

Lesson 6: The Reading of the Word.

The condition in which Nehemiah found Jerusalem seemed to suggest that Ezra was missing from Jerusalem for between twelve and thirteen years. During this period the people had become lax in their worship, there was the oppression of the rich men (ch. 4), the prevalence of mixed marriages (6:18; 10:30; 13:23–30), the desecration of the Sabbath (10:31; 13:15–18), the negligence with respect to tithes and offerings (10:33–39) which makes it unlikely that Ezra was there and carrying out his ministry. It seems, therefore, most probable that he had been recalled to the court and only returned at the beginning of the seventh month, Tisri, the most sacred of the year. It would be in keeping with his office that he should be asked to resume his work of instruction by reading and expounding the law of Moses to the people (ch. 8:1). Though they do not keep the law, they have a yearning after it. They are not contented with their existing condition, but desire better things, and they have an instinctive feeling that to hear God's word will help them. Moses gave the law which gave instructions on dealing with the end of the seven year people together for the reading of the law. It is noteworthy that no one, not even the stranger/foreigner, was exempted from this meeting.

Reading and Hearing the Law

Before he began to read, he gave thanks, "blessing the Lord, the great God, and all the people answer, "Amen, Amen," bowing their head, and lifting their hands in reverent joy (ver. 6). Ezra read and explained in their own language the ancient law which God gave to Moses, and unrolled to them the early history of their country, recalling old and hallowed memories the strong men as well as the women and the children yielded to their emotion, and tears streamed down their faces. "All the people wept when they heard the word of the law" (ver. 9). The day was, however, one of the chief festivals of the year, and therefore not a day for crying. Instead, Ezra recommended liberal alms-giving in the place of tears (ver. 10). The people became zealous for the "book" and met again on the second of Tisri, to hear a second reading. Ezra used the time to direct their attention to the impending "feast of tabernacles," and read to them the portions of the law which bore upon it (ver. 14). As Ezra opened the book of the law of the Lord, with spontaneous reverence the whole company rose to its feet.

The people became more scrupulous in their observance of the legal regulations such as the dwelling in booths, which had been given up (ver. 17); the feast was continued during the full eight days (ver. 18); the solemn assemblies on the first day and the eighth were held (*ibid.*); and, above all, "day by day, from the first day unto the last day," Ezra took care to "read in the book of the law of God" before the people, thus bringing before them their practical duties in the most solemn and effective way, and stirring them up to holiness and repentance. The reading and expounding, after such an extended interval, would naturally have a great effect on the people. It would be likely to stir penitence, arouse more effective thinking, and lead to greater diligence in keeping the law. This day was called "feast of trumpets," and it led to much weeping; "all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law." He began early and read till noon, that is, for six hours or more. The reading appears to have been varied by occasional exposition (vers. 7, 8). The ears of all the people were attentive, their minds were fixed on nothing else but the reading of the scriptures. We too need to read the scriptures and have them expounded to us in a way that we can understand and digest; so we can say with the prophet

Jeremiah "Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and Thy word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." (Jeremiah 15:16). The law of God which represents the character of God and is the foundation on which our Christian life is built possesses not only the will of God, but also His mercy and His grace. The people were to give heed to all the statutes and judgments which Moses, as the servant of God, had taught them, in order that they might do them.

Statutes: included everything, prescribed or enacted by law, whether moral, ritual, or civil; *Judgments:* referred to one's *rights*, whether public or private, all that each could claim as his due, and all he was bound to render to God or to his fellow-men as their due. These two comprehend the whole Law as binding on Israel. Moses gave them the Torah which included not only the law, but also their history as the chosen people, and a continuing community. God promised the patriarchs that He would make of their posterity a great nation (Gen. 12:1; 17:6; 18:18), but fulfillment of this promise was conditioned by their continuing as a people in the fear of God, and in obedience to his Law. Everything, then, depended on their hearing what Moses had been commanded to teach them, and observing to do it, that it may be well with them.

