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Facing the Future in the Faith of the Past.

(AN EXPOSITORY STUDY FOR THE PRESENT CRISIS.)

"Who will bring me into the strong city? Who hath led me into Edom?"
(Ps. lx. 9; and see also cviii. 10).

THERE is in the nations of the West something of a hush of expectancy. The fierce, rapid movements of the autumn have dropped into the doggedness of siege warfare. In spite of constant explosion and frequent rushes upon trenches, the campaign is understood to be marking time. We are waiting for the "general advance." Unless an economic famine forces a scarcely hoped-for collapse, we have, as the soldiers sing, "a long way to go." The words of the text, then, are singularly appropriate, and the circumstances under which the Psalm was written are peculiarly helpful for meditation and stimulus. Israel and Edom were at war. The invading foe had been checked and thrown back by the former, and now there came the more serious task of driving him into his capital and forcing him to terms. Battles already won lead the poet-king to trust for complete victory. David argues from the past to the future. If we may paraphrase his words into modern terms, "the God who gave the triumph of the Marne may be trusted to open the road to Berlin." The poem is a war-hymn composed half-way through a keen campaign. The history, as the title of the Psalm suggests, may be read in 2 Sam. viii. and 2 Chron. xviii., and these chapters throw considerable light upon the setting. Its first five verses express national grief at very serious losses. The next three breathe quiet confidence during the recruiting of a new army. And the last four speak of hope and cheerfulness as to the ultimate issue of the fight. Let us consider these in order. But first a word as to

THE TITLE.

David says he wrote these verses when the Edomites attacked him during his campaign "with Aram-Naharaim (*i.e.*)

Mesopotamia) and Aram-Zobah." He had gained a remarkable series of successes. The Philistines on the south-west had been reduced to harmlessness (2 Sam. viii. 1). On the south-east Moab had been beaten to the ground (2 Sam. viii. 2). The king's forces had then proceeded to a larger task in the frontier quarrel with Aram—often rendered "Syria" in our Authorized Version, but really including, as Sayce tells us, Mesopotamian Syria as far south as the borders of Palestine, and the larger part of Arabia Petraea, possibly even Edom ("Hast. Dict." i. 139). Confederate States, like Zobah, Damascus, and Rehob, were all part of Aram (2 Sam. viii. 5, x. 8), and were doubtless included in the conquest. In the midst of this sweep of unbroken successes came a check. Edom, filled with delight at the thought of gratifying a very ancient cousinly hatred for men who, being of the same blood originally, were much more prosperous, swooped upon the unguarded south. Amalek had done the same at an earlier date when the forces were away (1 Sam. xxx. 1). It is possible that Moab, recently smitten and consequently smarting, joined with Edom in this raid (Ps. lx. 9). I understand from the same verse that Philistia had prudently kept quiet. This, then, introduces our first section—

I.—THE NATIONAL LOSSES AND SORROW (VERS. 1-4).

The onslaught of the raiders found the people unprepared for these "*hard things*" (ver. 3); the savage ferocity of the foe acted like heady *wine* (ver. 3), and they were at first too dazed to know what to do. The home garrisons were beaten back (ver. 1), the lines were pierced (ver. 2). The villages looked as though an earthquake had wrecked them (ver. 2). Worst of all, it seemed as though God's favour, of which the previous victories had made them confident, had been withdrawn. He had suddenly dropped them (ver. 1); the nerve of the people was shaken at the eclipsing of the light of His countenance. The dread tidings flew forth by the lips of swift messengers,

and David promptly detached Joab and Abishai with their commands to punish the invaders (2 Chron. xviii. 12 ; Ps. lx., title). Marching south, the sight of their banners rallied the scattered forces of the home divisions (Ps. lx. 4), which had been panic-stricken by the rain of arrows from the Edomite archers (see R.V.M., ver. 4, and LXX). David appears to have followed them up (2 Sam. viii. 13), and a pitched battle was fought in Edomite territory, in which heavy losses were inflicted on the foe. Nevertheless, a larger work remained to be done : the capital of the enemy had yet to be invested (Ps. lx. 9), the country had to be garrisoned, and a new army had to be raised. So David prays that God will change His front (ver. 1) and remember His beloved (ver. 5). Only God's hand can really do what is needed, and David becomes the nation's intercessor (ver. 5). If this Psalm was written for use at the Temple service of national humiliation and prayer before the expedition started, then we have here the leader's call to prayer.

