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A DEVOTIONAL MEDITATION ON WORSHIP

THE central verse of the ninety-fifth Psalm consists of an exhortation to worship Jehovah. "O come", says the Psalmist, "let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker." Round this exhortation may be made to revolve the greater part of the teaching of this well-known psalm. To bring this teaching to the notice of our readers is the purpose of this devotional article.

The psalm is no doubt addressed primarily to the people of Israel. It refers to their forty years' wandering in the wilderness, the hardening of their hearts, their contempt of God's word and commandment, and to the judicial exclusion of a large number of them from the land which God graciously promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The people of Israel, however, were a type of the Church, and the spiritual teaching given to them is also intended for the people of God to-day. "Wherefore, take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief (as there was in Israel) in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To-day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. . . . While it is said, To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation" (Heb. iii, 7, 12, 13, 15). It is well to remember that the quotation from this psalm in the Epistle to the Hebrews is introduced by the words, "As the Holy Ghost saith." The writer of the psalm spake as he was moved by the Holy Ghost. What then does God the Holy Ghost teach us in the psalm on the subject of worship?

I

First, we are taught that those who really engage in the worship of Jehovah are "*the people of His pasture*".

Moses said to the people of Israel, "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God; the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy vii. 6). They were His

beloved, chosen, and redeemed people. Though stiffnecked and rebellious, He loved and saved them from Egyptian bondage, and apart from any righteousness of their own, He brought them into the land which He had promised their fathers to give them. He provided for all their wants, and thus they were the people of His pasture. The Church of God is in like manner the object of His choice. Its members have been loved with an everlasting love, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, redeemed by His precious blood, regenerated by His Spirit, and called and justified by His grace. In time past they were not a people, but are now the people of God. They had not obtained mercy, but now they have experienced the tender mercy of God. To them He says, "I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (2 Cor. vi. 16). To such the exhortation comes, "O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker." It is the living, regenerated people of God who are exhorted to worship Him. "The (spiritually) dead praise not the Lord" (Psalm cxv. 17). Men must be born again ere they can worship Jehovah in spirit and in truth.

The Lord's people are the people of His pasture. He feeds His people both temporally and spiritually. Jacob could speak of Him as, "The God which fed me all my life long." Elijah could say that God had commanded the ravens to feed him, and also a widow woman to sustain him. Moreover, it is certain that as God feeds the birds of the air, He will much more feed all His people.

He also nourishes them spiritually. He makes them to lie down in the green pastures of His Word. Jeremiah said, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. xv. 16). Just, however, as we may neglect the nourishment of our bodies, we may also neglect the Divinely-provided nourishment of our souls. The godly man who thrives spiritually is one whose "delight is in the law of the Lord", and who meditates therein day and night. The people of God who neglect their Bibles are not likely to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need both the milk and strong meat of the Word, if we are to grow. Well is it if we can say, "O how love I Thy law! it is my meditation all the day."

II

Secondly, the true worshippers are the sheep of His hand. They are the sheep whom He gave to the good shepherd. They are the sheep for whom the Shepherd laid down His life. They were lost, but He sought for them. He brought them back into the fold. He, by His power, caused them to hear His voice. He, in rich mercy, gave to them eternal life, and He by His mighty grace keeps and preserves them, and enables them to follow Him.

There is no doubt about the eternal salvation of all these sheep. The Good Shepherd has made Himself responsible for their eternal safety. He says, "Them also I *must* bring, and they *shall* hear My voice, and there shall be one fold (flock) and one shepherd." They all eventually hear His voice and follow Him. To all of them He gives eternal life, and assures them of their final preservation. He knows them all, and not one of them will be missing from the heavenly fold. The doctrine that Christ has redeemed them from the penalty of their sins, but that they may eventually be lost because they failed to take the initial step, finds no warrant in Scripture. The great Shepherd Himself says, "All that the Father giveth me *shall* come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John vi. 37). The Good Shepherd, Who laid down His life for the sheep, "*shall* see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied". He would not be satisfied if only one of His redeemed sheep were missing. They are the "sheep of His hand". None shall pluck them out of His hand of power. The Lord upholdeth them with His hand. He leads them with His hand. He helps them with His hand. He opens His hand to provide for them. His hand is never shortened that it cannot save them from every peril to which they are exposed.

