

THE PSALMS AND PRAISE TO GOD

Some time ago, a brother remarked in his exhortation that he would be sorry when we had got through the reading of the Psalms—not, he said, that other parts of the Bible were not equally, and, in some cases, more instructive in the ways of God, but there was a beauty and a comfort about the Psalms all their own. Every appreciative reader of the Scriptures will share this sentiment. The beauty of the Psalms requires a predisposed state of mind to see it. You could not prove it any more than you could prove the beauty of a Greek statue. But you can see and feel it, if your heart is in tune with the key-note that governs them all—God. This is the note that spoils their music throughout for some people. To those in David's mind, who thirsted for God as the panting hart for the waterbrooks, it is their light, and joy, and beauty. You feel when you have read them, that you have been, like Moses, with the glory on the mount, causing the skin of the face to shine.

The Psalm we have read today (107) is peculiar among the Psalms in being divided into equal sections by a recurring refrain, which would probably be sung in the temple in connection with the recitation of that Psalm by the priests. The refrain is this:

“O that men would praise Yahweh for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.”

Let us consider this, and extract from it what belongs to us as those who have been called out of darkness for this very purpose. It refers to the themes rehearsed in the intervals of the refrain. These themes cover a great variety of topics. Israel's deliverance from Egypt is, of course, very prominent; but there are other things. They range, as the Psalms in their entirety do, from the individual experiences of divine goodness in little things to the incomprehensible achievements of divine power and wisdom in the boundless field of nature. Concerning all of them, the intense desire is expressed that men would open their eyes to the discernment of the greatness, and their mouths in praise of the goodness to which there is no weariness or end. Is not this rooted in the deepest reason? Men do praise things. It is going on every day. They praise beautiful workmanship, they praise disinterested actions; they praise noble deeds. They praise many smaller things and some larger. It is better they should praise small things than praise nothing. A man who has no praise for anything but his own things, who has no commendation for anything but himself, is an abortion of a man. He lacks the noblest side of man. Better that a man should be enthusiastic about dogs or birds' eggs than enthusiastic about nothing. But among all the praise that is going on, who thinks of praising God in the sincere manner in which they praise a public singer or a public man? It does not occur to them. One here and there may be found with a mind open and a heart fervent in this direction like David; but to the mass of mankind it is foreign, a lifeless idea—a thing of “cant.” Yet consider how reasonable it is, and how unreasonable by comparison is the praise of anything else. Why should a picture be praised? It is a lifeless thing. Why should a man of talent be praised? He did not create his talent. A certain kind of praise is doubtless appropriate, the expression of admiration is natural; and that God intended its use in measure is shown by the constitution he has given to the human brain, which in one of its faculties yearns to bestow it, and, in another, has pleasure in receiving it. But we are considering the matter in the bearing suggested by the Psalm. If praise is legitimate towards men and things, how much more called for towards God. This is the argument of the Psalm. Weigh it, and see how powerful it is. Look around. Man made nothing. He is himself a made thing and frail at that. He is a flower, as the Scriptures declare, that cometh forth and is cut down—a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanisheth away. But some great Maker is somewhere; for here is a vast universe, full of the contrivances of a perfect wisdom in things great and small. It is enlarging to the mind to study these things—the organization of invisible animalculae, the structure of vegetation, the mechanism of a thousand living things, and the balanced majestic movements of the starry universe over our heads. They bear the impress of a Master Workman—an adjusting, purposeful, contriving Workman; as the Duke of Argyle triumphantly shows in his work on “The Reign of Law,” and “The Unity of Nature,” in answer to Darwin, Spencer, Wallace and others. The Psalms invite us to study these things, “*the works of His hands,*” and to join in the exclamation of over-powered and astonished admiration:

“O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all. The earth is full of Thy riches.” “Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.”

Here we find scope for unstinted and rational and ennobling and rejoicing praise. We contemplate the Eternal Father, who is ONE and everywhere present by His limitless and subtle Spirit. We recognise with joy and satisfaction His invisible and universal energy as the source of the latent wisdom and power we see expressed in the visible universe; and the Psalms give us suitable utterance to the otherwise inexpressible feelings that swell the enlightened heart. We praise, we magnify, we exult in the fathomless ocean of power and wisdom in which we live and move and have our being.

