

Nehemiah Exposition 2 - Maclaren

Alexander Maclaren on Nehemiah

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Nehemiah 8:1-12: READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

'And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. 2. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate, from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. 4. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up: 6. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jemin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelgiah; and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. 8. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 9. And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. 10. Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength. 11. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. 12. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them..' —Nehemiah 8:1-12

THE wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which was the sixth month. The events recorded in this passage took place on the first day of the seventh month. The year is not given, but the natural inference is that it was the same as that of the finishing of the wall; namely, the twentieth of Artaxerxes. If so, the completion of the fortifications to which Nehemiah had set himself, was immediately followed by this reading of the law, in which Ezra takes the lead. The two men stand in a similar relative position to that of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the one representing the civil and the other the religious authority.

According to Ezra 7:9, Ezra had gone to Jerusalem about thirteen years before Nehemiah, and had had a weary time of fighting against the corruptions which had crept in among the returned captives. The arrival of Nehemiah would be hailed as bringing fresh,

young enthusiasm, none the less welcome and powerful because it had the king's authority entrusted to it. Evidently the two men thoroughly understood one another, and pulled together heartily. We heard nothing about Ezra while the wall was being built. But now he is the principal figure, and Nehemiah is barely mentioned. The reasons for Ezra's taking the prominent part in the reading of the law are given in the two titles by which he is designated in two successive verses (vers. 1, 2). He was 'the scribe' and also 'the priest,' and in both capacities was the natural person for such a work.

The seventh month was the festival month of the year, its first day being that of the Feast of trumpets, and the great Feast of tabernacles as well as the solemn day of atonement occurring in it. Possibly, the prospect of the coming of the times for these celebrations may have led to the people's wish to hear the law, that they might duly observe the appointed ceremonial. At all events, the first thing to note is that it was in consequence of the people's wish that the law was read in their hearing. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah originated the gathering together. They obeyed a popular impulse which they had not created. We must not, indeed, give the multitude credit for much more than the wish to have their ceremonial right. But there was at least that wish, and possibly something deeper and more spiritual. The walls were completed; but the true defence of Israel was in God, and the condition of His defending was Israel's obedience to His law. The people were, in some measure, beginning to realise that condition with new clearness, in consequence of the new fervour which Nehemiah had brought.

It is singular that, during his thirteen years of residence, Ezra is not recorded to have promulgated the law, though it lay at the basis of the drastic reforms which he was able to carry through. Probably he had not been silent, but the solemn public recitation of the law was felt to be appropriate on occasion of completing the wall. Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that earnest wish to know God's

will which is cherished in vain. He who does not intend to does not wish to know the law. If we have no lon to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person, works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit, and in those things which the world calls 'circumstances' and faith names 'providences.'

II. Nehemiah 8:2-8 appear to tell the same incidents twice over — first, more generally in verses 2 and 3, and then more minutely.

Such expanded repetition is characteristic of the Old Testament historical style. It is somewhat difficult to make sure of the real circumstances. Clearly enough there was a solemn assembly of men, women, and children in a great open space outside one of the gates, and there, from dawn till noon, the law was read and explained. But whether Ezra read it all, while the Levites named in verse 7 explained or paraphrased or translated it, or whether they all read in turns, or whether there were a number of groups, each of which had a teacher who both read and expounded, is hard to determine. At all events, Ezra was the principal figure, and began the reading.

It was a picturesque scene. The sun, rising over the slopes of Olivet, would fall on the gathered crowd, if the water-gate was, as is probable, on the east or south-east side of the city. Beneath the fresh fortifications probably, which would act as a sounding-board for the reader, was set up a scaffold high above the crowd, large enough to hold Ezra and thirteen supporters— principal men, no doubt — seven on one side of him and six on the other. Probably a name has dropped out, and the numbers were equal. There, in the morning light, with the new walls for a background, stood Ezra on his rostrum, and amid reverent silence, lifted high the sacred roll. A common impulse swayed the crowd, and brought them all to their feet— token at once of respect and obedient attention. Probably many of them had never seen a sacred roll. To them all it was comparatively unfamiliar. No wonder that, as Ezra's voice rose in prayer, the whole assembly fell on their faces in adoration, and every lip responded 'Amen! amen!'

Much superstition may have mingled with the reverence. No doubt, there was then what we are often solemnly warned against now, bibliolatry. But in this time of critical investigation it is not the divine element in Scripture which is likely to be exaggerated; and few are likely to go wrong in the direction of paying too much reverence to the Book in which, as is still believed, God has revealed His will and Himself. While welcoming all investigations which throw light on its origin or its meaning, and perfectly recognising the human element in it, we should learn the lesson taught by that waiting crowd prone on their faces, and blessing God for His word. Such attitude must ever precede reading it, if we are to read aright.