In time of war, then, this is the first note for the heads of a nation to strike and the people to echo—a note of profound sorrow for widespread loss and destruction ; of thankfulness that in the banner of God we have always a rallying-point, and by it a King who reigns in righteousness ; of earnest pleading to Him for final victory ; of recognition that His right hand counts and His love decides issues. Nor will the situation be substantially altered even where some success has already been attained. For in these days every victory is costly, and in the light of Christianity all war is not only a calamity, but a reflection on the previous conditions of international relationship. Each side needs to confess sin, though one side may be more blameworthy. Each side has to mourn disaster, though one may be less harmed. Amid much dissimilarity we recognize many parallels between King David's people and King George's—sudden and unexpected assault after much prosperity, initial giving way before the foe through lack of time for preparation and shortage of troops, recovery of ground through brave generals and valorous men, but nevertheless much work yet

remaining to be done before peace comes. We turn, then, to the central section of the Psalm.

II.—THE RESPONSE OF THE NATION (VERS. 6-8).

The atmosphere of these verses is that of calm confidence in the general situation, of certainty that the people are on the side of the Holy God (ver. 6), and of belief that the loyalty of the nation will rise to deal with the need that has arisen (vers. 6, 7), with the general result that the foe will be ultimately subdued (ver. 8). One striking feature is the way in which the King and the King of Kings are identified in plan and action. It is not certain who says, "I." We ask, "Is it David or God?" and the answer, surely, is, "Both." This is not arrogance; it is faith. It is the reliance of God's man upon God's word. "*The children of wickedness shall not humiliate them*" (2 Sam. vii. 10) is David's charter of victory. "*God hath spoken*" by the holy prophet and with the weight of an oracle. So he reviews his people and his plans. "*I will exult*"—he is cheery with a spirit of sacred defiance of adversity (see same word in Hab. iii. 18). Therefore his methods must be thorough. There must be an organized levy for military service over the divisional districts of Shechem, with all the land on this side Jordan, and Succoth, with all the wilder districts on the eastern banks (ver. 6). This is the territory north of Judah, which therefore had not been overrun by the invader. He counts confidently on the loyalty and response of both areas: "Gilead and Manasseh, the colonies on the east of Jordan, and Judah and Ephraim on the west, the men across the water and the men this side the water, I can count on them as king's men through and through" (ver. 7; contrast Judges v. 17). The western forces are the cream of the army. The mountaineers and woodsmen of Ephraim are the line regiments which shall repel and pierce the enemy's lines like the horns of the bull which was perhaps depicted on Ephraim's standard (see Deut. xxxiii. 17, R.V.M.; Num. ii. 2, 18). "*The strength of his head*" are the large families of sturdy sons among Joseph's "doubly fruitful" tribesmen (Gen. xli. 52), masses of

men ready for flank movements, like curving horns. And the brain behind the horns, the staff behind the army, is the royal clan of Judah, lawgiver and sceptre-bearer (see Gen. xlix. 10), kinsmen on whose counsel David can rely, whose interests are his interests, as perhaps Ephraim's could not be, in view of old-time rivalry and coming separation (Ps. lxxviii. 67; 2 Sam. ii. 9, 10; 1 Kings xi. 26); yet in this time of national stress old rivalries are put away, horns and brain are acting together in victorious combination.

Then the King turns to review the possible strength of the foe; Moab hostile but enfeebled, Edom the heart of the danger, Philistia terrorized into neutrality. The contempt of an Eastern for his foe rings in the lines that follow. The most menial office is that of washing the feet that have been exposed on the open sandals to the defilement of undrained streets. Moab shall be his foot-washer, and Edom shall pick up and carry the dirty sandals (in passing, notice what a light this throws on the humility of Christ in the Upper Room and John the Baptist at the Jordan—St. John xiii. 5, 6; St. Matt. iii. 11). Philistia shall cry "God save the King," even though she may not feel it. Ewald thinks the difficult phrase is a warning to Philistia against seizing the occasion for a rising. At any rate, as David reviews both friend and foe, he sees nothing to discourage his hopefulness.

Here, then, is a second parallel with our own present position. We too look with the gladness of a trustful confidence to God Who judgeth righteously. We make our plans, and raise our willing millions from home and across the seas, while rivalries are hushed and paltry strife almost (not quite, alas!) forgotten, and Cabinet and Staff take harmonious counsel together. Our foes, too, we reckon as three, one fierce and dominating, one subdued and accommodating, one thrust out of neutrality, probably into nothingness. Our Philistia doubtless wishes she had held her hand; while our Moab and Edom shall, if God prosper us, be compelled to yield, though it shall

not be our purpose to humiliate them. Great David's greater Son has taught us better things.

So we turn to the third section of the Psalm.

III.—THE TASK BEFORE THE NATION (VERS. 9-12).

