

PRAISE AND HEART-HARDENING

The psalm read this morning (95) furnishes, as every portion of Scripture does, themes of profitable meditation. It opens with an invitation to praise:

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise unto the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.”

We are told in another psalm:

“It is good to sing praises to our God, for it is pleasant, and praise is comely.”

In the psalm before us a reason is given for the invitation to indulge in this good thing. It is not a mere sentimental rapture, though sentiment and rapture have their fullest and most reasonable scope in the act of praise directed to God. It has a reason, and the reason is:

“For the Lord is a great God.”

Another psalm, like many besides, indicates the nature and extent of the greatness:

“By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.”

Let us open our minds to this great idea. It lies at the very root of the truth. It is the beginning of the gospel, the ground of our hope, the source of all true consolation. It is the end of salvation: for what do we find in all the delineations of the perfected state but praise as the foremost occupation—the highest delight of those who have part in it? Of the apocalyptic four beasts, symbolic of Israel redeemed (and if we are saved we shall be incorporate with them), it is testified that—

“They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

How reasonable is praise to God. He made us, and not we ourselves. He made all things. Do we admire the stupendous and well-ordered movements of the universe? Are we impressed with the beneficent march of the seasons? See we anything in the poise of the elements and the inimitable adjustment of the intricate forces of nature? Or are we struck with the exquisite skill exhibited in the construction of the minutest fibre in plant or animal? To man we can attribute nothing of all this power and all this wisdom. Man himself is a product of it. He is a helpless, if not an admiring, spectator. He cannot modify the fundamental laws around him, if he appreciate ever so little or desire ever so much. He can but manipulate (and that on a very small scale) the materials brought to his hand; and these he can only use in subjection to already established laws and affinities which he is powerless to touch. To God we look with ascription of all this wealth of wisdom and power, and the contemplation of Him generates praise. If He fill heaven and earth by His Spirit—if thus He is near to every one of us—if all this mighty frame-work of visible existence around us is the concretion of the invisible energy of His Spirit—if every faculty we possess, and every idea we conceive, and every beauty we admire in the great work around us are traceable to the impress of His eternal wisdom on the materials He has provided and employed in the construction of heaven and earth, is it not reasonable we should, like David, call upon all that is within us to bless His holy name?

An apparently curious theme of adoration is furnished in the psalm:

“In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land.”

Why should “*the deep places of the earth*” be mentioned more than the flat places or the wide places? There seems to me a reason. If there is one time more than another when we are enabled to feel our own absolute insignificance, or tempted to doubt the power of God, it is when we have to do with the deep places of the earth. On the iron-bound coast, you peep over the mighty crags into the dizzy depths below, where ships are specks, and great rocks like very small stones on the strand; or from a mountain side, you gaze down into a yawning gorge into which a single false step would precipitate you to destruction; or in the mammoth underground caves of the American Continent, you wander

with lantern light in miles of mazy darkness till at the end you come to a fathomless deep into which you throw stones that never reach the bottom, so far as you can make out from the sound—in such places and at such times there is a world of meaning in the words:

“In his hand are the deep places of the earth.”

If in His hand are the deep places of the earth, we powerfully feel how great is He and how entirely and implicitly we are in His hand. So also with the strength of the hills. The great mountains overwhelm us with the idea of stupendous power; if this strength is *“His,”* how strong is He, as well as wise and kind. It is not without a meaning that the Scriptures speak of Him as *“the great and dreadful God.”* His greatness is unsearchable. It is staggering to our poor capacities. We can but recognise it and yield the feeble tribute of our praise.

There is something to consider in the fact that the psalm before us invites us to praise. Who gives this invitation? Well, doubtless, in the first instance, the invitation is David’s; but we must never forget that the Spirit of God spake by David, and that David, in the Psalms, personates the Son of David (the Messiah), as shown by the frequent application of the Psalms in this way by the Spirit in the Apostles. The psalm shadows forth the glorious invitation which the Captain of our salvation will address to all his brethren, and through them to all the world in the day of his manifestation. He has said,

“In the midst of the ecclesia I will sing praise unto thee”; and again, “My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation.”

