

Zion's Joy and God's

Alexander Maclaren

"Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.... He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing" — Zephaniah 3:14, 17

What a wonderful rush of exuberant gladness there is in these words! The swift, short clauses, the triple invocation in the former verse, the triple promise in the latter, the heaped together synonyms, all help the impression. The very words seem to dance with joy. But more remarkable than this is the parallelism between the two verses. *Zion is called to rejoice in God because God rejoices in her.* She is to shout for joy and sing because God's joy too has a voice and breaks out into singing. For every throb of joy in man's heart, there is a wave of gladness in God's. The notes of our praise are at once the echoes and the occasions of His. We are to be glad because He is glad: He is glad because we are so. *We sing for joy, and He joys over us with singing because we do.*

I. God's joy over Zion

It is to be noticed that the former verse of our text is followed by the assurance: "The Lord is in the midst of thee;" and that the latter verse is preceded by the same assurance. So, then, intimate fellowship and communion between God and Israel lies at the root both of God's joy in man and man's joy in God.

We are solemnly warned by "profound thinkers" of letting the shadow of our emotions fall upon God. No doubt there is a real danger there; but there is a worse danger, that of conceiving of a God who has no life and heart; and it is better to hold fast by this - *that in Him is that which corresponds to what in us is gladness.* We are often told, too, that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is a stern and repellent God, and the religion of the Old Testament is gloomy and servile. But such a misconception is hard to maintain in the face of such words as these. Zephaniah, of whom we know little, and whose words are mainly forecasts of judgments and woes pronounced against Zion that was rebellious and polluted, ends his prophecy with these companion pictures, like a gleam of sunshine which often streams out at the close of a dark winter's day. To him the judgments which he prophesied were no contradiction of the love and gladness of God. The thought of a glad God might be a very awful thought; such an insight as this prophet had gives a blessed meaning to it. We may think of the joy that belongs to the divine nature as coming from the completeness of His being, which is raised far above all that makes of sorrow. But it is not in Himself alone that He is glad; but it is because He loves. The exercise of love is ever blessedness. His joy is in self-impartation; His delights are in the sons of men: *"As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee."* His gladness is in His children when they let Him love them and do not throw back His love on itself. As in man's physical frame it is pain to have secretions dammed up, so when God's love is forced back upon itself and prevented from flowing out in blessing, some shadow of suffering cannot but pass across that calm sky. He is glad when His face is mirrored in ours, and the rays from Him are reflected from us.

But there is another wonderfully bold and beautiful thought in this representation of the gladness of God. Note the double form which it assumes: "He will rest"—literally, be silent—in His love; "He will joy over thee with singing." As to the former, loving hearts

on earth know that the deepest love knows no utterance and can find none. A heart full of love rests as having attained its desire and accomplished its purpose. It keeps a perpetual Sabbath and is content to be silent.

But side by side with this picture of the repose of God's joy is set with great poetic insight the precisely opposite image of a love which delights in expression and rejoices over its object with singing. The combination of the two helps to express the depth and intensity of the one love, which like a song-bird rises with quivering delight and pours out as it rises an ever louder and more joyous note, and then drops, composed and still, to its nest upon the dewy ground.

II. **Zion's joy in God.**

To the Prophet, the fact that "the Lord is in the midst of thee" was the guarantee for the confident assurance "Thou shalt not fear any more;" and this assurance was to be the occasion of exuberant gladness, which ripples over in the very words of our first text. That great thought of "God dwelling in the midst" is rightly a pain and a terror to rebellious wills and alienated hearts. It needs some preparation of mind and spirit to be glad because God is near; and they who find their satisfaction in earthly sources, and those who seek for it in these, see no word of good news, but rather a "fearful looking for of judgment" in the thought that God is in their midst. The word rendered "rejoices" in the first verse of our text is not the same as that so translated in the second. The latter means literally, to move in a circle; while the former literally means, to leap for joy. Thus the gladness of God is thought of as expressing itself in dignified, calm movements, whilst Zion's joy is likened in its expression to the more violent movements of the dance. True human joy is like God's, in that He delights in us and we in Him, and in that both He and we delight in the exercise of love. But we are never to forget that the differences are real as the resemblances, and that it is reserved for the higher form of our experiences in a future life to "enter into the joy of the Lord."

It becomes us to see to it that our religion is a religion of joy. Our text is an authoritative command as well as a joyful exhortation, and we do not fairly represent the facts of Christian faith if we do not "rejoice in the Lord always." In all the sadness and troubles which necessarily accompany us, as they do all men, we ought by the effort of faith to set the Lord always before us that we be not moved. The secret of stable and perpetual joy still lies where Zephaniah found it—in the assurance that the Lord is with us, and in the vision of His love resting upon us, and rejoicing over us with singing. If thus our love clasps His, and His joy finds its way into our hearts, it will remain with us that our "joy may be full;" and being guarded by Him whilst still there is fear of stumbling, He will set us at last "before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy."