

THE PSALMS

The Psalms are much more than the emotional outpourings of a human mind. They speak freely and surely of prophecy and eternity, and the deep original causes and purposes which only the Spirit knows. They portray the development of the mind and character of the multitudinous Christ, centering particularly in the training and perfecting of its glorious head. The Psalms fill in the gaps and omissions of the Gospels. They take us behind the scenes, and give us an inner view of the Gospel picture. In them we are with Christ during those years when he was hid from the world, and during those hours when He was alone with the Father.

“His delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Psa. 1:2).

This is the godly man. The fact that such a character seems extreme and unattainable is illustrative of the depravity of the flesh, and its deceptive ability to present its own deformity and illness as the standard of health. But this is the true standard—anything less is a diseased condition.

This ideal character, the godly man, appears throughout all the psalms, weaving them into an epic of the perfect fulfilment of man’s destiny.

“The Lord hath set apart him that is godly for Himself” (Psa. 4:3).

The world rushes by and around him, but it all has the unreal atmosphere of a dream. God has called him aside out of the throng into the quiet sanctuary of divine favour, and has shown him the plans for the eternal building that is to be erected on the site of all the present purposeless bustle and strife.

For peace of mind, and for the single-minded and effectual accomplishment of the work to which he is divinely appointed, the godly man does well to remember that he has been set apart. But still, he is not a cold, unfeeling spectator, hardly regarding the world’s troubles and, like Jonah, impatient for its destruction. Repeatedly we are told that Christ was moved with compassion for the vast droves of shepherdless sheep and was never far away from tears when he contemplated the benighted misery of the world, but still...

“Thou hast put gladness in my heart” (Psa. 4:7).

Gladness is our true foundation. The deepest layer of the life of the righteous is pure gladness. Underneath and surrounding the transient sorrows of the present, God has put an all-embracing gladness in his heart. It is not a shallow gladness that ignores sorrow, but one that sees through and beyond it. This is real. All else is passing. This is God’s gift of peace in the midst of storm—received and enjoyed in direct proportion as it is perceived and drawn upon.

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength” (Psa. 8:2).

The weak things of the world are used to carry on God’s mighty purpose, and confound the wise.

“I thank thee, Father; Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto the babes.”

The last shall be first, the weak shall be strong, the abased shall be exalted, the poor shall be rich. Is it that God just set out deliberately to reverse every human trend and value, or is it that all man’s views and standards are in direct and presumptuous defiance of eternal reality and truth? Can it be possible for proud, self-satisfied man to be consistently wrong?

“That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

And to our minds comes that vicious parade of selfish virtues and glorified vices that comprise the philosophy of the natural brute beast called man. Let us distrust every natural thought and inclination.

“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

asks the Psalmist (v. 4) contemplating this sad spectacle. Then illustrating the rich interweavings of the mind of the Spirit, Paul takes up this very passage and focuses it on THE Man, Christ:

“Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour... O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy Name!”

Thus is man brought from the depths. But so few rise to the call of this glorious destiny.

“The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside” (Psa. 14:2).

Many wonder about the countless millions that come and go entirely outside the scope of God’s plan, but God has looked them all over. The material that God desires is very rare—almost non-existent—true humility that seeks God’s will in all things, and has no ideas of its own. Man’s major problem is to get his estimation of himself and his own ideas to its true level of utter insignificance. Then he will not wonder why God can find no use for so many creatures like him, but he will bend every effort to make himself of some value to God.

Psalm 15 gives eleven points which mark the man that God can use.

Among them—

“He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not”(v.4).

There are few tests of character more decisive, especially in little things. There are many things that seem too small to make it necessary to be careful to adhere to principles; little infractions that we can laugh off, or dismiss lightly.

“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful in much: he that is unjust in the least is unjust in much.”

If we are unfaithful in little things, then we can be sure that our faithfulness in big things has no sound basis, but is merely the result of fear, necessity, or pride.

In any accepted benefit, there is an implied covenant. The limitations of our circumstances may confine the return to simple thanksgiving, but usually there is much more to be done. The person who fails to realize this—that whenever he accepts, he is obliged to give—has not learned the first law of the spirit of life. The life of Christ was in its entirety a complete and continual giving, and it was the only perfect life. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister—not to get, but to give—not to accumulate, but to distribute. He fully realized the implications of the everlasting covenant.

“He that doeth these things shall never be moved” (Psa.15:5).

What is it that moves us when others find fault? It is the half conscious fear that somewhere we have lost contact with the mind of the spirit and the fault-finder may have some ground of fact at the bottom of the grievance he has built up. And in God’s wise provision for the mortification of the flesh, we usually find that to a larger or smaller degree this is true. Rarely, if ever, are we permitted to enjoy the sweet but dangerous gratification of having been entirely right.

