

## DAVID'S SHORTCOMINGS

There are two features in the psalm read this morning (40), which deserve the closest consideration. They are characteristic of the psalms in general, and are very precious characteristics when discerned in their true significance, but, on the other hand, are such as may and do yield hurtful results when understood superficially.

I refer first to that in which David bewails his shortcomings and sins. The language in which he does so is no measured language at all. On the contrary, it is as extreme as could be.

*"There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger: neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over my head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness. I am troubled: I am bowed down greatly: I go mourning all day long."*  
(Psalm 38:3-6.)

On the superficial view of these words, some are apt to exclaim, "What a wretched character this David must have been!" With a sneer, the unfriendly critic says, "I thought David was a man after God's own heart." Such a critic imagines David's confessions to mean that he was an abandoned character—given over to all iniquity with greediness—a liar, a thief, a drunkard, a fornicator, &c. That this is an enormous mistake is at once apparent from those other descriptions of David, by his own pen, in which he appears as one always afraid of sin, greatly fearing God and take daily delight in His commandments. Take for example the declaration in Psalm 18 of which there are many like.

*"I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his judgments were before me: and I did not put away his statutes from me. I was always upright before him, and I kept myself from mine iniquity. Therefore hath the Lord recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his eye sight."*

The very psalms in which the lamentations of sin appear, afford evidence of David's fervent godliness. What is the explanation then? Answer: It is to be found in **the standard before the mind of the writer.**

You sometimes hear an artist say of his productions, they are miserable blotches, or a man of fine musical capabilities, that his own compositions are poor affairs. The novice in art or music perhaps thinks the utterance insincere—a mere fishing for compliments, whereas the mistake is with the novice. In the eyes of the novice, the pictures and the pieces are master works. He only wishes he were able to do the like. The village novice, who has never seen a real work of art, it may be, is proud of his amateur drawings, and thinks them fit for exhibition. His admiring rustic friends help him in the delusion. The village novice thinks poor work good; and the real artist thinks good work poor. And this is the explanation of the peculiarity in the Psalms which we are considering. The world in general is a novice in holiness, and not even a novice, for a novice has at least begun to open his mind to perception, while the world is utterly dead in trespasses and sins. Men of a worldly mind listening to David imagine he is describing himself according to their standard, whereas he is describing himself by a standard as far above them as the sun is above the earth. When David looks to their standard, he says—

*"I have hated the congregation of evil doers, I will not sit with the wicked. I will wash my hands in innocency. . . . I walk in mine integrity."* (Psa. 26.)

When he looks to the standard of Him "*who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity,*" he says—

*"My life is spent with grief and my ears with sighing; my strength faileth because of mine iniquity and my bones are consumed."* (Psa. 31:10.)

To the ungodly mind, this is simply hopeless contradiction. Not so to those whose heart and aim are where David's were. They recognise David's experience as identical with their own, and can adopt David's language as descriptive of their own state. While scorning to be classed with the workers of iniquity (the class who neither fear God nor regard man, and make their natural desires the sole law of their action): while stoutly asserting their integrity as against the innuendoes of such as cannot judge them aright, because not themselves, "*delighting in the law of the Lord after the inward man,*" they nevertheless feel an utter abasement towards God on a ground that sinners cannot

appreciate. They are oppressed by the miserably felt inefficiency of their highest achievements in godliness, and the gaps and shortcomings and grovellingness that mar their highest life. They see and aspire to glorious heights of love, worship and purity, but they are broken-winged in their flights to reach them, and are constantly coming to the ground. They would delight to see God always before them, as a constant sun in their mental sky, warming and healing and strengthening; but, lo! the clouds come, and fogs arise, and colds and fevers are taken. They yearn to be in constant and sublime subjection to the perfect law of God in all things, as regards all that God desires His children to be to Himself and to their neighbours; but they find their subjection is by constraint, and fitful, and incomplete. Their love is intermittent; their compliances imperfect; their failures sometimes complete. In all this they are distressed and helpless. They walk not with sinners, and turn not aside from Yahweh's holy ways. They obey His commandments, and their affections are towards Him as their exceeding joy. Still, the nature they wear in the present state of things is so incapable of the entire spiritual triumph which they desire that a sense of failure brings distress, even as of a burden of iniquity prevailing like a billow going over the head. Their distress is not a distress that the ungodly would feel at all. The ungodly are not distressed at real wickedness: they have a perfectly satisfactory opinion of themselves at any time. Therefore, they are not likely to be troubled at higher deficiencies which they never can feel for want of that higher susceptibility to godly discernment which distinguishes the righteous from the wicked.

