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

**EZRA-005. GOD THE JOY BRINGER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They kept the feast ... seven days with joy; for the Lord had made them joyful."*

*Ezra 6:22*

Twenty years of hard work and many disappointments and dangers had at last, for the Israelites returning from the captivity, been crowned by the completion of the Temple. It was a poor affair as compared with the magnificent house that had stood upon Zion; and so some of them despised the day of small things. They were ringed about by enemies; they were feeble in themselves; there was a great deal to darken their prospects and to sadden their hearts; and yet, when memories of the ancient days came back, and once more they saw the sacrificial smoke rising from the long cold and ruined altar, they rejoiced in God, and they kept the passover amid the ruins, as my text tells us, for the seven days of the statutory period with joy, because, in spite of all, the Lord had made them joyful.

I think if we take this simple saying we get two or three thoughts, not altogether irrelevant to universal experience, about the true and the counterfeit gladnesses possible to us all.

**I. Look at that great and wonderful thought--God the joy-maker.**

We do not often realise how glad God is when we are glad, and how worthy an object of much that He does is simply the prosperity and the blessedness of human hearts. The poorest creature that lives has a right to ask from God the satisfaction of its instincts, and every man has a claim on God--because he is God's creature--to make him glad. God honours all cheques legitimately drawn on Him, and answers all claims, and regards Himself as occupied in a manner entirely congruous with His magnificence and His infinitude, when He stoops to put some kind of vibrating gladness into the wings of a gnat that dances for an hour in the sunshine, and into the heart of a man that lives his time for only a very little longer.

God is the Joy-maker. There are far more magnificent and sublime thoughts about Him than that; but I do not know that there is any that ought to come nearer to our hearts, and to silence more of our grumblings and of our distrust, than the belief that the gladness of His children is an end contemplated by Him in all that He does. Whether we think it of small importance or no, He does not think it so, that all mankind should rejoice in Himself. And this is a marvellous revelation to break out of the very heart of that comparatively hard system of ancient Judaism. The Lord hath made them joyful.

Turning away from the immediate connection of these words, let me remind you of the great outlines of the divine provision for gladdening men's hearts. I was going to say that God had only one way of making us glad; and perhaps that is in the deepest sense true. That way is by putting Himself into us. He gives us Himself to make us glad; for nothing else will do it--or, at least, though there may be many subordinate sources of joy, if there be in the innermost shrine of our spirits an empty place, where the Shekinah ought to shine, no other joys will suffice to settle and to rejoice the soul. The secret of all true human well-being is close communion with God; and when He looks at the poorest of us, desiring to make us blessed, He can but say, I will give Myself to that poor man; to that ignorant creature; to that wayward and prodigal child; to that harlot in her corruption; to that worldling in his narrow godlessness; I will give Myself, if they will have Me. And thus, and only thus, does He make us truly, perfectly, and for ever glad.

Besides that, or rather as a sequel and consequence of that, there come such other God-given blessings as these to which my text refers. What were the outward reasons for the restored exiles gladness? The Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king ... unto them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

So, then, He pours into men's lives by His providences the secondary and lower gifts which men, according to changing circumstances, need; and He also satisfies the permanent physical necessities of all orders of beings to whom He has given life. He gives Himself for the spirit; He gives whatever is contributory to any kind of gladness; and if we are wise we shall trace all to Him. He is the Joy-giver; and that man has not yet understood either the sanctity of life or the full sweetness of its sweetest things unless he sees, written over every one of them, the name of God, their giver. Your common mercies are His love tokens, and they all come to us, just as the gifts of parents to their children do, with this on the fly-leaf, With a father's love. Whatever comes to God's child with that inscription, surely it ought to kindle a thrill of gladness. That the king of Assyria's heart is turned; shall we thank the king of Assyria? Yes and No! For it was God who turned it. Oh! to carry the quiet confidence of that thought into all our daily life, and see His name written upon everything that contributes to make us blessed. God is the true Source and Maker of every joy.

And by the side of that we must put this other thought--there are sources of joy with which He has nothing to do. There are people who are joyful--and there are some of them listening now--not because God made them joyful, but because the world, the devil, and the flesh have given them ghastly caricatures of the true gladness. And these rival sources of blessedness, the existence of which my text suggests, are the enemies of all that is good and noble in us and in our joys. God made these men joyful, and so their gladness was wholesome.

**II. Note the consequent obligation and wisdom of taking our God-given joys.**

They kept the feast with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful. Then it is our obligation to accept and use what it is His blessedness to give. Be sure you take Him. When He is waiting to pour all His love into your heart, and all His sweetness into your sensitive spirit, to calm your anxieties, to deepen your blessedness, to strengthen everything that is good in you, to be to you a stay in the midst of crumbling prosperity, and a Light in the midst of gathering darkness, be sure that you take the joy that waits your acceptance. Do not let it be said that, when the Lord Christ has come down from heaven, and lived upon earth, and gone back to heaven, and sent His Spirit to dwell in you, you lock the door against the entrance of the joy-bringing Messenger, and are sad and restless and discontented because you have shut out the God who desires to abide in your hearts.