Here the dominant note is clear-sighted hopefulness. He recognizes the difficulty of the task, but has every confidence in the Lord of Hosts and the hosts of the Lord. "*Who will bring me into the strong city?*" The Edomite city of Petra or Sela (2 Kings xiv. 7) was probably the most difficult of all the surrounding capital cities to assault. It is approached by a narrow defile two miles in length, capable of admitting only two horsemen abreast, beside the stream which flows down it. This gorge opens out finally into an amphitheatre about a thousand yards wide surrounded by very steep cliffs. In these was a very remarkable series of rock-hewn dwellings and adapted caves, dating from Horite times, and much strengthened since. Small wonder that David calls it the strong city, and asks whether the great fight in the Valley of Salt will be followed by a crowning triumph in the reduction of the Edomite stronghold.

And the answer is that the future is to be inferred from God's treatment in the past. "Who will?" finds its response in "Who hath?" The God of the Past is the Lord of the Future. David infers that Petra will fall, because in the Valley of Salt God has already showed His right hand. "*Who hath led me into Edom?*" God. "*Who will lead me into the strong city,*" with its difficult approaches and its frowning fortifications? The same Lord. Yes, but there is a deeper answer still. It is not only the God of the victories but the God of the reverses of whom he is so sure. Even there God had His purposes, which have now ripened. Self-confidence has been moved into dependence. "*Wilt not thou, O God, which hadst cast us off? And thou, O God, which didst not go forth with our armies?*" This is no vainglorious boast, like the Edomite's "*who shall bring me down to the ground*" (Obad. 3). Still less is it a

blind appeal to a tribal fetish. "*Give us help from trouble, for vain is the help of man.*" Nations often learn more from trouble than from victories. "*Through God we shall do valiantly, for He it is that shall tread down our enemies.*"

And the hope of King and people was evidently justified. "*He put garrisons throughout all Edom, and all the Edomites became servants to David, and the Lord gave David victory whithersoever he went*" (2 Sam. viii. 14). It took six months to accomplish, and the Crown Prince was compelled to flee the country (1 Kings xi. 16, 17).

So we to-day in like case take both national and personal comfort. God is prepared to exceed His own records in dealing with us, if we with humility and faith seek Him. The difficult tasks of clearing Belgium, of entering Germany, of compelling terms—Who shall say how these things can come about? Yet very sure we are that somehow God shall bring it to pass. A short time since I received a letter from a man who was brought to God after a remarkable experience two years ago. He is now with the colours, and sent to me, as he said, "a verse from last Sunday's Psalms in Canterbury Cathedral: '*Through God we shall do great acts, for it is He who shall tread down our enemies.*' And there is not a happier man in His Majesty's forces than your grateful friend." So did David's hymn hearten one of England's men. It is not only the nation, but the individual, who needs a stimulating message of this kind.

And in the personal matter of the inmost life of the soul we may also argue from the past to the future. A vision of Christ has, it may be, dawned before us, and we fear we cannot attain unto it. Let us follow the gleam and remember the days of old. The Lord Who led us out of our old surroundings can bring us up to a mount not only of Transfiguration, but of Pentecostal power, and making even the strongholds of imagination fall, shall occupy them with the garrisons of His peace (2 Cor. x. 4-5; Phil. iv. 7). What God has done for others He can do for us. What strengthened men in olden days is good medicine for their souls now. Even as I write I

hear a strange story, directly from an officer at Mons, of a sudden checking of Prussian cavalry, for no apparent reason, in the midst of a deadly charge, and of a vision of angels seen by a Highlander dowered with the Celtic gift of second-sight. I cannot say. Who knows? The Lord still reigns. The most encouraging study for faith is history, and the future draws its heartiest inspiration from the past. Shall we ever understand the action of the German right wing before Paris by merely military reasoning? Who dies if England live? And who fears if the living God be seen and followed?

HARRINGTON C. LEES.

NOTES.

1. There are several difficult passages in the Psalm, notably in verses 4, 8, 9, 10. A conclusion must be adopted in exposition, even when the opposite view is known to be reasonable. What seemed most intelligible has not been adopted without consultation of authorities such as Perowne, Cheyne, Lange, Kirkpatrick, Sanders and Kent, Hengstenberg, Ewald, Delitzsch, and Cook.

2. At a later day Amaziah again undertook the reduction of Petra and succeeded (2 Kings xiv. 7), calling it Joktheel, "subdued by God," as Gesenius renders it. I suggest that Psalm cviii. was used as a war-hymn on this occasion; and since the expedition had not been preceded by the reverses which had led up to David's punitive expedition, the first four verses were omitted as pessimistic, and part of Psalm lvii., a hymn of David's cave and wilderness warfare, was added as a suitable prelude to the "expeditionary" passage. By that time the "remnant of the Philistines," as Amos calls them (i. 8) were a negligible factor. Hence the change of reading in verse 9. Amaziah originally contemplated an attack by the united forces of the two kingdoms; hence Ps. cviii. 8, and see 2 Chron. xxv. 5-12.