Hour after hour the recitation went on. We must let the question of the precise form of the events remain undetermined. It is somewhat singular that thirteen names are enumerated as of the men who stood by Ezra, and thirteen as those of the readers or expounders. It may be the case that the former number is complete, though uneven, and that there was some reason unknown for dividing the audience into just so many sections. The second set of thirteen was not composed of the same men as the first. They seem to have been Levites, whose office of assisting at the menial parts of the sacrifices was now elevated into that of setting forth the law. Probably the portions read were such as bore especially on ritual, though the tears of the listeners are sufficient proof that

they had heard some things that went deeper than that.

The word rendered 'distinctly' in the Revised Version (margin, with an interpretation) is ambiguous, and may either mean that the Levites explained or that they translated the words. The former is the more probable, as there is no reason to suppose that the audience, most of whom had been born in the land, were ignorant of Hebrew. But if the ritual had been irregularly observed, and the circle of ideas in the law become unfamiliar, many explanations would be necessary. It strikes one as touching and strange that such an assembly should be needed after so many centuries of national existence. It sums up in one vivid picture the sin and suffering of the nation. To observe that law had been the condition of their prosperity. To bind it on their hearts should have been their delight and would have been their life, and here, after all these generations, the best of the nation are assembled, so ignorant of it that they cannot even understand it when they hear it. Absorption with worldly things has an awful power of dulling spiritual apprehension. Neglect of God's law weakens the power of understanding it.

This scene was in the truest sense a 'revival.' We may learn the true way of bringing men back to God; namely, the faithful exposition and enforcement of God's will and word. We may learn, too, what should be the aim of public teachers of religion; namely, first and foremost, the clear setting forth of God's truth. Their first business is to 'give the sense, so that they understand the reading'; and that, not for merely intellectual purposes, but that, like the crowd outside the water-gate on that hot noonday, men may be moved to penitence, and then lifted to the joy of the Lord.

The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of trumpets; and when the reading was over, and its effects of tears and sorrow for disobedience were seen, the preachers changed their tone, to bring consolation and exhort to gladness. Nehemiah had taken no part in reading the law, as Ezra the priest and his Levites were more appropriately set to that. But he joins them in exhorting the people to dry their tears, and go joyfully to the feast. These exhortations contain many thoughts universally applicable. They teach that even those who are most conscious of sin and breaches of God's law should weep indeed, but should swiftly pass from tears to joy. They do not teach how that passage is to be effected; and in so far they are imperfect, and need to be supplemented by the New Testament teaching of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But in their clear discernment that sorrow is not meant to be a permanent characteristic of religion, and that gladness is a more acceptable offering than tears, they teach a valuable lesson, needed always by men who fancy that they must atone for their sins by their own sadness, and that religion is gloomy, harsh, and crabbed.

Further, these exhortations to festal gladness breathe the characteristic Old Testament tone of wholesome enjoyment of material good as a part of religion. The way of looking at eating and drinking and the like, as capable of being made acts of worship, has been too often forgotten by two kinds of men — saints who have sought sanctity in asceticism; and sensualists who have taken deep draughts of such pleasures without calling on the name of the Lord, and so have failed to find His gifts a cup of salvation. It is possible to 'eat and drink and see God,' as the elders of Israel did on Sinai.

Further, the plain duty of remembering the needy while we enjoy God's gifts is beautifully enjoined here. The principle underlying the commandment to 'send portions to them for whom nothing is provided' — that is, for whom no feast has been dressed — is that all gifts are held in trust, that nothing is bestowed on us for our own good only, but that we are in all things stewards. The law extends to the smallest and to the greatest possessions. We have no right to feast on anything unless we share it, whether it be festal dainties or the bread that came down from heaven. To divide our portion with others is the way to make our portion greater as well as sweeter.

Further, 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.' By strength here seems to be meant a stronghold. If we fix our desires on God, and have trained our hearts to find sweeter delights in communion with Him than in any earthly good, our religion will have lifted us above mists and clouds into clear air above, where sorrows and changes will have little power to affect us. If we are to rejoice in the Lord, it will be possible for us to 'rejoice always,' and that joy will be as a refuge from all the ills that flesh is heir to. Dwelling in God, we shall dwell safely, and be far from the fear of evil.

