

PSALMS—SUMMARY OF SACRED LEARNING

soul" (35:25), "Give me not over to the soul of my enemies" (27:12), are scarcely intelligible to the untrained English reader. It may be doubted whether Driver has given quite enough prominence to the simple idea of personality as filling the word "soul," though undoubtedly he recognises it. See our Exposition of 16:10; and cp. Eze. 18:4. Apart from any nice shades of meaning in the word "soul," the broad psychological fact remains that by means of it a man is solicited to exercise his marvellous capacity of projecting himself from himself, to view himself from without himself, and to address himself in the language of expostulation and exhortation; of which 42:5, 11, 43:5 and 103:1, 2, 22 (see Expositions) are memorable examples.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PSALMS AS A STIMULUS TO HOLY LIVING

Holy Living is here regarded as something more than righteous conduct; just as being is more than doing, and holiness goes beyond righteousness. Correct conduct in all its forms is necessarily included, but holy living has in it the vitality and the bloom which spring from communion with a holy God. To such living, the Psalms are, by experience, found to supply a mighty stimulus.

That they should do so, lies in the very nature of things. Not only do they emphasise character in a remarkably varied and persistently recurring way, but they set the sympathetic soul in pursuit of character by moving the deepest springs of desire and endeavour. They bring the soul into contact with God, in the highest and most spiritual acts of adoration, praise and prayer. To use the Psalms devoutly, is to come into the presence-chamber of the All-Holy. One has only to consider the proportion of direct address to Deity which the Psalms contain, to perceive the extent to which the man who sincerely uses them commits himself to sentiments of penitence, confidence, adoration, love, desire; so as to place himself under moral compulsion either to mean what he says, or to desist from saying it,—unless he would recklessly embark on the repugnant course of daring hypocrisy.

STUDIES IN PSALMS

It is not meant that a man cannot respectfully listen to prayers and praises in which he is not for the present prepared to commit himself by voluntary personal undertaking. Yet still, setting callous formalism aside as downright iniquity and mockery, the compelling power of devout compositions,—especially when voiced by worshippers believed to be sincere,—must ever be either sympathetically to join, or candidly to dissent and refrain. Supposing, however, the beginnings of faith and desire to be present in ever so feeble a degree, and the inclination be indulged to join in the devout utterance of the Psalms—then, what is the nature of the influence under which a man's mind consents to come? It must be—to become holy.

Is God himself holy? And is he, in psalms like these, directly addressed? To the first of these two vital questions an affirmative answer is here assumed—without argument. To the second, some fresh emphasis is sought to be given. At this point the appeal of necessity lies to experience. Thousands—myriads—now living—can attest that, to the best of their judgment when turned towards the witness of their own consciousness, there is such a thing as speaking directly to the Omniscient, in perfect confidence of being heard of Him. There is such a thing as communion with God. There is such a thing as doing that which these holy psalms are evermore doing. And it is a part of this consciousness that thereby is let in upon the worshipper's soul the mightiest stimulus to become—what the God addressed is—holy.

Nothing further claims admission into this Chapter, save to strengthen what has already, in brief, been expressed.

It is conceivable that the importance which the Psalter attaches to human character, should be obscured by the incidental nature of its enforcement and especially by the surpassing energy with which the influences fitted to bear on character are concentrated on the worshipper's mind. In other words, the grand mission of the psalmists seems to be, rather to display and illustrate the character which Jehovah already bears, than to enforce the character which his adorers are called upon to work out. Their songs of set purpose glorify God: incidentally, they educate man.