“The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance” (Psa. 16:5).

The mind that has fully grasped this has solved all problems and achieved perfect peace. All fear is removed and all desire is satisfied.

Verse 11, *“In thy presence is fullness of joy.”*

How remote, and ineffectual, are the vain chatterings and clamourings of men!

“Men of the world, which have their portion in this life” (Psa. 17:14).

David was king of a prosperous and successful nation. He subdued all his enemies round about, and enjoyed all the power and wealth and respect that natural man could wish. But he was never a *“man of the world having his portion in this life.”* God was too real to him. He was too simple and genuine and unaffectedly humble. Weak though he was, these were the basic qualities of his heart, and he was chosen as the most suitable medium for the recording of the psalms. They are far more than David’s thoughts, but David was the one whose mind was most in tune with them.

He says in the next verse—

“As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness, I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness...The Lord is my portion.”

Many of the holy garments portrayed in the Psalms are far too large to fit David, but David, more than any other, burned with a realization of the infinite desirability of the full stature of the perfect man in Christ Jesus.

“I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.”

Psalms 18 is majestic and warlike throughout. Its theme is vengeance and victory. All the destructive elements of nature are marshalled on the side of omnipotence, but right in the midst of it we read (v. 55),

“Thy gentleness hath made me great.”

The destructive power is the outer shell. The Lord is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire. These are but the passing manifestations of His fury, which endures but for a moment; but the still small voice of gentleness remains. Whirlwind and earthquake and fire—those mighty evidences of power—can pull down, and purify, and destroy, but gentleness alone can build and make great.

“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Psa. 19:7).

God does not attempt to give wisdom to the wise. That is too hard a task even for God. To recognize our simplicity and distrust our wisdom is the first step toward knowledge.

The 22nd Psalm stands apart. The opening words, which Jesus uttered on the cross, are no puzzle to those who know the Psalms.

“Why hast thou forsaken me?”

This thought is not an uncommon one. We find several Psalms beginning with this sentiment, but we do not find them ending with it. Consider the end of this one—

“He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, neither hath He hid His face from him, but when he cried unto Him, He heard...All the ends of the world shall turn unto the Lord” (v.24).

Christ only quoted the opening words, but the whole Psalm would be vividly before his mind, for it is clear that it was written expressly for that very occasion.

“They pierced my hands and my feet” (v.16).

“They parted my garments among them” (v.18).

Then the familiar 23rd Psalm, verse 3,

“He restoreth my soul.”

What does this mean, and how is it done? It is that process which clears and renews the perception and shrinks the present back into its proper dimensions. It consists of having certain things passed through the mind in orderly procession until the lurking shadows are removed, and the true relations of present and future are perceived. It would not matter how deep the pit were if, like Jacob, we could perceive a ladder reaching from it to the safe haven of God, peopled by His messengers sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation.

The preceding Psalm is an example. The first verse prepared Christ for what was coming, and told him that it was all foreseen. Specific details of the occasion confirm the application. Then assurance is given that God is never heedless or unmindful of those in affliction, and finally the ladder leads the mind right to the final glorious consummation,

linking the sorrows of the present into a continuous chain with the pleasures of eternity. So the soul is restored and takes up the journey again with the renewed vigour and courage. It is often the harshness of man that drives the soul to seek and find this comfort from God.

"The meek will He teach His way" (Psa. 25:9).

Meekness opens the gates to communion with God. God will not transmit wisdom through any other medium.

"To this man will I look...him who is of a humble and contrite spirit."

And it shuts the gates in the opposite direction. It is difficult to hurt a meek man. Arrows bounce harmlessly off the armour of his meekness. The proud is covered with exposed and tender susceptibilities, but the meek man knows none of these miseries.

"All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth UNTO SUCH AS KEEP HIS COVENANTS AND HIS TESTIMONIES" (Psa. 25:10).

We unconsciously tend to absorb from those around us dangerous conceptions concerning the indiscriminate operation of God's mercy. God said,

"I will have mercy ON WHOM I WILL HAVE MERCY. Great is His mercy TOWARD THEM THAT FEAR HIM."

And those that fear the Lord are specifically defined in Psalm 112:1, as

"those that DELIGHT GREATLY in His commandments."

Not just delighting in His word, but delighting in the actual application of it to their lives.

Every effect has a cause. All things operate by law, and the Scriptures teach us that the mercy of God is no exception. He is not a God of chance or caprice. For those who bend every effort to carefully learn and obey God's commands as the first concern of life, His mercy will have no limits; but for those who in any way presume upon their position, or ignore His instructions in any respect, mercy does not enter the picture.

