

Sunday Reading.

Dignity of lowly Work.

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"
—St. MARK.

A lesson, Lord, those eighteen years to me;
Not elsewhere I could so divinely learn
That humble tasks are best, however I
yearn
For higher sphere where I may work more
free.
Blest where those patient toiling years to
Thee,
Their secret kept within Thy lonely heart,
While Thou wast trained by daily skill of
art
To build new world for human destiny.
Thy Future was the Now. 'Twas from its
height
Thine eye read meanings in the passing
day.
If cross of Death cast shadows on Thy
way,
What sun was that so darkened in his light?
O Nazarene, out of these toils there came
That which we prize most dear—A Brother's
name.
—Dr. A. A. LIPSCOMB, in *Harper's Magazine*
for May.

Church Prosperity.

A SERMON PREACHED AT THE DEDICATION OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH AT HAMMOND'S PLAINS, ON SUNDAY APRIL 6TH.

By REV. J. W. MANNING.

(Published by request of the Church.)

"O Lord I beseech Thee send now prosperity." Psalm cxviii. 25.

We are referred by this Psalm to a most interesting portion of Jewish history. The long and weary years of the Babylonish captivity have ended at last, and with joyful feet many of the liberated tribes hastened back to Jerusalem to gaze with weeping eyes on the ruins of their sacred temple.

The holy and beautiful house where their fathers worshipped had been burned with fire. With self-denying zeal they went to work, laying bare the foundations of the former house, and building thereon the second temple. Not nearly so large, nor so gorgeously furnished, it was still the temple for the worship of the living God—the God of their fathers. It is probable that this psalm was composed for the first celebration of the feast of tabernacles after the completion of the second temple, and the words of our text form a part of the choral song, sung by the people as they joyfully stood or passed around the altar of burnt-offering once on each of the six days of the week, and seven times on the seventh day.

A careful study of the psalm reveals to us a most impressive scene connected with the worship of God. We see the thousands of Israel marching in joyful procession to the temple. In their hands, or led by them, are the animals devoted to sacrifice. As they ascend the temple hill a company of white-robed priests meet them, chanting the first verses of the psalm. As they approach the gates of the courts they sing with joyful tones the petition, "Open to me the gates of righteousness." The gates are then swung open, and as the entire company march around the altar there fall from their lips the words of the text—"O Lord, I beseech Thee, send now prosperity."

My brethren, we are assembled today for the purpose of setting apart this house to the worship and service of God. The old meeting-house has given place to the present edifice, which is larger, more commodious, and in every way better adapted to the wants of this community. The circumstances connected with the re-building of the second temple are not precisely analogous to yours, and yet they are of such a nature as to be suggestive at least. A house re-built and a joyful people assembled for worship at its opening; in this you are alike. With the thousands of Israel you too can lift up your hearts to Almighty God and pray the prayer of the text, "O Lord, I beseech Thee, send now prosperity."

Our text is a suitable prayer for the church in all ages, and it is eminently fitting that we who love the church, who ardently desire her welfare, and who believe that much, very much, depends upon her prosperity, should take upon our lips this prayer, and plead with God for the prosperity of His Zion. Let me ask your attention at this time to the object desired in the prayer.