But their educative influence, when concentrated, is very strong. The first psalm—introductory to the whole collection—is devoted to character. The fifteenth, dramatically extols

PSALMS—STIMULUS TO HOLY LIVING

character: so does the twenty-fourth, with still more brilliant scenic energy. The fifty-first, with bitter tears for failure, exactly enforces character—thorough, pure, influential. The seventy-second, in a quite unexpected way, extols character as exemplified in the person of its ideal King; and, out of many to name but one more, the extremely dramatic one-hundred-and-eighteenth in a remarkable manner sets character on the highest conceivable pedestal by opening the gate of Jehovah only to the righteous. If behind these direct and indirect encomiums on good character there be massed the strongly disapproving reflections with which the Psalter abounds on men of the stamp of Cush and Doeg and Ahithophel—to name no more of the throng of the cunning, the double-tongued, the ungrateful, the impious—it will in candour be confessed that the mighty moral influence of the Psalms is in favour of the noble, the trusty, the devout, the merciful, the God-like. And even if the execration of the Psalter on the perfidious and vile are sometimes carried to what in ourselves would be a culpable and un-Christ-like excess which we whole-heartedly deplore, nevertheless they reveal a passion for righteousness which, when refined, is of incalculable moral value.

We have alluded to the larger freedom of the Psalter in displaying the character of God than in prescribing the attributes needful to constitute godly men. And this, indeed, is one of the crowning glories of the Psalms. They extol God with a will. They are never tired of praising Him. They delight to effloresce on this ever-welcome theme. For example, they pile up epithets of delight and satisfaction in Jehovah (as witness Pss. 18:1-3, 144:1, 2); they echo and re-echo his most gracious Divine Name, (146:5-10); by the aid of a simple pronoun of reference, they unfurl clause after clause in his praise (103:3-5); they begrudge not to exhaust the whole alphabet to initial his sole doings and perfections (111, 145).

Not as a feeble, doubtful God, do the psalmists extol Jehovah. His character, in their esteem, is weighted with wisdom: it is nerved with moral energy. Their God is a good hater: he detests cruel men, and he abhors hypocrites. His pity does not blind his judgment. He searches men through and through, and sees them as they are. Those who have loved and served him, and walked in his ways, and then, alas! have sinned against him, are not here seen easily commending themselves to be received back into Divine favour. No! their repentance has to go down to the springs of their life; and their restoration has to be a re-creation.

STUDIES IN PSALMS

Not otherwise can they have given back to them the joys of Jehovah's salvation.

When restored, or as already serving God with loyalty, they not only adore him, but they think of his presence with a holy passion of desire to be admitted thereto. The very blaze of holiness warms their craving to be with him. It was, then, not without amplest warrant that we said at the beginning of this chapter that the stimplating power of the Psalms to move to holy living is grounded in the very nature of things. Educatively, *that is* what the Psalms mean: "Be ye holy, for I am holy."

It would not be frank—it would not be honest—in a Christian—to say that the Psalms perfectly meet every want. In truth, they create a demand for more than they supply. To express this abstract assertion in concrete form suggested by the Psalms themselves, how remarkable a thing it is that, whereas it is foretold of David (89:26) that he should do the very thing which Christians are always doing, namely call God "Father!", yet he never once does it. He well-nigh says this in hundreds of instances: adoration, admiration, affection, fond comparison—these are ever springing to his lips, ever drawing forth from his lyre the sweetest of sounds; and yet his inspired lips never well-over with the one decisive child's word in recognition of his Father. There is no "Abba Father" in the Psalms! Where direct address is so conspicuously dominant, where terms of direct address are so various and abundant, from "Shield" to "Sun," from "Shepherd" to "King,"—the omission is symptomatic. The Spirit of Sonship had not been bestowed: the Son himself had not arrived: the relationship itself, though founded and figured, had not been personally perfected; and so the adequate channel of utterance was not in existence:—hence the lack. But the Son—of David and of God—has come at length, personally realised the endearing relationship, received first for himself and then for us the Spirit of Sonship, and so—now—we cannot desist from the outcry for the utterance of which our inmost heart yearns, as, to David's Shield, Sun, Shepherd, King, even to Jehovah, we cry, "Abba! oh Father!" Henceforth the holiness of the Psalms acquires in our esteem a refinement of moral beauty it never before possessed, because now we view it as illumined by a Messianic light; and we are moved to its pursuit by a charm and a power which we gratefully acknowledge as reaching us through the mediation, through the death, resurrection and ascension into heavenly glory, of David's Son and Lord.