Nehemiah 8:10: THE JOY OF THE LORD

“ The joy of the Lord is your strength.” — Nehemiah 8:10.

JUDAISM, in its formal and ceremonial aspect, was a religion of gladness. The feast was the great act of worship. It is not to be wondered at, that Christianity, the perfecting of that ancient system, has been less markedly felt to be a religion of joy; for it brings with it far deeper and more solemn views about man in his nature, condition, responsibilities, destinies, than ever prevailed before, under any system of worship. And yet all deep religion ought to be joyful, and all strong religion assuredly will be so.

Here, in the incident before us, there has come a time in Nehemiah's great enterprise, when the law, long forgotten, long broken by

the captives, is now to be established again as the rule of the newly-founded commonwealth. Naturally enough there comes a remembrance of many sins in the past history of the people; and tears not unnaturally mingle with the thankfulness that again they are a nation, having a divine worship and a divine law in their midst. The leader of them, knowing for one thing that if the spirits of his people once began to flag, they could not face nor conquer the difficulties of their position, said to them, 'This day is holy unto the Lord: this feast that we are keeping is a day of devout worship; therefore mourn not, nor weep: go your way; eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' You will make nothing of it by indulgence in lamentation and in mourning. You will have no more power for obedience, you will not be fit for your work, if you fall into a desponding state. Be thankful and glad; and remember that the purest worship is the worship of God-fixed joy, 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.' And that is as true, brethren! with regard to us, as it ever was in these old times; and we, I think, need the lesson contained in this saying of Nehemiah's, because of some prevalent tendencies amongst us, no less than these Jews did. Take some simple thoughts suggested by this text which are both important in themselves and needful to be made emphatic because so often forgotten in the ordinary type of Christian character. They are these. Religious Joy is the natural result of faith. It is a Christian duty. It is an important element in Christian strength.

I. Joy in the Lord is the natural result of Christian Faith.

There is a natural adaptation or provision in the Gospel, both by what it brings to us and by what it takes away from us, to make a calm, and settled, and deep gladness, the prevalent temper of the Christian spirit. In what it gives us, I say, and in what it takes away from us. It gives us what we call well a sense of acceptance with God, it gives us God for the rest of our spirits, it gives us the communion with Him which in proportion as it is real, will be still, and in proportion as it is still, will be all bright and joyful. It takes away from us the fear that lies before us, the strifes that lie within us, the desperate conflict that is waged between a man's conscience and his inclinations, between his will and his passions, which tears the heart asunder, and always makes sorrow and tumult wherever it comes. It takes away the sense of sin. It gives us, instead of the torpid conscience, or the angrily-stinging conscience — a conscience all calm from its accusations, with all the sting drawn out of it : — for quiet peace lies in the heart of the man that is trusting in the Lord. The Gospel works joy, because the soul is at rest in God; joy, because every function of the spiritual nature has found now its haven and its object; joy, because health has come, and the healthy working of the body or of the spirit is itself a gladness; joy, because the dim future is painted (where it is painted at all) with shapes of light and beauty, and because the very vagueness of these is an element in the greatness of its revelation. The joy that is in Christ is deep and abiding. Faith in Him naturally works gladness.

I do not forget that, on the other side, it is equally true that the Christian faith has as marked and almost as strong an adaptation to produce a solemn sorrow — solemn, manly, noble, and strong. 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' is the rule of the Christian life. If we think of what our faith does; of the light that it casts upon our condition, upon our nature, upon our responsibilities, upon our sins, and upon our destinies, we can easily see how, if gladness be one part of its operation, no less really and truly is sadness another. Brethren! all great thoughts have a solemn quiet in them, which not unfrequently merges into a still sorrow. There is nothing more contemptible in itself, and there is no more sure mark of a trivial nature and a trivial round of occupations, than unshaded gladness, that rests on no deep foundations of quiet, patient grief; grief, because I know what I am and what I ought to be; grief, because I have learnt the 'exceeding sinfulness of sin'; grief, because, looking out upon the world, I see, as other men do not see, hell-fire burning at the back of the mirth and the laughter, and know what it is that men are hurrying to! Do you remember who it was that stood by the side of the one poor dumb man, whose tongue He was going to loose, and looking up to heaven, sighed before He could say, 'Be opened'? Do you remember that of Him it is said, 'God hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows'; and also, 'a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief'? And do you not think that both these characteristics are to be repeated in the operations of His Gospel upon every heart that receives it? And if, by the hopes it breathes into us, by the fears that it takes away from us, by the union with God that it accomplishes for us, by the fellowship that it implants in us, it indeed anoints us all 'with the oil of gladness'; yet, on the other hand, by the sense of mine own sin that it teaches me; by the conflict with weakness which it makes to be the law of my life; by the clear vision which it gives me of 'the law of my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into subjection'; by the intensity which it breathes into all my nature, and by the thoughts that it presents of what sin leads to, and what the world at present is, the Gospel, wheresoever it comes, will infuse a wise, valiant sadness as the very foundation of character. Yes, joy, but sorrow too! the joy of the Lord, but sorrow as we look on our own sin and the world's woe! the head anointed with the oil of gladness, but also crowned with thorns!

