

JUBILEE SERMON.

Christian Rejoicing.

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"Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say, rejoice."—PHILIPPIANS IV. 4.

Gladness and rejoicing, on the part of His creatures, is doubtless more acceptable to God than weeping and sorrow. Nor that these last are unnecessary; on the contrary, there are conditions of the heart and conduct when to weep and be afflicted is the only proper state of mind. But this is not what God appears finally to aim at in his dealings with men, nor what is most acceptable, as I judge, in his sight.

The world, as He has made it, is full of studied occasions of gladness. The sorrows are man-made far more than God-made. Joy and rejoicing are our ultimate duty, as well as privilege, and sorrows are appointed as a needful preparation for joy. This true state of the case has, I think, been greatly overlooked.

Men have read distinctly such passages as these, "Be afflicted and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into heaviness," and have not seemed to discern with equal clearness how often, both under the old dispensation and the new, God's people are commanded to rejoice. This is probably owing to that proneness to sin and consequent feebleness of faith that have ever tended to conceal from men the exceeding goodness of God, especially in the gospel, and the rich abundance of the provision made to take away all sin, and so, all sorrow, and bring along, perfect, and establish the reign of joy. The Mosaic Dispensation might indeed be characterised as one of law, and penalty, and punishment, more than a dispensation of rewards and gladness; and yet even that dispensation aimed ultimately at the safety, happiness and prosperity of the Jewish people; nothing but their disobedience made it otherwise, or defeated the gracious end designed. Still, the multitude of observances imposed a heavy burthen which, as the Apostle Paul acknowledges, neither they, of his time, nor their fathers were able to bear. But the gospel is altogether of another character. If the law frowned with its grave rebukes, the gospel smiles with joyous invitations. And if, under the old economy, the tone of address to the people may be said to have chiefly been "obey or suffer," under the new the language we hear addressed to us throughout is, believe and rejoice. Thus in our text, with special earnestness Paul cries to his beloved Philippian converts, "Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say, rejoice."

1. It is our purpose in this discourse first to urge compliance with these words as a Christian duty. The words alone are sufficient to shew it to be so. Being called on to rejoice, by the express language of an apostolic injunction, we must acknowledge it to be evidently our duty to comply. But more than this. Let us reflect that the gospel is a message to us of a triumphant and glorious work of God, containing infinite good for the whole race of man. The burthen of the message is that of a vast and wondrous deliverance. The whole story is in its advent and in its final issue redolent of joy, though its worth is attested and measured by the magnitude and severity of a painful sacrifice, by which the good announced was attained. Dull, narrow, and earth-bound must that man's mind be who has not soul enough in him to feel and acknowledge the inferior joys of life, of spring-time, of harvest, of health, or any of the innocent forms of human happiness. All the great gifts of nature, indeed, utter a call to men to rejoice before God on account of them; and most men acknowledge the justice of the call. But the gospel makes a similar claim. It calls on men to rejoice on account of good conferred. A great work of God, of infinite cost, bringing joyous deliverance, and announced to men as a message of vast good from Heaven to earth, must needs make it their duty to rejoice in it. The difference between the natural and the spiritual gifts lies in the infinite value of gospel benefits compared with those of life, and nature; and the duty in the one case is therefore infinitely greater than in the other. It is dishonoring to God whenever men refuse or neglect to acknowledge the natural gifts as proceeding from Him, and as such to rejoice in them. How much more dishonoring to Him it must be to refuse or neglect to acknowledge or to rejoice in the infinitely greater gift of salvation!