But if those who fear God have distress on account of the weakness and gloom of this earth-cleaving Adamic nature, they have none from a defiled conscience. Their overt acts are in harmony with Yahweh's righteous law. They do the things that the lord commands; and they abstain from the things that the lord forbids. They are the "*blessed*" spoken of by the Spirit in Psalm 119:

*"Who are undefiled in the way: who walk in the law of the Lord. They keep his testimonies, and seek him with the whole heart: they also do no iniquity, for he hath commanded them to keep his precepts diligently;"—*

Not that there is never any failure, but that the bent of their heart is toward the Lord, and the shape of their whole conduct in its fundamental features is in the image of his law. They are of the sort described by Yahweh himself as those to whom He looks: "*broken and contrite in heart, trembling at His word*"—fearful to deviate therefrom in any matter, and therefore as regards the main complexion of their lives, they are the righteous. They find consolation for their weaknesses and shortcomings in the fact so abundantly testified in all the Scriptures—that there is forgiveness for those who fear Yahweh's name and hope in His mercy. (Psa. 130:4; 147:11.) Concerning much of that weakness and shortcoming, they are able to say with Paul, as to things they would do and cannot, and things they would not do but are compelled,

*"It is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me."*

The Lord knows concerning many such things that—

*"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."*

*"He knoweth our frame and remembereth that we are dust:"*

Consequently, He shows pity to His children, who will all be able to say at last with David,

*"He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities, for as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy towards them that fear him. And as far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:10.)*

The lamentations in the Psalms then, do not give countenance to the doleful confession put into the mouths of the people by the liturgy of the Church of England—"We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done." This was not at all David's case, nor has it ever been the case of those with whom God is well pleased. They are distinguished on the contrary, by a careful doing of His commandments on both the positive and negative sides. Only in the midst of their highest performance, they feel so environed with frailty and shortcoming that they have groaned out,

*"My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken Thou me according to Thy word." (Psalm 119:25.)*

The second feature in the psalm requiring a careful discrimination, is the imprecation of evil upon enemies.

*“Let them be ashamed and confounded together that seek after my soul to destroy it; let them be drawn backward and put to shame that wish me evil.”*

The most remarkable illustration of this feature, perhaps, is that to be found in Psalm 109, where the following utterances are recorded concerning Judas: —

*“Set thou a wicked man over him, and let Satan stand at his right hand. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. Let his children be continually vagabonds and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places. Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let strangers spoil his labour. Let there be none to extend mercy unto him; neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off, and in the generation following, let their name be blotted out.”*

What could exceed the dreadful and intensity of this seven times infolded curse? It is appalling in its terrible bitterness. It distresses many lovers of the Scriptures, for want of a view sufficiently large to take in all parts of the subject. They think of the precepts of Christ, which tell us to do good to them that hate us, and to pray for them that despitefully use us and afflict us, —to bless them that persecute us; to bless and curse not. And they are distressed with the thought that there is a strange and inexplicable discrepancy between such precepts and the prayers of malediction which occur so frequently in the psalms. Their distress will disappear, if they will but realise that the precepts of Christ are only for the present position of saints in an evil world, while the Spirit-shadowed curses of the psalms are for sinners in the day of retribution. They can have no difficulty in realising this, if they will but reflect. Is it the purpose of God, as a finality, that those who hate and curse His people are to be recipients of good at their hands? On the contrary, the day of Christ is, for the enemies of God’s people, a day of wrath and destruction, as every part of the apostolic writings which deals with that day plainly represents—a day of “*flaming fire*” and vengeance by Christ on those that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:8.)—a day of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversary (Heb. 10:27), a day of breaking in pieces as a potter’s vessel, of treading the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God (Rev. 2:27; 19:15). Not only is the day of Christ a day of vengeance for the enemies of God, but it is vengeance to be administered by the saints themselves. Into their hands is the sword of judgment to be put; with them lies the execution of the judgment written. (Rev. 18:6-7, 20; 14:16; 2:26; Dan. 7:22; Psa. 149:9.) Consequently, it follows that the command to do good to the evil, and to refrain from avenging ourselves, is for present proof of obedience merely, and the development, by self-restraint, of that character required for the trusteeship of irresponsible power in the Kingdom of God.

Between these commandments and the delineation of coming judgment on the ungodly, there can, in the nature of things, be no true discrepancy. They are two separate things. The Psalms are inspired effusions, giving us, not David’s thoughts as a merely natural man, but the will and purpose of the Eternal Spirit, as signified to him by that Spirit which dwelt with him and spake by him from the day of his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Sam. 23:2), and they concern not David merely, but the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow, as the Spirit in the apostles teaches us. (1 Pet. 1:11.) They, therefore, breathe the righteous mind of the Spirit in exhibiting vengeance as the coming portion of those who act the part of enemies to those who are precious to God. That this exhibition should take the form of prayer for the vengeance adds to its effectiveness. Such a mode of presentation is so far from being inconsistent with the mind of Christ in the New Testament, that we find him recognising “prayer day and night” for vengeance as part of the attitude of God’s elect—an attitude which was unmistakably illustrated to John in Patmos, in that message of Christ which showed his slain servants under the symbolical altar saying,

*“How long, oh Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”*

The modern emasculation of the teaching of the New Testament has obscured this feature. In fact, it has disappeared altogether from what are called “Christian ethics.” But it has not disappeared from the divine purpose. God will judge the world by Christ Jesus when the time arrives; whether it be agreeable to the sentiments of man or not. Such a judgment must necessarily be “*a time of trouble, such as never was.*” It is of practical moment that we recognise it beforehand.