These two are not contradictory. These two states of mind, both of them the natural operations of any deep faith, may co-exist and blend into one another, so as that the gladness is sobered, and chastened, and made manly and noble; and that the sorrow is like some thundercloud, all streaked with bars of sunshine, that pierce into its deepest depths. The joy lives in the midst of the sorrow; the sorrow springs from the same root as the gladness. The two do not clash against each other, or reduce the emotion to a neutral indifference, but they blend into one another; just as, in the Arctic regions, deep down beneath the cold snow, with its white desolation and its barren death, you will find the budding of the early spring flowers and the fresh green grass; just as some kinds of fire burn below the water; just as, in the midst of the barren and undrinkable sea, there may be welling up some little fountain of

fresh water that comes from a deeper depth than the great ocean around it, and pours its sweet streams along the surface of the salt waste. Gladness, because I love, for love is gladness; gladness, because I trust, for trust is gladness; gladness, because I obey, for obedience is a meat that others know not of, and light comes when we do His will! But sorrow, because still I am wrestling with sin; sorrow, because still I have not perfect fellowship; sorrow, because mine eye, purified by my living with God, sees earth, and sin, and life, and death, and the generations of men, and the darkness beyond, in some measure as God sees them! And yet, the sorrow is surface, and the joy is central; the sorrow springs from circumstance, and the gladness from the essence of the thing ; — and therefore the sorrow is transitory, and the gladness is perennial. For the Christian life is all like one of those sweet spring showers in early April, when the rain-drops weave for us a mist that hides the sunshine; and yet the hidden sun is in every sparkling drop, and they are all saturated and steeped in its light. 'The joy of the Lord' is the natural result and offspring of all Christian faith.

II. And now, secondly, the 'joy of the Lord' or rejoicing in God, is a matter of Christian duty.

It is a commandment here, and it is a command in the New Testament as well. 'Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' I need not quote to you the frequent repetitions of the same injunction which the Apostle Paul gives us,

'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice'; 'Rejoice evermore,' and the like.

The fact that this joy is enjoined us suggests to us a thought or two, worth looking at.

You may say with truth, 'My emotions of joy and sorrow are not under my own control: I cannot help being glad and sad as circumstances dictate.' But yet here it lies, a commandment. It is a duty, a thing that the Apostle enjoins; in which, of course, is implied, that somehow or other it is to a large extent within one's own power, and that even the indulgence in this emotion, and the degree to which a Christian life shall be a cheerful life, is dependent in a large measure on our own volitions, and stands on the same footing as our obedience to God's other commandments.

We can to a very great extent control even our own emotions; but then, besides, we can do more than that. It may be quite true, that you cannot help feeling sorrowful in the presence of sorrowful thoughts, and glad in the presence of thoughts that naturally kindle gladness. But I will tell you what you can do or refrain from doing — you can either go and stand in the light, or you can go and stand in the shadow. You can either fix your attention upon, and make the predominant subject of your religious contemplations, a truth which shall make you glad and strong, or a half-truth, which shall make you sorrowful, and therefore weak. Your meditations may either centre mainly upon your own selves, your faults and failings, and the like; or they may centre mainly upon God and His love, Christ and His grace, the Holy Spirit and His communion. You may either fill your soul with joyful thoughts, or though a true Christian, a real, devout, God-accepted believer, you may be so misapprehending the nature of the Gospel, and your relation to it, its promises and precepts, its duties and predictions, as that the prevalent tinge and cast of your religion shall be solemn and almost gloomy, and not lighted up and irradiated with the felt sense of God's presence — with the strong, healthy consciousness that you are a forgiven and justified man, and that you are going to be a glorified one.