1. The object desired, is Church

prosperity. The first question that one naturally asks is: What is the object so earnestly desired in the text? What truly constitutes the prosperity of the church? There can be no doubt that prosperity in the different senses in which it is understood is a thing that is greatly desired, but as some understand it by one thing, and others another, it will be necessary to define the term, that we may know what is meant. I presume all will agree that any organization may be regarded as prosperous which accomplishes the purposes of its organization. It would surely not be right to regard a society, organized for the purpose of giving relief to the poor, as prosperous, because it had a large number of persons enrolled on its list of membership, if it should spend more money in sumptuous entertainments than it expended in helping the needy. And it would not be right to estimate the prosperity of a school by the number of victories its members might win on the base-ball or cricket ground. No school of learning was ever founded for such purposes. In the self-same way are we to judge of the prosperity of the Church of Jesus Christ. We are to acknowledge it only in so far as she accomplishes the purpose of her organization. It matters not how many other useful purposes she may serve, the question we are to ask in coming to a right conclusion is not, Is she wealthy? Is she popular? Has she influence? but, Does she do that for which she was founded? We shall be at no trouble to learn what these are. The Bible tells us plainly, it is to make known the Gospel and train the membership in the ways of Christ. Or, to put it in Bible phraseology, to labor under the direction of the Head, for the regeneration and sanctification of the children of men. Here we have the Divine standard to judge of the prosperity of any church. If through her instrumentality men are converted, and through her ordinances, and discipline, and instruction, men are made Christ-like in life and disposition, then she is a prosperous church though her numbers are few and their position in the social circle low, and possessed of but little of this world's goods.

There are, however, some particular elements in connection with Church life which, when they exist to any extent in a church, may fairly entitle that church to the claim of a prosperous church. Let us note some of these elements:

1. Piety.—and when I use this term it is not that it may be applied to anything and everything done in the name of religion. We are all aware that there are many who are exceedingly active in church festivals, and all those things pertaining to what may be termed the outside work of the church, whose interest in the devotional part of the Christian's life is very small. While the activity of many Christians in Christian work is a thing not to be restrained, yet if there be this and nothing more—if it does not contribute to the formation of a robust, earnest Christian character—if it is allowed to take the place of personal holiness, it is a most delusive and dangerous substitute.

Every man is born again for some specific purpose. It is that he may become more Christ-like. We need to emphasize the truth that Christ died not only to redeem us from the penalty of sin, but "from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people." The terms frequently employed in the Scriptures to define the Christian life, present that life as imperfect—incomplete—and as going on to perfection. We are born into the Kingdom of God as "babes," but we are to grow to the stature of men in Christ. If the beginning of the new life is indicated by "the blade," it is to be followed by "the ear and the full corn in the ear." If we are saved by faith in Christ, we are enjoined to "add to our faith, virtue, knowledge," &c. Piety is the bringing of the affections, the intellect and the will under the control of Christ. It is the working out in daily life what Christ by His Spirit works in us. The church is a school having before it a model and moved with an impelling purpose to become like unto it, and a prosperous church is such a school tremendously in earnest for eminence in grace; and when in any church you find persons struggling "to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of

Christ," earnestly seeking in spirit and motive, and conduct to be like Him, then there is prosperity. The prayer of such students is—

"More like Jesus would I be,
Let my Saviour dwell in me."

2. Love. The founders of all religions, or societies, have selected different forms and rites by which their members might be known. Christ, before He departed for heaven, declared a certain sign by which in all time His followers should be known, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." This was His spirit—who loved and gave Himself for us, and it is this spirit which all who bear His name are to evince—"A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another."

The relation of Christians to each other is entirely different from that which exists between the members of any other organization—a relation that is illustrated by such figures as "the vine and its branches," "the body and its members." Christians are members of one common body, of which Christ is the head, and as in the natural body, there is a love for all the members—a love which shows itself in the care bestowed upon each, and the desire to preserve each from pain. So in the church, the body of Christ, there is a heavenly love for all the members, and the presence of this affection in any general degree is an evidence of real prosperity.

And so essential is the presence of this grace in the church that it may be as truly said of her as of the individual, "Though she speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and has not love, she has become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." In a church possessing this important element of prosperity, dissensions that tear the body of Christ are unknown, differences are held and considered in a tender and loving spirit, or are completely removed, a deep concern for the welfare of others is always shown—common weaknesses are borne and judged with Christian charity. In a word—

They share their mutual woes,
Their mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows,
The sympathizing tear.