2. The duty of Christian joy may further appear by considering how especially and constantly the gospel requires faith; which argues that it is needed in order that we may know what vast blessings are conferred on us, and knowing them, gratefully and intelligently rejoice in the possession; and, like the men healed in gospel history, glorify God for the great gifts conferred. But what a world of promise faith grasps. It puts a man at once into possession of all the blessings and mercies of the reign of grace; joys innumerable follow in its train; some of them seem to flash upon us in the words, "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, faith (i. e., increase of faith), meekness, temperance." But if these great blessings are appointed to follow faith, and are such as must occasion great joy to those who possess them, then it must be their duty to obey that appointment, and to rejoice continually and thankfully on account of these gifts. Faith was indeed required of the Hebrews also, whose ancestor, Abraham, was especially commended for his faith, and therefore is styled the Father of the Faithful. But it is in a more peculiar sense that faith is requisite to the Christian, for to him, by faith, the whole law becomes fulfilled in Christ. The fulfilment of the law, which the Jew could obtain only by a careful and anxious observance of all its ordinances, the Christian obtains by casting himself by faith on the atonement and righteousness of Christ. Well then may he rejoice for whom the law, that is in his case the whole moral law, is so entirely fulfilled that the wonderful result follows which is expressed in the words, "There is now no condemnation to him that is in Christ Jesus."

Faith, then, lays a broad and deep foundation for joy. Thus our Heavenly Father designed it to be. Joy is our duty, and we are so far disobedient and ungrateful as we fail to rejoice; we may have much need of sorrow and

repentance; but it were better so to repent and believe as to abound in occasions of joy.

But if the duty of rejoicing is proved by its implying faith, the leading duty of the Christian life, how much more evidently is it a Christian duty to rejoice if we consider more particularly the nature of the blessings that faith thus grasps. A prodigious scope of view here opens before us; a single discourse can but glance at the joyous fruits of faith. We would aim to strike if possible a few notes familiar to all Christians in unison with this Jubilee of joy and praise. We have referred to the wonderful truth that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus; and this applies of course to all Christians; for they all are in Christ by faith. But this truth calls for more attentive thought. What a wonderful and mighty thing it is;—no condemnation! There is no doubt that condemnation is a necessary result of sinning. It as certainly follows the transgression of the law as poverty follows idleness;—as an evil conscience follows crime. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right! and what is more right than that a judge should vindicate and enforce the law. Will the millions of God's intelligent creatures continue to respect Him if sin and the sinner shall be permitted to roam over the fairest portions of God's dominion, and not meet the condemnation they deserve? And yet, to every repenting sinner who believes in Christ, condemnation is utterly done away. What can possibly be so great a wonder as this! It is, however, expressly written in the Word, that God can now be "just, and the justifier of every one (though a sinner) who repents and believes in Jesus." If Christians have not occasion for joy in this, it would be difficult to find in the universe any just occasion of joy. What is the return of a loved friend from a weary absence of many years; what the recovery of a precious child from a long and dangerous sickness, in which even the most skilled physician lost all hope, what abundance, or even opulence, succeeding a long-continued and grinding poverty; what any or all of these, compared with a complete and utter blotting out of every sentence, every syllable of the condemnation that justice and conscience had recorded against months and years of unbelief and sin. Oh, ye disciples of Christ, let me cry to you, and say, Wake up from darkness and doubt; wake up from sin and unbelief; grovel no longer in the mire of uncertainty and worldliness; grasp this great truth and make it yours:—condemnation obliterated; utterly gone; the hand-writing on the wall against you blotted out forever; Rejoice! Rejoice! It is your sweetest, highest duty. And waking so, remember that love for one another, and increased purity of heart and life, inevitably follow; rejoice then also in this.