They kept the feast with joy, because the Lord had made them joyful. Oh! how many Christian men and women there are, who in the midst of the abundant and wonderful provision for continual cheerfulness and buoyancy of spirit given to them in the promises of the Gospel, in the gifts of Christ, in the indwelling of the Divine Spirit, do yet go through life creeping and sad, burdened and anxious, perplexed and at their wits end, just because they will not have the God who yearns to come to them, or at least will not have Him in anything like the fullness and the completeness in which He desires to bestow Himself. If God gives, surely we are bound to receive. It is an obligation upon Christian men and women, which they do not sufficiently realise, to be glad, and it is a commandment needing to be reiterated. Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice. Would that Christian experience in this generation was more alive to the obligation and the blessedness of perpetual joy arising from perpetual communion with Him.

Further, another obligation is to recognise Him in all common mercies, because He is at the back of them all. Let them always proclaim Him to us. Oh! if we did not go through the world blinded to the real Power that underlies all its motions, we should feel that everything was vocal to us of the loving-kindness of our Father in heaven. Link Him, dear friend! with everything that makes your heart glad; with everything pleasant that comes to you. There is nothing good or sweet but it flows from Him. There is no common delight of flesh or sense, of sight or taste or smell, no little enjoyment that makes the moment pass more brightly, no drop of oil that eases the friction of the wheels of life, but it may be elevated into greatness and nobleness, and will then first be understood in its true significance, if it is connected with Him. God does not desire to be put away high up on a pedestal above our lives, as if He regulated the great things and the trifles regulated themselves; but He seeks to come, as air into the lungs, into every particle of the mass of life, and to fill it all with His own purifying presence.

Recognise Him in common joys. If, when we sit down to partake of them, we would say to ourselves, The Lord has made us joyful, all our home delights, all our social pleasures, all our intellectual and all our sensuous ones--rest and food and drink and all other goods for the body--they would all be felt to be great, as they indeed are. Enjoyed in Him, the smallest is great; without Him, the greatest is small. The Lord made them joyful; and what is large enough for Him to give ought not to be too small for us to receive with recognition of His hand.

Another piece of wholesome counsel in this matter is--Be sure that you use the joys which God does give. Many good people seem to think that it is somehow devout and becoming to pitch most of their songs in a minor key, and to be habitually talking about trials and disappointments, and a desert land, and Brief life is here our portion, and so on, and so on. There are two ways in which you can look at the world and at everything that befalls you. There is enough in everybody's life to make him sad if he sulkily selects these things to dwell upon. There is enough in everybody's life to make him continually glad if he wisely picks out these to think about. It depends altogether on the angle at which you look at your life what you see in it. For instance, you know how children do when they get a bit of a willow wand into their possession. They cut off rings of bark, and get the switch alternately white and black, white and black, and so on right away to the tip. Whether will you look at the white rings or the black ones? They are both there. But if you rightly look at the black you will find out that there is white below it, and it only needs a very little stripping off of a film to make it into white too. Or, to put it into simpler words, no Christian man has the right to regard anything that God's Providence brings to him as such unmingled evil that it ought to make him sad. We are bound to rejoice in the Lord always.

I know how hard it is, but sure am I that it is possible for a man, if he keeps near Jesus Christ, to reproduce Paul's paradox of being sorrowful yet always rejoicing, and even in the midst of darkness and losses and sorrows and blighted hopes and disappointed aims to rejoice in the Lord, and to keep the feast with gladness, because the Lord has made him joyful. Nor do we discharge our duty, unless side by side with the sorrow which is legitimate, which is blessed, strengthening, purifying, calming, moderating, there is also joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Again, be sure that you limit your delights to God-made joys. Too many of us have what parts of our nature recognise as satisfaction, and are glad to have, apart from Him. There is nothing sadder than the joys that come into a life, and do not come from God. Oh! let us see to it that we do not fill our cisterns with poisonous sewage when God is waiting to fill them with the pure river of the water of life. Do not let us draw our blessedness from the world and its evils. Does my joy help me to come near to God? Does it interfere with my communion with Him? Does it aid me in the consecration of myself? Does my conscience go with it when my conscience is most awake? Do I recognise Him as the Giver of the thing that is so blessed? If we can say Yes! to these questions, we can venture to believe that our blessedness comes from God, and leads to God, however homely, however sensuous and material may be its immediate occasion. But if not, then the less we have to do with such sham gladness the better. Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness. The alternative presented for the choice of each of us is whether we will have surface joy and a centre of dark discontent, or surface sorrow and a centre of calm blessedness. The film of stagnant water on a pond full of rottenness simulates the glories of the rainbow, in which pure sunshine falls upon the pure drops, but it is only painted corruption after all, a sign of rotting; and if a man puts his lips to it it will kill him. Such is the joy which is apart from God. It is the crackling of thorns under a pot--the more fiercely they burn the sooner they are ashes. And, on the other hand, these things have I spoken unto you that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

It is not for seven days that we keep the feast if God has made us joyful, but for all the rest of the days of time, and for the endless years of the calm gladnesses of the heavens.