On such a church, possessing such a spirit, the eye of Christ lovingly rests. "The Lord delighteth in her." In view of the excellency of this grace shall we not listen to the exhortation of the Apostle, "Little children love one another, for love is of God."

3. Knowledge of God's Word.—The church, as already intimated, is a school whose members are, or ought to be, diligently employed in learning the doctrines of the written Word, and applying the lessons for their instruction in righteousness. The truth of God, as contained in His word contains important and vital relations to the Christian. It is no mere accident that in the exhortation of Peter, "growth in grace," and "growth in knowledge," are joined together, or that when he speaks of young converts as "new born babes," they are exhorted to "desire the sincere milk of the word that they may grow thereby." The study of the Scriptures is not an accomplishment, nor a means of discipline, but a vital necessity. Without it there is no life; no holiness, no power. In our Saviour's prayer, our sanctification is declared to be effected "through the truth." It is to be feared that this element of prosperity, the systematic, thorough knowledge of God's word is sadly wanting in many of our churches. It is not enough that we are in the Sunday School; not enough that we listen on Sabbath days to the ministry of the word; every member of the church should make it a life-business to be a diligent and regular student of the Scriptures, understanding its doctrines and applying their lessons. The periods of the greatest prosperity of the people of God have been marked by this feature. When the Jews returned from Babylon—the very period in which our text is written—they spent much time in the study of the law and the prophets. They gathered together for a week at a time, giving earnest and devout attention to the Word explained by men "who read in the Book of the law of the Lord distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the meaning." Would to God that all of

us were as they in this respect! And so in the time of the Reformation, men gave themselves to the study of the Word with still greater diligence. Give to our people an intimate and thorough acquaintance with the Scriptures and it will make them steadfast, "being no longer children tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine." They will be established—built up in the truth. A church thus engaged, carefully "comparing spiritual things with spiritual," is a church worthy of the name prosperous.

4. ACTIVITY.—The church is not a "Home for invalids," where the infirm may retire for rest and care, nor is it a "Wanderer's Home," where homeless ones may find shelter for the night without cost; but she is a community of Christian workers to whom a great work has been committed, and to the faithful performance of which she is firmly held by her Lord. The prosperous church believes that the salvation of men is a thing to be desired, and practicable; and moreover that it is enjoined by the Lord: and so she labors most earnestly to win men to Christ. In every possible way she strives to fulfill her mission in this respect. Each member is a messenger of mercy, who in deeds of sacrifice "loses his life" in order that he may save others. A truly prosperous church will meet the description given by John Wesley, "all at it, and always at it," and the prayer of her members in every hour is that which fell from the trembling lips of him who more than any other man was most like his Lord in ceaseless activity, "What wilt Thou have me to do." The activity of such a church is not confined to her own narrow limits. It will reach out its loving arms to all parts of the country; and not only so, but she will cast her eye out over the length and breadth of the land where the blessed ministries of the word are seldom enjoyed, and the world with its teeming millions who are yet "in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity," will arouse her sympathy and call forth her benevolence. No one feels that he is excused from the obligations of "Go work in my vineyard," no matter how small the gift and how few the opportunities, he must employ the one and improve the other. Then we shall see what we ought to see in all our churches, each man consecrating himself to the work of the Lord. We talk of churches dying; such churches never die. They may be small in numbers, lowly in station, but they cannot die. A healthy person never dies, except by accident or designed assault, and churches do not die that way.

II. Why should such a prayer as this commend itself to us?

(1). And I may say in answer to this, that there is a proper recognition of God as the source of prosperity. This is implied in the words, "I beseech Thee, O Lord." The Jew was taught in a variety of ways that "prosperity cometh from the Lord." They had learned that important lesson, that "except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it." And so we find in their recorded prayers a steady recognition of this profound truth, "O Lord revive Thy work," "Thou shalt arise and have mercy upon Zion." Men may give what they call the externals of prosperity—artistic music, a gorgeous building, a large assembly and eloquent speaker, but God alone can give real prosperity. He alone can give "seed to the sower and bread to the eater." To Him, therefore, let us pray with simple earnestness and genuine faith, "O Lord, we beseech Thee, send now prosperity."