3. But another fruit of faith and ground of joy is this, that, condemnation gone, there follows of necessity fellowship with God. The divine picture in Genesis, of God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening together with His solemn and yet familiar enquiries addressed to our first parents after their sin, suggests to us the happier intercourse that must have previously subsisted. Isaac, also, meditating in the field at eventide; Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel; and especially the marvellous nearness to God so often shewn in the writings of the Psalmists, and of the Prophets, are of the same character; the spirit, too, of the gospel as a Divine scheme of reconciliation between God and man, wrought out by One who is both man and God; and our social nature which makes fellowship so needful, and much more that might be gathered from scripture statements and hints; all this seems to indicate to us that God, by the gospel, the great remedial process, is drawing all redeemed souls into ultimate nearness to Himself. Will not this form an integral part of the happiness of Heaven—Christ, and God in Christ in blessed union with his people forever? For God, we may be assured, will not do things by halves. He will perfect all he has designed. He shews His glory in redemption in the sacrifice that obtained it; and all the heart-searchings and heart-writings that may have led to the personal redemption of each saved individual; but He will shew His glory yet more grandly by effecting through redemption a perfect fellowship of his once lost creatures with Himself. Oh who can fitly describe the final joy of this, or the duty of joy in such a prospect. Fellowship with God, what marvellous words! We shudder awe-struck when our eye is turned on our unworthiness and sin. Like Peter, we seem to say, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, Oh Lord." But it will never do to stop there. Well may we, indeed, like Moses, remove the shoes from off our feet, for the place whereon we stand is holy ground; but we dishonour God and degrade His Word, if we do not learn to look upon this burning bush, "burning yet unconsumed,"—man in communion with God,—as a grand reality which the feeblest saint may know. Prayer is such communion,—all real prayer; so is a solemn but blessed sense of awe in the Divine Presence; nearer still is the consciousness of Christ present with His people, and ourselves among them. One is astonished to perceive how early it began. The opening address of the Lord's prayer instantly brought the first disciples, imperfect as they were, into the endeared relation to God of children, holding simple but real fellowship with their Father; they on earth and He in heaven; but the distance between earth and heaven gone, or turned miraculously into a greater nearness. Even on earth a wise father desires his dear children to confide in him; to make him their counsellor; the companion of all their thoughts and purposes. How much more does God require from us a holy familiarity—an urgent importunity; and even an infinite minuteness of detail while we seek His presence. I find no words strong and clear enough to set forth the consciousness which I trust God has given me of His infinite approbation of trust and fellowship and nearness to Him, on the part of his redeemed children,—and which consciousness increases and becomes stronger and clearer at every new aspect of Gospel truth.

At the risk of saying too much, I venture to refer to one or two thoughts more that point to the same end—the duty of joy. One of these may perhaps be characterised as the great delusion of men; the bubble of mistake and error—burst. Error cannot stand for an instant in the focus of the burning light that, wherever faith is simple-hearted and strong, the Spirit pours into the understanding and heart of him who is taught of God; and all his people, more or less, are so taught. And accordingly, it will be found, wherever we have the means of knowing, that some great radical

delusion fades away, like the mist before the rising sun, in every soul whom God teaches; and thus it is the fact, that in certain great fundamental principles, Christians of every sort or class are found, whenever they understand one another, to agree. The delusion, for instance, is burst practically, if not in theory, that disposes men to trust in themselves—their virtues, their ceremonies, instead of altogether in Christ. Thomas a Kempis, in this matter, in the midst of innumerable ceremonies imposed by what he revered as a just authority, stood nevertheless on the same platform with John Wesley, with Calvin, with Zuinglius, and in every case of conversion where human inventions are fewer, and faith is strong and simple, how thick and wide a delusion with regard to worldly views and judgments is dispelled by the clear light of God's word. How many a simple-hearted soul, taught of God, all the world over, is to-day rejoicing in the liberty of Christ, which he consciously possesses through the bursting of the bubble of worldly judgments. What a clear light shews him, for example, that he has in his heart and soul something infinitely better than all that millions of human wealth could bring him! And with what astonishment and gladness he enters again and again that Temple of Truth—the Word of God—to find all his convictions of the vanity of the world, and the solid reality and priceless value of the gospel rewards renewed and magnified. He gladly acknowledges his duty to rejoice in this, and as he thus refreshes his soul, a further joy springs up within him, often growing stronger and stronger in the conviction that the same light that burst his delusions, and brought him liberty, may shine on others with the same convictions and the same joyous effect. And so, that disciple—man or woman—wakes to the perception, however humble, in each case the appointed lot in life, that in this conscious light and liberty a call is heard to a noble course of life-long labor; labor for Christ—for souls—for salvation. Nor is the little that may be possible in many cases to be done operate so as to extinguish or even cloud the joy of saving souls; it is joy unspeakable to put even one feeble hand on the rope that may draw a human soul away from destructive delusions and idolatries to God and Christ. It seems needless to say that the Christian cannot but acknowledge his obligation to rejoice in this. Here it is we may read the true interpretation of the heroic lives of such men as Schwartz or Henry Martyn, Carey or Judson. No earthly joys to them were to be compared to the joy of laboring to save a soul, no duty higher than to earn that joy.