Reading and Interpreting the Word

One of the most affective scenes depicted in Scriptures is brought to our attention. The city of God was secure, the walls were rebuilt, the gates replaced and shut; its inhabitants were no longer struggling with hope and fear, there was no need for a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other; they could rejoice in their strength and peace, and that their brethren were dwelling together in unity. With one accord they now come, men, women, and children, as many as "could hear with understanding." They asked Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of the law" (ver. 1). So far was Ezra from being obliged to urge the people to gather together and listen to the law, that they themselves called for its production, and demanded that it should be read to them. They hungered for the bread of life; they craved to hear the word of the living God. And when their wish was granted they showed themselves in real earnest, for they remained six hours eagerly listening as the law was read and expounded. Ezra "read therein from morning until midday ... and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law" (ver. 3). Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood with Mattithiah and Shema," by his side, also Jeshua and Bani," and "they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

There were two valuable things: (1) the distinct reading of the word of God; (2) the explanation of any obscure words or sentences, or, as we have it, "giving the sense," or "causing the people to understand the law." This is a reminder to us that we should not only have the Word of God within us, but we should also show greater appreciation for that Word. . We should consider how much more we have than they had, or than David had when he exclaimed how he loved the law, and when he preferred it to bodily gratification and worldly treasure (Ps. 19). We have, beside the "law of Moses which the Lord had commanded to Israel" (ver. 1). (1) the history of the Jews in the land of promise; (2) the Psalms of David; (3) the wisdom of Solomon; (4) the inspired utterances of many prophets; (5) the letters of apostles; and above all, (6) the very word of Jesus Christ Himself, and the story of His redeeming love. There is a much greater need in our time for although we have the Law imprinted in our heart; there is still the important function of expounding words and sentences, chapters and books, which are difficult to understand. Like

Ezra and his companions on this eventful day (ver. 6), the ministers of Christ have the high and noble function of *leading the people in prayer and in thanksgiving*; bearing the thoughts and feelings of the people heavenwards to the very throne of God, so that "all the people shall answer, Amen, Amen," and "worship the Lord" in spirit and in truth (ver. 6). There is no higher or greater service man can render man than that of helping him to come into close and living fellowship with the Father, the Saviour, the Sanctifier of his spirit.

The People's response

The scene through which the secured nation was passing was full of excitement. Everything conspired to affect the minds and stir the souls of the people. Large multitudes were soon wrought into intense feeling, and all that the assembled Israelites were then seeing, hearing, and doing. Their experiences and recollections mingled with reviving hopes of future freedom, all together moved and swayed their souls with powerful emotion so that all the people wept" (ver. 9). It was an interesting instance of religious emotion. This was a day for celebration, a day for giving thanks and not a day for mourning. Consequently, Nehemiah and Ezra, and "the Levites taught the people, said unto them, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep" (ver. 9).

Emotion needs control and correction when, It is in danger of being carried to *excess*, or under some circumstances, such as those in the text, when a very large number of people were all agitated by the same feelings, and each communicated something of his own enthusiasm to his neighbour. Such nervous excitement is perilous, for it deludes the hearts of men with the idea that they are intensely religious when they are the subjects of a bodily rather than a spiritual affection. Quite often it carries its subjects to religious and even bodily excesses, which can be very harmful. All religious emotion is, on this ground, to be carefully controlled. It has its place and its use in the Church of Christ, in the spreading of the kingdom; but it is a thing to be watched and guarded in the interests of morality and religion. Often our religious emotion is misplaced, ill-timed: we lament when God would have us "sing with joy," or we make ourselves merry when we have reason to humble ourselves in the dust. Thus they were reminded that "This day is holy unto our Lord: do not be sorrowful; for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (ver. 10).). It is both the *sign* and the *source* of joy. It is the utterance of our spiritual nature; not when it is weak through sin, but when made whole through the power of Christ. It was not in accordance with the law and the will of God that sorrow should be associated with a holy day. "With the voice of joy and praise" we should "keep holyday" (Ps. 42:4). With rejoicing hearts, full of the joy of thankfulness and hope, we should sit down to the table of the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). Joy, one of the "fruits of the Spirit," is commended to us with a fullness and frequency in the word of God which may well make us ask ourselves whether we are not negligent in this matter. Joy in Christ Jesus is a grace which we are repeatedly summoned to show; it makes us resemble him as He is, crowned with glory and joy; and is a sign and source of spiritual strength. After having calmed the people they instructed them to go home and make merry, "Go and enjoy yourselves, eat and drink of the best, let there be no fasting, nor even abstinence, on such a day as this "All the people wept when they heard the words of the law." "By the law is the knowledge of sin," and this knowledge cannot but awaken sorrow as to the guilty heart. The law is seen to be "holy and just and good;" The thought of what Israel would have been but for disobedience to the law would be