And thus far (and it is a long way) by the selection or the rejection of the appropriate and proper subjects which shall make the main portion of our religious contemplation, and shall be the food of our devout thoughts, we can determine the complexion of our religious life. Just as you inject colouring matter into the fibres of some anatomical preparation; so a Christian may, as it were, inject into all the veins of his religious character and life, either the bright tints of gladness or the dark ones of self-despondency; and the result will be according to the thing that he has put into them. If your thoughts are chiefly occupied with God, and what He has done and is for you, then you will have peaceful joy. If, on the other hand, they are bent ever on yourself and your own unbelief, then you will always be sad. You can make your choice.

Christian men, the joy of the Lord is a duty. It is so because, as we have seen, it is the natural effect of faith, because we can do much to regulate our emotions directly, and much more to determine them by determining what set of thoughts shall engage us. A wise and strong faith is our duty. To keep our emotional nature well under control of reason and will is our duty. To lose thoughts of ourselves in God's truth about Himself is our duty. If we do these things, we cannot fail to have Christ's joy remaining in us, and making ours full. If we have not that blessed possession abiding with us, which He lived and died to give us, there is something wrong in us somewhere.

It seems to me that this is a truth which we have great need, my friends, to lay to heart. It is of no great consequence that we should practically confute the impotent old sneer about religion as being a gloomy thing. One does not need to mind much what some people say on that matter. The world would call 'the joy of the Lord' gloom, just as much as it calls 'godly sorrow' gloom. But we are losing for ourselves a power and an energy of which we have no conception, unless we feel that joy is a duty, and unless we believe that not to be joyful in the Lord is, therefore, more than a misfortune, it is a fault.

I do not forget that the comparative absence of this happy, peaceful sense of acceptance, harmony, oneness with God, springs sometimes from temperament, and depends on our natural disposition. Of course the natural character determines to a large extent the perspective of our conceptions of Christian truth, and the colouring of our inner religious life. I do not mean to say, for a moment,

that there is one uniform type to which all must be conformed, or they sin. There is indeed one type, the perfect manhood of Jesus, but it is all comprehensive, and each variety of our fragmentary manhood finds its own perfecting, and not its transmutation to another fashion of man, in being conformed to Him. Some of us are naturally fainthearted, timid, sceptical of any success, grave, melancholy, or hard to stir to any emotion. To such there will be an added difficulty in making quiet confident joy any very familiar guest in their home or in their place of prayer. But even such should remember that the 'powers of the world to come,' the energies of the Gospel, are given to us for the very express purpose of overcoming, as well as of hallowing, natural dispositions. If it be our duty to rejoice in the Lord, it is no sufficient excuse to urge for not responding to the reiterated call, 'I myself am disposed to sadness.'

Whilst making all allowances for the diversities of character, which will always operate to diversify the cast of the inner life in each individual, we think that, in the great majority of instances, there are two things, both faults, which have a great deal more to do with the absence of joy from much Christian experience, than any unfortunate natural tendency to the dark side of things. The one is, an actual deficiency in the depth and reality of our faith; and the other is, a misapprehension of the position which we have a right to take and are bound to take.

There is an actual deficiency in our faith. Oh, brethren! it is not to be wondered at that Christians do not find that the Lord with them is the Lord their strength and joy, as well as the Lord 'their righteousness'; when the amount of their fellowship with Him is so small, and the depth of it so shallow, as we usually find it. The first true vision that a sinful soul has of God, the imperfect beginnings of religion, usually are accompanied with intense self-abhorrence, and sorrowing tears of penitence. A further closer

vision of the love of God in Jesus Christ brings with it 'joy and peace in believing.' But the prolongation of these throughout life requires the steadfast continuousness of gaze towards Him. It is only where there is much faith and consequent love that there is much joy. Let us search our own hearts. If there is but little heat around the bulb of the thermometer, no wonder that the mercury marks a low degree. If there is but small faith, there will not be much gladness. The road into Giant Despair's castle is through doubt, which doubt comes from an absence, a sinful absence, in our own experience, of the felt presence of God, and the felt force of the verities of His Gospel.