The world has not yet seen this great sight, when the Lamb, in the midst of the symbolic 144,000—*“the general assembly and ecclesia of the first-born”*—will give the signal for an outburst of praise such as has never been heard upon the wings of the wind, in the history of the human race at all events. And such praise! Every person in the assembly will take an enlightened and an efficient part. Every heart will be fully concentrated—*“fixed”* is the psalmodic phrase—on the high and holy object of it, who, though *“above all blessing and praise,”* has declared His delight in the pure-hearted adoration of those whom He has made. There will be no such drawback as we experience now in our midst: there will be no drawing nigh with the mouth while the heart is far away. There will be no technical pre-occupation with notes; no mechanical unfeeling utterance of words; no mere musical, and sometimes unmusical, sounds from the throat. Every mind will be aglow with great thoughts of God; every heart with the transport of admiration; and every voice in full accord with those laws of musical harmony, which, with all other laws, are laws of God’s own constitution. All who take part will have changed from the mortal and the frail to the undying and the strong; from the stunt and the incapacity and the weakness of the corruptible, to the strength and glory and efficiency of the spirit-nature, whose capabilities of enjoyment will be at their highest tension in the act of collective praise to the Eternal Father of all, of whom and to whom and through whom are all things.

We are looking forward to this feast of praise in the state described by Paul:

“Made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope.”

These are the days of our pilgrimage. But they need not be praiseless days. Nay, they must not be; it is part of the calling to which we have been called to—

“Render the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.”

We are *“a chosen generation—a peculiar people—a royal priesthood”*—even now (1 Pet. 2:9), part of whose vocation it is to—

“Show forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

We are called upon to *“Rejoice in the Lord,”* and to give expression to this joy in *“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”* Paul and Silas in prison, in the darkness of the night, prayed to God and *“sang praises, and the prisoners heard them”* (Acts 16:25). The invitation of the psalm before us is an invitation to sing unto the Lord now: *“Today, if ye will hear his voice”* (for these words form part of the psalm—verse 7), we are told to *“harden not our heart,”* as Israel did in the wilderness. Now if we shut our hearts to the luxury of praise and the sweetness of prayer, are we not *“hardening our hearts”*? Some people call this *“singing and praying”* *“soft.”* Be it so: softness is the opposite of hardness; and we are divinely warned against hardness. Because your popular superstition has run into one extreme, that is no reason why we should run into another. If men professing the truth are inaccessible to the feelings that find expression in praise, is it not a proof that they are in the very

attitude deprecated here? Paul directly applies the psalm to us in Heb. 3, and he applies it specifically on this question of heart-hardening. He says (verse 6) we are the house of Christ “*if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.*” Then, having quoted this psalm in illustration, and this part of it,

“*Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts,*” etc., he says, “*Wherefore . . . take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*” (Heb. 7:12-13).

Consequently, we listen to a divine exhortation, when we listen to any brother’s warning against a hardened state of the spiritual affections. No true man in Christ will dislike such warnings, if they are delivered in a benevolent and reasonable spirit; for such a man sufficiently knows by experience the tendency of human nature even in the best of men to sink into this state. And he delights in the reproofs of the spirit. He feels like David:

“*Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head*” (Psa. 141:5).

It is possible for the truth to interest the intellect, while the affections are set upon things on earth. In such a case, even the intellect itself will soon cease to be charmed by the testimony, whereas to the mind whose affections are set on things above, the word of the Lord will always hold the very high place assigned to it in all the Psalms, wherein it is declared to be more necessary than food: sweeter than honey: more valuable than piles of the precious metals.

