is such a direct communion between the giving God and the recipient believing spirit, you have yet to learn the deepest depth, and the most blessed blessedness, of Christian faith and experience. For lack of it a hundred evils beset modern Christianity. For lack of it men fix their faith so exclusively as that the faith is itself harmed thereby, on the past act of Christ's death on the Cross. You will not suspect me of minimizing that, but I beseech you remember one climax of the Apostle's which, though not bearing the same message as my text, is in harmony with it, 'Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.' And remember that Christ Himself bestows the gift of His Divine Spirit as the result of the humiliation and the agony of His Cross. Faith brings the direct action of the giving God.

And one more word about this first part of my text: the result of that direct action is complete—'the God of hope fill you' with no shrunken stream, no painful trickle out of a narrow rift in the rock, but a great exuberance which will pass into a man's nature in the measure of his capacity, which is the measure of his trust and desire. There are two limits to God's gifts to men: the one is the limitless limit of God's infinitude, the other is the working limit—our capacity—and that capacity is precisely measured, as the capacity of some built-in vessel might be measured by a little gauge on the outside, by our faith. 'The God of hope' fills

you in 'believing,' and 'according to thy faith shall it be unto thee.'

II. Notice the joy and peace which come from the direct action of the God of hope on the believer's soul.

Now, it is not only towards God that we exercise trust, but wherever it is exercised, to some extent, and in the measure in which the object on which it rests is discovered by experience to be worthy, it produces precisely these results. Whoever trusts is at peace, just as much as he trusts. His confidence may be mistaken, and there will come a tremendous awakening if it is, and the peace will be shattered like some crystal vessel dashed upon an iron pavement, but so long as a man's mind and heart are in the attitude of dependence upon another, conceived to be dependable, one knows that there are few phases of tranquility and blessedness which are sweeter and deeper than that. 'The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her'—that is one illustration, and a hundred more might be given. And if you will take that attitude of trust which, even when it twines round some earthly prop, is upheld for a time, and bears bright flowers—if you take it and twine it round the steadfast foundations of the Throne of God, what can shake that sure repose? 'Joy and peace' will come when the Christian heart closes with its trust, which is God in Christ.

He that believes has found the short, sure road to joy and peace, because his relations are set right with God. For these relations are the disturbing elements in all earthly tranquility, and like the skeleton at the feast in all earthly joy, and a man can never, down to the roots of his being, be at rest until he is quite sure that there is nothing wrong between him and God. And so believing, we come to that root of all real gladness which is anything better than a crackling of thorns under a pot, and to that beginning of all

true tranquility. Joy in the Lord and peace with God are the parents of all joy and peace that are worthy of the name.

And that same faith will again bring these two bright-winged angels into the most saddened and troubled lives, because that faith brings right relations with ourselves. For our inward strifes stuff thorns into the pillow of our repose, and mingle bitterness with the sweetest, foaming draughts of our earthly joys. If a man's conscience and inclinations pull him two different ways, he is torn asunder as by wild horses. If a man has a hungry heart, for ever yearning after unattained and impossible blessings, then there is no rest there. If a man's little kingdom within him is all anarchical, and each passion and appetite setting up for itself, then there is no tranquility. But if by faith we let the God of hope come in, then hungry hearts are satisfied, and warring dispositions are harmonized, and the conscience becomes quieted, and fair imaginations fill the chamber of the spirit, and the man is at rest, because he himself is unified by the faith and fear of God.

And the same faith brings joy and peace because it sets right our relations with other people, and with all externals. If I am living in an atmosphere of trust, then sorrow will never be absolute, nor have exclusive monopoly and possession of my spirit. But there will be the paradox, and the blessedness, of Christian experience, 'as sorrowful yet always rejoicing.' For the joy of the Christian life has its source far away beyond the swamps from which the sour drops of sorrow may trickle, and it is possible that, like the fabled fire that burned under water, the joy of the Lord may be bright in my heart, even when it is drenched in floods of calamity and distress.

And so, brethren, the joy and peace that come from faith will fill the heart which trusts. Only remember how emphatically the Apostle here puts these two things together, 'joy and peace in believing.' As long as, and not a

moment longer than, you are exercising the Christian act of trust, will you be experiencing the Christian blessedness of 'joy and peace.' Unscrew the pipe, and in an instant the water ceases to flow. Touch the button and switch off, and out goes the light. Some Christian people fancy they can live upon past faith. You will get no present joy and peace out of past faith. The rain of this day twelve months will not moisten the parched ground of to-day. Yesterday's religion was all used up yesterday. And if you would have a continuous flow of joy and peace through your lives, keep up a uniform habit and attitude of trust in God. You will get it then; you will get it in no other way.

III. Lastly, note the hope which springs from this experience of joy and peace.

'The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope.' Here, again, the Apostle does not trouble himself to define the object of the hope. In this, as in the former clause, his attention is fixed upon the emotion, not upon that towards which it goes out. And just as there was no need to say in whom it was that the Christian man was to believe, so there is no room to define what it is that the Christian man has a right to hope for. For his hope is intended to cover all the future, the next moment, or to-morrow, or the dimmest distance where time has ceased to be, and eternity stands unmoved. The attitude of the Christian mind ought to be a cheery optimism, an unconquerable hope. 'The best has yet to be' is the true Christian thought in contemplating the future for myself, for my dear ones, for God's Church, and for God's universe.

And the truest basis on which that hope can rest is the experience granted to us, on condition of our faith, of a present, abundant possession of the joy and peace which God gives. The gladder you are to-day, if the gladness comes from the right source, the surer you may be that that

gladness will never end. That is not what befalls men who live by earthly joys. For the more poignant, precious, and, as we faithlessly think, indispensable some of these are to us, the more into their sweetest sweetness creeps the dread thought: 'This is too good to last; this must pass.' We never need to think that about the peace and joy that come to us through believing. For they, in their sweetness, prophecy perpetuity. I need not dwell upon the thought that the firmest, most personally precious convictions of an eternity of future blessedness, rise and fall in a Christian consciousness with the purity and the depth of its own experience of the peace and joy of the Gospel. The more you have of Jesus Christ in your lives and hearts to-day, the surer you will be that whatever death may do, it cannot touch that, and the more ludicrously impossible it will seem that anything that befalls this poor body can touch the bond that knits us to Jesus Christ. Death can separate us from a great deal. Its sharp scythe cuts through all other bonds, but its edge is turned when it is tried against the golden chain that binds the believing soul to the Christ in whom he has believed.

So, brethren, there is the ladder—begin at the bottom step, with faith in Jesus Christ. That will bring God's direct action into your spirit, through His Holy Spirit, and that one gift will break up into an endless multiplicity of blessings, just as a beam of light spilt upon the surface of the ocean breaks into diamonds in every wave, and that 'joy and peace' will kindle in your hearts a hope fed by the great words of the Lord: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you,' 'My joy shall remain in you, and your joy shall be full,' 'He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'

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