There is a terror as well as a joy connected with the testimony of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:11). The exhibition of this terror in the testimony concerning "*judgment to come*" made Felix tremble (Acts 24:25), and it will be no less powerful to sober and subdue every reasonable mind. Yet men are so accustomed to the free enjoyment of the goodness of God in the ordinances of nature that they cannot realise the possibility of any interference with that enjoyment coming from him. Well, the terrible facts of existence do not depend upon our power to realise them. They work themselves out whether we recognise them or not. Though the world is all asleep on the subject, the time will come—is coming—is at the door—when "*indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish*" will be "*on every soul of man that doeth evil.*" (Rom. 2:9.)

It is profitable for us to think of this. The nature of the tribulation has been shown us beforehand. It is the tribulation produced by the events by which the world at the coming of Christ is to be subdued to him in "the war of the great day of God Almighty." The doom of every rejected candidate for Christ's favour is to depart from his presence in unchanged mortal nature, into the territory of the devil-nations, with whom he is about to enter into fiery conflict, to suffer with them the terrible adversities of the hour of judgment. What more appalling prospect is it possible to conceive? Judas will realise the significance of the words which Christ spake concerning him: "*Good were it for that man if he had not been born,*" and not only Judas, but every man who finds himself with Judas in that hapless company which, at the judgment of the household, departs rejected from the presence of the judge "*with weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.*" The bitterness of rejection will be immeasurably aggravated by the nature of the hour that has come. Christ has come, and with him the hour of blessing for all the chosen of God—the hour of relief—of deliverance—of salvation; the hour of honour, and glory, and gladness; the hour for the prowess and triumph of the divine purpose in the earth, and of the perdition of all the schemes and greatnesses of mortal man; the hour for setting up the kingdom of God with great power and glory, and the hour for overturning the kingdoms of men in every country, and of every name and constitution.

At that moment there are two camps, roughly speaking—the CAMP of CHRIST, which will be a little, and, for a time, a concealed camp, but which will contain in it the elements of omnipotence for the conflict impending; and the CAMP of the ENEMY—or the kingdoms of men—a huge and imposing camp, gigantically embattled for conflict with the unknown mysterious power that has stolen in upon the scene. How dreadful for a man bearing Christ's name to be sent away from him at such a supreme hour. How dreadful for a multitude of them to be so dismissed. Consider their forlorn position as strangers arriving in countries given up to war; without property, without house or home, without friends; vagabonds in the earth, avoided by the inhabitants, and overwhelmed with the dreadful knowledge that Christ is their enemy, and that the conflict about to be waged is a hopeless one. Death would, doubtless, be a relief; but this relief is beyond their grasp until the few or many stripes have vindicated "*the righteous judgment of God.*" Shame and contempt, hunger and nakedness, wretchedness and pain, without the alleviation of hope, will be their portion, at the hands both of friends that might have been, and foes that are, till, tossed to and fro in the dreadful confusion of the time of trouble, the vials of the divine anger will be fully emptied, and their miserable being disappears in the tempest that will sweep away all refuges of lies from the earth.

It is well to realise this side of our profession. We are not only "*called to receive a blessing,*" but failing of the offered blessing, there remains "*a fearful looking of judgment and fiery indignation,*" which will dawn at last upon us as an appalling reality, however carelessly and slightly we may talk of the prospect now. How unwise to leave it out of account. The stolid stoicism of the present century may affect to think such a calculation beneath a manly policy of life: but it is no part of true wisdom to cultivate such a callous mental habit. The human mind is constituted to work by hope and fear as well as love; and all the elements of our being are appealed to by the truth. Hope and love are powerful, and have everything calculated to bring them into action in the contemplation of the unspeakable well-being offered in the gospel, and of the unspeakable loveliness and perfection of the character of Christ and His Father. But fear also is a power to move: and Paul only uses the language of reason, when he says,

*"Let us therefore fear lest . . . we come short of the great salvation;"*

*"For it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*

The practical value of the fear lies in its power to help love and hope in their struggles to conform to the will of Christ now in his absence, that at his coming He may invite us into the participation of His joy, instead of banishing us to the unspeakable turmoils that will overwhelm his foes.

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