But then, besides that, there is another fault: not a fault in the sense of crime or sin, but a fault (and a great one) in the sense of error and misapprehension. We as Christians do not take the position which we have a right to take and that we are bound to take. Men venture themselves upon God's word as they do on doubtful ice, timidly putting a light foot out, to feel if it will bear them, and always having the tacit fear, 'Now, it is going to crack!' You must cast yourselves on God's Gospel with all your weight, without any hanging back, without any doubt, without even the shadow of a suspicion that it will give — that the firm, pure floor will give, and let you through into the water! A Christian shrink from saying what the Apostle said, 'I know in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him until that day!' A Christian fancy that salvation is a future thing, and forget that it is a present thing! A Christian tremble to profess 'assurance of hope,' forgetting that there is no hope strong enough to bear the stress of a life's sorrows, which is not a conviction certain as one's own existence! Brethren I understand that the Gospel is a Gospel which brings a present salvation; and try to feel that it is not presumption, but simply acting out the very fundamental principle of it, when you are not afraid to say, 'I know that my Redeemer is yonder, and I know that He loves me!' Try to feel, I say, that by faith you have a right to take that position, 'Now, we know that we are the sons of God'; that you have a right to claim for yourselves, and that you are falling beneath the loftiness of the gift that is given to you unless you do claim for yourselves, the place of sons, accepted, loved, sure to be glorified at God's right hand. Am I teaching presumption? am I teaching carelessness, or a dispensing with self-examination? No, but I am saying this: If a man have once felt, and feel, in however small and feeble a degree, and depressed by whatsoever sense of daily transgressions, if he feel, faint like the first movement of an imprisoned bird in its egg, the feeble pulse of an almost imperceptible and fluttering faith beat — then that man has a right to say, 'God is mine !'

As one of our great teachers, little remembered now said, 'Let me take my personal salvation for granted' — and what? and 'be idle?' No; 'and work from it.' Ay, brethren! a Christian is not to be for ever asking himself, 'Am I a Christian?' He is not to be for ever looking into himself for marks and signs that he is. He is to look into himself to discover sins, that he may by God's help cast them out, to discover sins that shall teach him to say with greater thankfulness, 'What a redemption this is which I possess!' but he is to base his convictions that he is God's child upon something other than his own characteristics and the feebleness of his own strength. He is to have 'joy in the Lord' whatever may be his sorrow from outward things. And I believe that if Christian people would lay that thought to heart, they would understand better how the natural operation of the Gospel is to make them glad, and how rejoicing in the Lord is a Christian duty.

III. And now with regard to the other thought that still remains to be considered, namely, that rejoicing in the Lord is a source of strength, — I have already anticipated, fragmentarily, nearly all that I could have said here in a more systematic form.

All gladness has something to do with our efficiency; for it is the prerogative of man that his force comes from his mind, and not from

his body. That old song about a sad heart tiring in a mile, is as true in regard to the Gospel, and the works of Christian people, as in any other case. If we have hearts full of light, and souls at rest in Christ, and the wealth and blessedness of a tranquil gladness lying there, and filling our being; work will be easy, endurance will be easy, sorrow will be bearable, trials will not be so very hard, and above all temptations we shall be lifted, and set upon a rock. If the soul is full, and full of joy, what side of it will be exposed to the assault of any temptation? If the appeal be to fear, the gladness that is there is an answer. If the appeal be to passion, desire, wish for pleasure of any sort, there is no need for any more — the heart is full. And so the gladness which rests in Christ will be a gladness which will fit us for all service and for all endurance, which will be unbroken by any sorrow, and, like the magic shield of the old legends, invisible, impenetrable, in its crystalline purity will stand before the tempted heart, and will repel all the 'fiery darts of the wicked.'

'The joy of the Lord is your strength,' my brother! Nothing else is. No vehement resolutions, no sense of his own sinfulness, nor even contrite remembrance of past failures, ever yet made a man strong. It made him weak that he might become strong, and when it had done that it had done its work. For strength there must be hope, for strength there must be joy. If the arm is to smite with vigour, it must smite at the bidding of a calm and light heart. Christian work is of such a sort as that the most dangerous opponent to it is simple despondency and simple sorrow. 'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Well, then! there are two questions: How comes it that so much of the world's joy is weakness? and how comes it that so much of the world's notion of religion is gloom and sadness? Answer them for yourselves, and remember: you are weak unless you are glad; you are not glad and strong unless your faith and hope are fixed in Christ, and unless you are working from and not towards the sense of pardon, from and not towards the conviction of acceptance with God!

Nehemiah 13:15-22: SABBATH OBSERVANCE

'In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. 16. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 17. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? 18. Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath. 19. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. 20. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. 21. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth Came they no more on the sabbath. 22. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.' — Nehemiah 13:15-22.