(2). Consider the urgency of the prayer—"We beseech Thee." Here strong desire and earnest expectation is expressed. It is used when famine stares one in the face; when the land is dry and parched for lack of rain, and God is entreated to send rain that all may not perish. The urgency is seen also in the word that accompanies the petition. It is *now*, not tomorrow, or the next year, but *now*; while the people wait, while they through the courts and compass the altars of Thy house,—send it *now*. There were many and weighty reasons why the Jew earnestly desired the favor of God. When they had it, the people were happy and joyful. Their power acknowledged by surrounding nations

and their God—the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob—was glorified by those "who heard what He did unto Israel." It was natural and reasonable that their prayer should be urgent. So, brethren, there are weighty reasons why we should be urgent in our prayer for the prosperity of the church, for most important interests are bound up in her welfare.

III. What are some of them?

(1). The honor and glory of her great Head.

The church is very dear to the heart of the Lord Jesus. His honor is bound up in her prosperity. She is His vineyard, His temple, His bride. Of her it is said, "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." As she prospers He rejoices, and so it shall be till the time comes, when before the assembled universe she stands without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, being cleansed by His blood. He shall say with unbounded delight, "Behold I and the children whom Thou hast given me." He is most intensely interested in her welfare. His people are said to be "dear as the apple of the eye," and their names are said to be engraven on the palms of His hands. For His sake, then, who loved the church and who gave Himself for it, let us pray, "O Lord, we beseech Thee, send now prosperity."

(2). The conversion of men.

There is the closest relation between a church possessing these elements of prosperity and the conversion of sinners. David pleaded that if he had a clean heart, a right spirit, the Divine presence, the power of the Holy Spirit, and possessed the joy of salvation, that sinners would be converted unto God. So, my brethren, when a church has the faithful preaching of the Gospel, faithfully observes the appointed ordinances, is zealous in the cultivation of the Christian graces, and is heartily engaged in Christian work, then will sinners be converted unto God. On such a church the Divine blessing will surely rest, and as men flocked to Jerusalem in the days of her prosperity, praying to be counted among the sons of Zion, so will it ever be with the church where these elements are present. There may many strange things happen, but the strangest of all would be that many sons and daughters should not be born unto her. We sometimes say when we hear of numerous additions to a church, that she is enjoying a revival. Why, a church possessing these elements is in a constant state of revival, or of real vigorous life, and converts will flock to such a church as doves to their windows. This experiment is surely worth trying. Experiment did I say? It has gone beyond that, and become a settled fact. It is one of the known results of spiritual law. Just as light follows darkness, spring winter, so conversions follow these elements. Then, brethren, for their sakes who "have no hope, and are without God in the world," let us pray, "O Lord, we beseech Thee, send now prosperity."

(3). The influence of the Church upon the world.

This has been beyond measure. It was designed that it should be so by the Founder Himself. He has said, "Ye are the light of the world," "the salt of the earth." But I cannot dwell upon this point, the time to halt has come. But let me say ere I close, dear brethren, we need this prosperity *now*. Never did an orphan child need more a mother's care, never did the thirsty ground need more the rain from heaven than we need this. May God give us this. We do not ask for wealth, nor social position, nor a name to live, but shall we not cry—shall we not all cry, "O Lord, we beseech Thee, send now prosperity?" And to Thy name will we give the glory now and forever. —Amen.

The one thing needful.

By REV. JOHN BROWN.

"But one thing is needful," etc.—Luke x. 42.

That the grace of God in the heart, a well-founded hope of heaven, is beyond all other things most needful there is no doubt, and the above passage is not unfrequently viewed and dwelt upon as referring to that "one thing"; but on a little investigation it will, I think, be seen that while it may serve to suggest valuable food for thought, and thoughts for sermons, it has no reference whatever to religion. It is always desirable in the first place to get at, if possible, the precise and exact meaning of a

passage before lessons are drawn from it. I understand the above to refer to a purely secular matter, namely, food.

Martha, evidently anxious to make a feast worthy of her guest, undertakes to provide something elaborate—a "good spread," as we should call it. Finding that (as it would appear) after she had done her best she was unequal to the work of making the necessary preparations, and knowing that if Mary were but helping her she could manage well enough, and doubtless thinking it hardly just that while she herself was "distracted" (R. V. margin) about much serving, Mary should be doing nothing, she goes to Christ, and asks Him whether He considers it right that all the work should be left to her, and requests that He should send Mary to help her. (Note how Martha says "my sister," and not Mary—a gentle insinuation that it was not very sisterly of Mary thus to act.) Christ replies in substance, "Martha, Martha, you are undertaking too much; I fully appreciate your loving intentions in making so much provision for My entertainment, but you are taking too much trouble, and providing a great 'many things' more than are necessary. Less will do," and then you can easily manage it yourself; you will not need Mary's help. I cannot therefore comply with your request, Martha; your sister has chosen to listen to My teaching; she has made a good choice which I cannot deprive her of. If it were necessary I would send her, but as it is not, and as by making less preparation you will not need help, I cannot comply with your request." In opposition to the common view, as represented by Mr. Barnes, who says, "That good part. The portion of the Gospel: the love of God, and an interest in His kingdom. She has chosen to be a Christian, and to give up her time and affections to God. Which shall not be taken away. God will not take away His grace from His people, neither shall any man pluck them out of His hand,"—I consider "the good part" (R. V.) to mean simply and solely her sitting at Christ's feet to hear His word, and not "the love of God," etc. His reply is a direct answer to Martha's request, and to take it as commonly understood would imply that Martha had asked Him to deprive her sister of the grace of God—of her interest in Christ! which of course no one would for a moment imagine; while at the same time the common view of the passage gives colour to such a construction, besides being entirely foreign to the matter about which they were talking. Nor is there anything in this little incident in the Bethany home to suggest that Martha loved Christ less than Mary did; nor do I see why she should be held up as a type of those Christians who are absorbed in worldly affairs. She is too good to be used for any such purpose.

It was no less her love to her Lord that led her to provide the very best she could for Him, than led Mary to sit at His feet to hear His words. Personally, I prefer Martha: she appears to have been more thoughtful than her sister. Rather than look upon her as a type of worldly-minded Christians who are more anxious about worldly affairs than they are about serving Christ, I prefer to look upon her as a type of those who love Jesus Christ, and are doing the very best they can to show that love in a practical way. Suppose she had sat at Jesus' feet too; how would matters have been when meal-time came? And on the other hand, may not Mary—whose attention to Christ's words is of course commendable, but who, at the same time, could hardly have been ignorant of the extra work on Martha's hands, if indeed she had not actually left her in the middle of it, as Martha's words imply—"Lord, dost thou not care that my sister did leave me to serve alone?" (R. V.)—be viewed as a type of those who sometimes neglect family and home duties to attend to what may in itself be Christian, but of the noblest kind? It is true that Christ shielded Mary, but He did so under the fact that Martha was doing more than there was necessity for; and had the "many things" been necessary I have no doubt her request would have been granted, and Mary would have been sent to help her; but I cannot altogether excuse Mary for leaving her sister in the way she did, even though it was to avail herself of the high privilege which presented itself. I beg to place a mark of honour after the name of Mary, and the same also after that of Martha, with a very strong inclination to add a second. These two Christian sisters are often compared, some favouring one, some the other; doubtless ministers (when from home) will appreciate the reply of an elderly brother, who, when asked by the writer

"Many ancient authorities read, *but few things are needful, or one.*" See margin of Revised Version.