If we delight greatly in a commandment, it ceases to be a commandment, and becomes a loving expression of communion and desire. This is the perfect law of liberty—the ultimate perfect merging of duty and desire. Law, we are told, is not for the righteous, but for the disobedient. Love eventually absorbs all law, as it does all fear, by removing all cause and necessity for it. Thus in the very process of abolishing the law, we establish it. The law is the form into which the character is poured. The form is soon removed, but the fixed character remains as an eternal monument to it.

"When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell." "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord"

(Psa. 27:2; 2Chr. 20:17).

Sometimes patience and faith must bridge a great gulf between the two parts of this verse, but for the godly man the immutability of the basic principle is assured. The worst of storms will finally blow itself out and leave the man of God unharmed.

"One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple" (v.4).

One thing. One thing is needful. Complication is unrest, but simplification is peace. One thing in life must stand in majestic isolation like the mountain of the Lord, and all other things must be grouped in complete subjection at its base.

"Wait on the Lord" (v. 14).

We have ample instruction that we must be diligent and redeem the time, but in many problems waiting on the Lord is the best solution. God is in complete control; we are merely servants. We have many specific duties and responsibilities, but even in the discharge of these, waiting on the Lord plays no small part. The question, *"Who shall roll away the stone?"* often occasions needless care. Much of it arises from our failure to recognize our

own significance in relation to God's great work. God is primarily testing and preparing us, not coming to us for help. Our task is confined to doing our own small part as it comes to us, in a manner pleasing to God.

All the planning and engineering we can safely leave to Him.

"HE is the saving strength of His anointed" (Psa. 28:8).

Was Christ different from us? God was his strength and his salvation. He had no other—nothing in himself; nor have we. He was the perfect man because he was the perfect manifestation of man's helplessness and God's perfection.

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psa. 29:2).

The weeping of the night is essential to the perfection of the morning's joy. Knowledge of good and evil have always been inseparably linked, right from the Garden of Eden. The weeping of the night, once it is over, will be a highly valued memory. Its actual sorrows will have left the mind, but its beneficial effect will be eternal. Nothing is unnecessary in the working of God's purpose.

"Fret not thyself because of evildoers" (Psa. 37:1).

It is natural to fret, but only because the whole picture is not kept in mind. It is no part of the necessary sorrows of the righteous to fret about evildoers, or about the multitude of abuses and inequalities evildoers impose on each other. The state of the world, local and international, is a matter of interest, but not of concern. Prices, wages, and social injustice are no personal anxiety of the man of God. He has been assured sustenance, and he desires no more. God's power is not shortened. Who comes out victor in the bitter political and industrial strivings of the potsherd of the earth cannot affect God's tender care for His children.

Continuing this thought—

"Surely every man walketh in a vain show; surely they are disquieted in vain; he heapeth up and knoweth not who shall gather it" (Psa. 39:6).

Three thousand years have not changed the picture. Man is still disquieted in vain. How futile and pitiful must man seem to God! And we all claim to know better; we are often careful and troubled about such little things. We sing, "Oh how love I Thy law, it is my study all the day." Surely if this is to be more than a pious exaggeration, it must fill our minds and eliminate our petty disquietude, and lead us to say...

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" (Psa. 43:5)

Here is spiritual wisdom reasoning with natural feeling. It is much more easy and natural to follow and be affected by feeling than reason. But wisdom here calls attention to all the blessings and promises of God, present and future, and urges the inescapable conclusion that only hope and joy and praise are in order among the company of God's elect, therefore...

"Sing ye praises WITH UNDERSTANDING" (Psa. 47:7).

This is the whole spirit of the book of Psalms. Praise is its form, understanding its outstanding characteristic. The Psalms speak with certainty and wisdom, upon every phase of divine purpose and human welfare, and they turn every aspect into praise and glorification of God. Understanding and praise go hand in hand. In Psalm 33 it is recorded

"Praise is comely for the upright."

All the activities of the upright should be directed toward the praise of God, in word and deed. Activities which do not measure up to this standard are uncomely and out of place.

To worship in holiness, and to praise with understanding, comprise the highest destiny and joy to which man can aspire. The whole Scripture is necessary to teach both the holiness and understanding, but in the developing and expressing of them in the form and spirit of worship and praise, the Psalms are pre-eminent.

And in the heart of every Psalm, lifting it out of the realm of the ideal and impossible into the practical and attainable, we see that one man in whom all the strength and salvation of God centred:

“In the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, O my God.”

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