A man’s relation to this question of “*praise*” is almost a criterion of his whereabouts as to the “*hardening*” deprecated in the psalm. If he has no delight in the direction of praise, it is a bad omen, and one demanding his particular attention. It is a remarkable feature that this hardening of the heart is spoken of as a matter subject to our will. The exhortation “*harden not your heart*” implies that it is within our volition to some extent to harden or not harden our hearts. This would seem as if it were contrary to truth. The truth would seem to be that if a man’s heart is hard, it is so by a constitution which it is beyond his power to alter; and that to exhort him not to harden his heart, is like exhorting him to change the colour of his hair or the height of his stature. The truth, however, is not altogether according to the appearance of things. The state of the heart, like the state of the body, is pretty much a question of treatment. If man cleanse, nourish, and exercise the body, health, vigour and symmetry are the results. If a man neglect these, wanness and weakness come instead. Consequently, though at a given moment, it might be absurd to say to a man in the latter state, “*Change your state,*” as regards the result possible by a certain line of action, it would not be so absurd as it would seem. So in this other case, the state of our minds is a question of the influences to which we subject them. We may harden them in a divine direction by neglect of divine things, or by exercising them in merely natural things. It is here where the reasonableness of the exhortation appears. It is here where responsibility rises as to the state of our hearts.

A man realising this will see the wisdom of regularly setting apart at least 20 minutes a day for the reading of the holy oracles. This reading is the greatest antidote in the present dispensation for the heart-hardening which is common to all men by nature. Next to it comes the morning and evening sacrifice of prayer—oftener, like David and Daniel, if the heart so frame, but at least thus often. This, like a watering of the seed sown by the word, will help that bringing forth the fruit thereof by which the Father is glorified. Then there are the assemblies of the saints enjoined by the word, which are a great help in the same direction. Next, there is nothing like the actual performance of well-doing for quickening of the heart towards God, and keeping us in a right frame and attitude. Let a man accustom himself to doing good—let him ponder his daily surroundings in the light of the commandments of Christ, and aim to adapt himself to those surroundings in accordance with those commandments, and he will be wonderfully helped. The combined result of this mode of life will be realised in a state of continual mental sympathy for divine ideas and things, otherwise expressed in apostolic phrase as being “*conformed to the image of the Son of God.*” It is, in fact, the growth of the new man, after the image of Him who has begotten him by the word. The outward man may perish from many causes, but by such a course, this inward man will be renewed from day to day, and manifest his increasing vigour by the increasing burden we shall feel with the present sinful state of things, and increasing desire for the change that is to be brought unto us at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The other side of the picture is to be seen in that opposite course which certainly brings a hardness of heart for which a man will be held responsible. In this opposite course, the man neglects the reading of the word. He does not absolutely leave the Bible unread but he adopts no system; he does it at haphazard, as time and inclination may suit. The consequence is, it is never very convenient, and never very enjoyable. The affairs of this life are always exacting, and he always accords to them the first claim. Bible reading is attended to at odd times, when he has nothing else particularly to do—perhaps on a Sunday afternoon occasionally, when he is heavy, or on a weeknight, when he is tired out with a day's work. It becomes more and more occasional, as time goes on, until it is practically shelved altogether. By and by, he wonders if the Bible is true, and becomes finally perhaps an easy prey to the shallow objections of a very superficial and unprincipled scepticism. If he does not exactly sink to this depth, he hangs on, a dead branch—a weight and a grief of mind to those who are flourishing on the sap of the true vine. This man. Whose delight is not in the law of the Lord, soon ceases to pray. He is tired at night, and he is in a hurry in the morning, and he does not see any particular use in praying. And so in the habitual absence of this opening and subduing and sanctifying act of the mind, his carnal heart settles gradually into a state of hopeless hardness. The meetings he thinks are all very well in their place, and he is easily kept at home; and as for bringing the precepts of Christ to bear on daily surroundings, he will be heard to whisper that religion should be kept in its own place. Money-making, by any means, is his charm; and he will be found standing in the way of sinners, and sitting in the seat of the scornful, and prominent in all pleasure-taking, and condescending even to worse follies in which he “does not see any harm.” His heart is hardened, and he has hardened it; and in the hardness of his impenitent heart, he is treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds.

Brethren, be it ours to listen to the Spirit's exhortation to harden not our hearts as in the day of Israel's provocation. Let us obey the other exhortation which says,

“My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life . . . For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he pondereth all his goings. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins. He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray.”

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