MANY religious and moral reformations depend for their vitality on one man, and droop if his influence be withdrawn. It was so with Nehemiah's work. He toiled for twelve years in Jerusalem, and then returned for 'certain days' to the king at Babylon. The length of his absence is not given; but it was long enough to let much of his work be undone, and to give him much trouble to restore it to the condition in which he had left it. This last chapter of his book is but a sad close for a record which began with such high hope, and tells of such strenuous, self-sacrificing effort. The last page of many a reformer's history has been, like Nehemiah's, a sad account of efforts to stem the ebbing tide of enthusiasm and the flowing tide of worldliness. The heavy stone is rolled a little way up hill, and, as soon as one strong hand is withdrawn, down it tumbles again to its old place. The evanescence of great men's work makes much of the tragedy of history. Our passage is particularly concerned with Nehemiah's efforts to enforce Sabbath observance. The rest of the chapter is occupied with similar efforts to set right other irregularities of a ceremonial character, such as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple, the exaction of the 'portions of the Levites,' and the like. The passage falls into three parts — the abuse (vs. 15, 16), the vigorous remedies (vs. 17-22), and the prayer (v. 22).

I. The abuse consisted in Sabbath work and trading.

Nehemiah found, on his return, that the people 'in Judaea' — that is, in the country districts — carried on their farm labour and also brought their produce to market to Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So he 'testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals'; that is, probably meaning that he warned them either in person or by messengers before taking further steps. Not only did Jews

break the sacred day, but they let heathen do so too. The narrative tells, with a kind of horror, the many aggravations of this piece of wickedness. 'They' — Gentiles with whom contact defiled — 'sold on the Sabbath' — the day of rest — 'to the children of Judah' — God's people — 'in Jerusalem' — the Holy City. It was a many-barrelled crime. Tyre was far from Jerusalem, and one does not see how fish could have been brought in good condition. Perhaps their perishableness was the excuse for allowing their sale on the Sabbath, as is sometimes the case in fishing-villages even in Sabbath-keeping Scotland. Such was the abuse with which Nehemiah struggled.

It is easy to pooh-pooh his crusade against Sabbath labour as mere scrupulousness about externals. But it is a blunder and an injustice to a noble character if we forget that the stage of revelation at which he stood necessarily made him more dependent on externals than Christians are or should be. But his vindication does not need such considerations. He had a truer insight into what active men needed for vigorous working days, and what devout men needed for healthy religion, than many moderns who smile at his eagerness about 'mere externalisms.'

It is easy to ridicule the Jewish Sabbath and 'the Puritan Sunday.' No doubt there have been and are well-meant but mistaken efforts to insist on too rigid observance. No doubt it has been often forgotten by good people that the Christian Lord's Day is not the Jewish Sabbath. Of course the religious observance of the day is not a fit subject for legislation. But the need for a seventh day of rest is impressed on our physical and intellectual nature; and devout hearts will joyfully find their best rest in Christian worship and service. The vigour of religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused unless it is concentrated at certain times.

They are no benefactors to the community who seek to break down and relax the stringency of the prohibition of labour. If once the idea that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule. There never was a time when men lived so furiously fast as now. The pace of modern life demands Sunday rest more than ever. If a railway car is run continually it will wear out sooner than if it were laid aside for a day or two occasionally; and if it is run at express speed it will need the rest more. We are all going at top speed; and there would be more breakdowns if it were not for that blessed institution which some people think they are promoting the public good by destroying — a seventh day of rest.

Our great trading centres in England have the same foreign element to complicate matters as Nehemiah had to deal with. The Tyrian fishmongers knew and cared nothing for Israel's Jehovah or Sabbath, and their presence would increase the tendency to disregard the day. So with us, foreigners of many nationalities, but alike in their disregard of our religious observances, leaven the society, and help to mould the opinions and practices, of our great cities. That is a very real source of danger in regard to Sabbath observance and many other things; and Christian people should be on their guard against it.

II. The vigorous remedies applied by Nehemiah were administered first to the rulers.

He sent for the nobles, and laid the blame at their doors. 'Ye profane the day,' said he. Men in authority are responsible for crimes which they could check, but prefer to wink at. Nehemiah seems to trace all the national calamities to the breach of the Sabbath; but of course he is simply laying stress on the sin about which he is speaking, as any man who sets himself earnestly to work to fight any form of evil is apt to do. Then the men who are not in earnest cry out about 'exaggeration.' Many other sins besides Sabbath-breaking had a share in sending Israel into captivity; and if Nehemiah had been fighting with idolatrous tendencies he would have isolated idolatry as the cause of its calamities, just as, when fighting against Sabbath-breaking, he emphasises that sin.

Nehemiah was governor for the Persian king, and so had a right to rate these nobles. In this day the people have the same right, and there are many social sins for which they should arraign civic and other authorities. Christian principles unflinchingly insisted on by Christian people, and brought to bear, by ballot-boxes and other persuasive ways, on what strands for conscience in some high places, would make a wonder-fill difference on many of the abominations of our cities. Go to the 'nobles' first, and lay the burden on the backs that ought to carry it.