most distressing to the Jews. So when we think of all we have lost through sin we may also grieve.

The joy of the Lord. "Go your way, eat the fat ... for the joy of the Lord is your strength" Any idea that the Jewish religion was gloomy and austere is erroneous. Its ritual and ceremonial observances were in some respects burdensome, but there was much that was joyous. The private observance of religion consisted a good deal in offering sacrifices of thanksgiving, of which the larger portion was eaten by the offerer and his friends in a social festal meal (Deut. 27:6, 7 expresses the spirit of the Mosaic law). The Sabbath day, as originally instituted, was far from being the gloomy season which some represent; and of the other seasons set apart for special religious observance, only one was a fast, all the rest were festivals for the commemoration of God's goodness, and the offering of praise to him. The consciousness of redemption, of pardon, peace with God, son-ship, should produce joy.

The Joy of the Lord

The celebration of Divine ordinances promotes, and should be with, gladness. The gladness of gratitude for Divine favours, the joy of a good conscience which obedience brings, the joy of mutual love and fellowship, the joy of hope, along with happy people who unite in the service of God. Once the sweetness of the Divine word is tasted and appreciated, there springs up in the heart a desire for more, or a feeling like that of the Psalmist when he said, "*Oh, how I love thy law: It is my meditation all the day*" (Ps. 119:97). The Jews, having been instructed, by Ezra, in the law of God, on the first day of the month, returned to him on the second wanting to hear more of the word of life. The practice of "dwelling in booths," commanded in Lev. 23:42, had fallen into disuse, probably during the captivity, and though the feast itself had been revived by Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:4), yet this feature of it, from which it derives its name, had remained in abeyance. Though the "feast of trumpets" was also a feast in the seventh month, that of tabernacles was one of *the feasts* which all Israelites were bound to attend (Exod. 23:14–17; Deut. 16:16), and which was placed on a par with the Passover and Pentecost. There was a sincere desire, not only to hear, but also to be obedient to all the words of the law. So when they heard that this day required them to move out of their comfortable houses and to live in booth they moved with dispatch. They spoke to all the people, telling them to go into the mountain and get that which the law demanded for the building of the tents. As a result there was *such joyous and general* celebration of the festival that was not seen since the time of Joshua. In the first seven days there was continuous and systematic reading followed by a solemn assembly on the eighth day. This seems to imply that the year was a Sabbatical one, and that the rehearsal commanded in Deut. In this lesson we learn the value of well-instructed rulers and ministers of religion, especially those who are well instructed in Holy Scripture. An ignorant clergy is one of the greatest evils,

The careful student of God's word is rewarded by important discoveries. He will find truths, precepts, and promises which are new to him, or come with all the freshness and force of a new revelation, to correct his beliefs or his conduct, or to give him new comfort and joy. The Bible is an inexhaustible mine of eternal treasures. These Jews could turn their serious attention to the instructions and ordinances of their law now that they were safe from the assaults of their enemies. What about us?