II. We may be permitted here to add a few thoughts on the uses of joy.

1. It gives Christian health; it is itself, when genuine, a state of health. It breathes heaven. It is an earnest of the heavenly inheritance.

2. It lays a foundation of gratitude to God, stronger and deeper than any other. The largest gratitude because rendered for the largest gift, the gift of joyful union with God through Christ.

3. It promotes true Christian fellowship, because love and joy are twin sisters. Where joy is, there is love; wherever love is, there is joy.

4. But more especially it appears to be essential to any large measure of that love which earnestly desires and labors for the salvation of souls. And this seems easy to understand, for wherever the heart swells, and the face beams with sincere, humble, but earnest Christian joy, that Christian wields an almost irresistible force. God is in him and His most broken words are clothed with eloquence and power.

Long centuries ago, David, though a king, knew this, and had felt it in himself. "Restore unto me," said he in his grief, for he had grievously sinned, but now deeply repented, "restore unto me the joy of thy salvation," and almost immediately adds, "Then shall I teach transgressors thy way, and sinners shall be converted unto Thee." He recognizes distinctly the intimate bond between joy and its attendant benefits of converting power and the salvation of souls. Thus it is that God's Spirit works, and this is no doubt a chief means of Christian increase in individual growth, and more especially in the salvation of souls.

The highest case of joy moving forward to the loftiest achievement is given to us in the case of our Lord himself, "who, it is written, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

Let none suppose that in these remarks I would depreciate the more sombre Christian graces; it has been said or hinted already that they all have their appropriate places. But joy has its appropriate place also.

III. But we now turn in the direction of particular occasions of Christian joy.

Many an incident in life may to each one assume this character; a recovery from sickness; the removal of some threatening calamity; the escape of oneself, or of a dear friend, from imminent peril; the day, or even hour of spiritual birth of ourselves, or of our friends; all or each of these occurrences may afford fitting occasions of thanksgiving and joyful praise. To dedicate to these occurrences some special service of acknowledgement to God; or even to raise such service into the rank of an Anniversary, to be observed by our friends and children, as well as by ourselves; might seem to be justified by the nature and value of the blessing acknowledged. But there may be also, no doubt, a signal propriety in a similar acknowledgement made by communities, of remarkable occasions of Divine goodness. The Jubilee of the Jewish law seems to have been attended with services of this sort. A most remarkable period was that fiftieth year to the Jewish nation. The twelve tribes had now passed through seven weeks of years; on every seventh year of each week of years, all servile toil had ceased; the land lay untilled, and the vine undressed; and yet the triple production of each sixth year had over filled the land with plenty; and the people suffered no want, though all servile labor ceased on each seventh year. Then, too, with joy, every bond-man found himself liberated and returned to his family, set free from his bondage; every debt was released; and the whole land shouted for joy. It was the joy of a wide-spread deliverance from the pressure of temporal incumbrances. Christian communities have sometimes imitated the Jubilee in regard of remarkable occasions of spiritual good by holding on the fiftieth, or the one hundredth anniversary of such occasions, special services