Then Nehemiah took practical measures by shutting the city gates on the eve of the Sabbath, and putting some of his own servants as a watch. The thing seems to have been done without any notice; so when the country folk came in, as usual, on the Sabbath, they could not get into the city, and camped outside, making a visible temptation to the citizens, to slip out and do a little business, if they could manage to elude the guards. Once or twice this happened; and then Nehemiah himself seems to have taken them in hand, with a very plain and sufficiently emphatic warning: 'If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

Of course, 'from that time they came no more on the Sabbath,' as was natural after such a volley. A man with a good strong will is apt to get his own way, even when he is not clothed with the authority of a governor. Then Nehemiah strengthened the guard, or perhaps withdrew his own servants and substituted for them Levites, whose official position would put them in full sympathy with his efforts. That priestly guard would be inflexible, and with its appointment the abuse appears to have been crushed.

The example of Nehemiah's enforcing Sabbath observance is not to be taken as a pattern for Christian communities, without many limitations. But it appears to the present writer that it is perfectly legitimate for the civil power to insist upon, and if necessary to enforce, the observance of Sunday as a day of rest; and that, since legitimate, it is for the well-being of the community that it should do so. Tyrians might believe anything they chose, and use the day of rest as they thought proper, so long as they did not sell fish on it. We do not interfere with religious convictions when we enjoin Sunday observance. Nehemiah's argument has sometimes to be used, even about such a matter: 'If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

The methods adopted may yield suggestions for all who would aim at reforming abuses or public immoralities. One most necessary step is to cut off, as far as possible, opportunities for the sin. There will be no trade if you shut the gates the night before. There will be little drunkenness if there are no liquor shops. It is quite true that people cannot be made virtuous by legislation, but it is also true that they may be saved from temptations to become vicious by it.

Another hint comes from Nehemiah's vigorous word to the country folk outside the wall. There is need for very strong determination and much sanctified obstinacy in fighting popular abuses. They die hard. It is permissible to invoke the aid of the lawful authority. But a man with strong convictions and earnest purpose will be able to impress his convictions on a mass, even if he have no guards at his back. The one thing needful for Christian reformers is, not the power to appeal to force, but the force which they can carry within them. And it is better when the traders love the Sabbath too well to wish to drive bargains on it, than when they are hindered from doing as they wish by Nehemiah's strong will or formidable threats.

Once more, the guard of Levites may suggest that the execution of measures for the reformation of manners or morals is best entrusted to those who are in sympathy with them. Levites made faithful watchmen. Many a promising measure for reformation has come to nothing because committed to the hands of functionaries who did not care for its success. The instruments are almost as important as the measures which they carry out.

III. Nehemiah's prayer occurs thrice in this chapter, at the close of each section recounting his reforming acts.

In the first instance (v. 14) it is most full, and puts very plainly the merit of good deeds as a plea with God. The same thing is implied in its form in verse 22. But while, no doubt, the tone of the prayer is startling to us, and is not such as should be offered now by Christians, it but echoes the principle of retribution which underlies the law. 'This do, and thou shalt live,' was the very foundation of Nehemiah's form of God's revelation. We do not plead our own merits, because we are not under the law, but under grace, and the principle underlying the gospel is life by impartation of unmerited mercy and divine life. But the law of retribution still remains valid for Christians in so far as that God will never forget any of their works, and will give them full recompense for their work of faith and labour of love. Eternal life here and hereafter is wholly the gift of God; but that fact does not exclude the notion of 'the recompense of reward' from the Christian conception of the future. It becomes not us to present our good deeds before the Judge, since they are stained and imperfect, and the goodness in them is His gift. But it becomes Him to crown them with His gracious approbation, and to proportion the cities ruled in that future world to the talents faithfully used here. We need not be afraid of obscuring the truth that we are saved 'not of works, lest any man should boast,' though we insist that a Christian man is rewarded according to his works.

Nehemiah had no false notion of his own goodness; for, while he asked for recompense for these good deeds of his, he could not but add, 'Spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.' He who asks to be 'spared' must know himself in peril of destruction; and he who invokes 'mercy' must think that, if he were dealt with according to justice, he would be in evil case. So the consciousness of weakness and sin is an integral part of this prayer, and that takes all the apparent self-righteousness out of the previous petition. However worthy of and sure of reward a Christian man's acts of love and efforts for the spread of God's honour may be, the doer of them must still be 'looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.'