God’s revelation of Himself by Moses and the prophets, Jesus and the apostles, enables us to do this to some purpose. Apart from this, we should not know that praise from feeble mortals could be acceptable to *“the High and Lofty One inhabiting eternity;”* nor could we be aware that He had any purpose with us beyond the fleeting life we now live for threescore years and ten. We could not be sure that we were justified in hoping for any further goodness than we experience in this mortal state. But in the light of what He has said, and caused to be written for our instruction, during those sundry times and divers manners in which in time past He spoke to the fathers by the prophets and lastly by His Son whom He hath constituted the heir of all things, the case stands very differently. We have learnt that He delights in the worship of those who are of a humble and earnest, and enlightened and obedient mind towards Himself; that to such He looks with complacency, and guides their ways, even when He seems not to do so in the darkness; and that He has a purpose of kindness towards them in Christ, according to the counsel of His own will—a purpose for which He is now preparing them, and which He will accomplish towards them in those *“ages to come”* when He will banish all evil from the earth, and confer upon them the glory of an immortality that will render them the everlasting inhabitants of a finished and beautiful earth.

With such an apprehension of the bearing of things, we can give wings to our praise, and soar with David in all the lofty flights in which by the Spirit he was able to indulge. Do we weary and fail by reason of this weakness which belongs to mortal nature? We have reason notwithstanding to refuse to be discouraged. The goodness of God enables us to lean on His indulgence with regard to such incapacities; they belong to those *“things that we would not but which we do”* to which Paul makes more than regretful allusion in Romans 7:15-20, and for which he comfortingly argues we are not responsible. The 103rd Psalm is very specific on this point. It first exhibits the benevolence of God’s character:

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.”

What a pillow of rest there is in this declaration, especially when considered in the light of the express historic illustration it receives in the record of God’s dealings with Israel:

“They kept not the covenant of God and refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had showed them . . . Therefore their days did He consume in vanity and their years in trouble . . . Then they sought Him and they returned and enquired early after God . . . And He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity and destroyed them not. Yea, many a time turned He His anger away and did not stir up all His wrath. For He remembered they were but flesh: a wind that passeth away and cometh not again” (Psa. 78:10-39).

There is nothing more constraining in the direction of obedience, holiness, and comfort than this view of God’s patient kindness. The heart has but to open to its reception to feel its great purifying power. When it has free course, it enables us to join heartily in the opening objurgation of the 103rd Psalm:

“Bless Yahweh, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies: who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s”

What good thing is absent from this list of benefactions? If the comfort could be made greater, it is when it goes on to speak of the bearing of this goodness on our manifold imperfections, shortcomings and sins.

“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. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame. He remembereth that we are dust."

We have therefore every cause to be of good cheer as the apostolic writings exhort—always presupposing one thing which even these comforting psalms do not forget to state: that we fear God with an earnest and intelligent fear and wait diligently upon Him in the observance of what He requires at our hands. There is a danger of presuming on mercy that will not be ours. God is not the God of the Universalist or the Unitarian or the mere philanthropist. "*God is love,*" but "*our God is also a consuming fire;*" and how these two attributes mix and work together we learned from the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone. We should make a mistake if we were to apply all the consolations we have been looking at to such as are regardless or forgetful of God, or to those who are negligent of His commandments. God is good and forgiving, but it is on conditions, and the conditions are expressed in the very psalm that tells us so unctuously of His mercy.

"The mercy of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him . . . to such as keep His covenant and to those who remember His commandments to do them."

This is where our meetings and our readings of the Word are so valuable—so indispensable to us. They keep us associated with the covenant of God, and they keep His commandments in our living memory, and thus keep His mercy always active towards us in the forgiveness of our many shortcomings, and will finally give its glorious effect in our absolute deliverance from all evil.

"Oh, that men would praise Yahweh for His goodness."

"It is," as another psalm has it—"*a good thing to give thanks unto Yahweh, and to sing praises unto Thy name, O Most High;*" and yet another,

"It is good to sing praises unto our God: it is pleasant: praise is comely."

It is, indeed, beautiful, pleasant and comely. Human nature never appears in so lovely an aspect as when moved by the unaffected sentiment of adoration. We see little of it in this sterile age, because "*the world lieth in wickedness.*" When we do see it, it is as one of the flowers of heaven springing in the desert. The desert in this sense shall yet blossom as the rose: and "*the earth shall be full of His praise.*" For this, by the power of the gospel, we patiently wait in hope, able to endure the present desolation by the certainty of God's purpose in this matter:

"As truly as I live, the whole earth shall be filled with My glory."

If it is pleasant to see, how glorious to feel. We are susceptible of a great variety of kinds of feeling. Some yield satisfaction, and some the reverse: but none can exceed the pure gratification of the sense of admiration, excited by whatsoever. The degree of it is of course proportioned to the object that calls it forth. There are small admirations and large ones. What can compare with the admiration excited by God when we get a full view?—holding in Himself all power and wisdom—absolute, underived, eternal; and being in Himself an inexhaustible fountain of goodness, light, beauty, strength, and joy; and embracing by Himself all worlds, all phenomena, all space; without whose cognisance nothing can occur in heaven or earth, "*of Whom and through Whom and to Whom are all things.*"

Praise is beggared and baffled. He is "*exalted far above all blessing and praise.*" Reverence, silent, deep, profound, seems the only seemly part for mortals, as saith the Scripture,

"Let all the earth keep silence before Him."

We may be glad that it pleases Him to be worshipped. This worship is a great privilege. The pureness of reason and the sweetness of emotion unite in a transporting thrill.

"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory."

We are but dust, animate for a few years by permission. We have no claim to honour except such as God may confer.

"Give unto Yahweh the glory due unto His name."

To Him it is "*due.*" He doeth whatsoever pleaseth Him in heaven and earth. There is not an excellence in nature, there is not a faculty among animals, there is not a power in man, there is not a grace in angels, but what is rooted in Him. They are all but the flowering of His invisible energy by the contrivance of His exquisite wisdom in the effectual working of His unfailing power. Praise to Him is reasonable and glorious. Man was made to praise Him, but man has failed in this object of his existence.

“The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there were any that did understand that did seek God.”

What is the result of His inspection?

“They are all gone back. They are together become filthy. There is none that doeth good, no not one.”

Will God’s purpose with man fail? Oh no. He will yet fill the earth with His glory. This is the earliest pledge of His goodness. He is preparing the way for it in all He has been doing upon earth for ages past. He is preparing the material for the work even now. We are in the channel of this preparatory operation. God was in Christ when—1,850 years ago, he initiated the process of reconciliation in his crucifixion and resurrection—and He has not since abandoned the process of reconciliation by the forgiveness and purification of those believing. The process has been going on more or less ever since. In the working out of it we have been provisionally included in the selection by our submission to the Gospel in this nineteenth century. The gospel was established for the purpose—that Christ might purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works. Wherein we may have been purified and rendered zealous in this direction, *“we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.”* We would not have been what we are if we had not come within the transforming influence of the gospel—which is His power unto salvation. Let us not forget the object for which we have been called even now, *“that we might show forth the praises of Him who hath called us from darkness into His marvellous light.”* Even now are we the sons of God. Even now we are His temple—if we are anything real in Christ. Even now will His praise be our delight; thanksgiving the daily incense of our hearts; supplication the daily staff on which we lean. If it be not so, how can we be fitted to enter the state in which *“every one doth speak of His glory?”*

We are unfavourably placed in an age when worship is either burlesqued in the irrational excesses of superstition and effeminacy; or killed by the frosts of misapplied science. God knows our drawbacks in living in the midst of such frightful desolation. Let us not despair. We have His Word, which is both a light and a fertiliser. Keeping close to it in daily reading, we shall be kept from evil, and grow into conformity with its noble spirit of enlightened devoutness, notwithstanding the deforming blight that reigns in all the world. By the power of the Scriptures and the protection of God, we shall be preserved in the universal corruption, and be prepared for the glory of God in that gladsome and glorious day of which the Psalm concludes with a glimpse: a day when He will *“set the poor on high from affliction and place them in families like a flock; when the righteous shall see it and rejoice, and all iniquity shall stop her mouth.”* Then shall the earth be invited to *“sing a new song to Yahweh . . . before Yahweh who cometh to judge the world with righteousness and the people with His truth.”*

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