III

But Who is the Object Whom the Lord's people are exhorted to worship? They are to kneel before the Lord. But Who is the Lord? "The Lord is a great God" (verse 3). The greatness of Jehovah is a truth which we do well to remember.

The Assyrians thought that the God of Israel was a mere local deity. They compared Him to the gods of Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivah. If their gods were helpless against the power of the great king of Assyria, how could the God of Israel deliver out of the hand of Sennacherib? Hezekiah, however, had different thoughts of the God of Israel. "Thou," he said, "art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; Thou hast made heaven and earth." Thou art "the living God". "Thou art the Lord God, even Thou only." Hence the psalmist says, "The Lord is great, and greatly to be praised: He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the Lord made the heavens" (Psalm xcvi. 5, 6). Therefore "give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name" (verses 7, 8).

Idols are mere silver and gold. "They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not." Our God hath spoken to us. His eyes are upon us for good, and His ears are open to our prayers. His hand of power is stretched out to protect and to deliver us. He is a God Who saith, "Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the nations" (Psalm xlvi. 10).

He is a God Whose prerogative it is to judge all the earth. He is "high above all the earth", "exalted far above all gods". At His presence the hills melt like wax. He is "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy". He saith, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah xlv. 22).

Moses speaks of Him as "a mighty God and terrible" (Deut. vii. 21). Some think of Him as if He were such an one as themselves, but He is "the mighty God, even the Lord". It is only as we realize the greatness, the majesty, the glory, and the power of God that we shall give unto Him the honour due unto His name. One of the great sins of the day is the lack of reverence for the Majesty of heaven. Flippancy of language ill becomes those who draw near to the great God. Yet, His believing people may enter into His presence with courage and boldness through the blood of Jesus. Though He be high, "yet hath He respect unto the lowly". He condescends "to

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behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth ” (Psalm cxiii. 6). He dwelleth “ with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit . . . ”

He is *great in wealth*. “ The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof ” (Psalm xxiv. 1). He can therefore supply the needs of all His people. He giveth them richly all things to enjoy.

He is *great in mercy*. “ As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him ” (Psalm ciii. 11). His mercy is extended to every penitent sinner who trusts in His blood and righteousness. The saints, too, daily need His mercy, and they are bidden to come boldly to His throne to obtain it.

He is *great in power and in wisdom*. “ Great is our Lord, and of great power ; His understanding is infinite.” He giveth power to His fainting people, and increaseth the strength of the helpless. When, lacking wisdom, they ask of God, and He giveth it to them liberally. “ Who is so great a God as our God ? ” “ His greatness is unsearchable ”, and because He is great, He is greatly to be praised, and He is worthy to be had in honour.

It is He Whom His people are to worship, and they are to render worship to no other god. He says to His redeemed people, “ I am the Lord thy God. . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them : for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.” “ My glory will I not give to another, neither My praise to graven images ” (Exod. xx. 2, 5 ; Isaiah xlii. 8).

IV

Fourthly, *the Object of our worship is “ a great King ”*. Jehovah is “ a great King above all gods ”.

He is *an eternal King*. We in Britain have just been mourning the death of our beloved King George V. For more than twenty-five years he has been permitted to reign over the British Empire. We felt his removal keenly, and our tenderest sympathy goes out to Queen Mary and to all the Royal Family, including our new King, Edward VIII. Earthly

kings, however, pass away like other men. It is appointed to all sorts of men once to die, and we are solemnly reminded that "all flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field".

Jehovah, however, never ceases to reign. He never abdicates, and He never dies. He abideth for ever.

"The Lord is King for ever and ever" (Psalm x. 16). "The Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever" (Psalm xxix. 10). No rebellion, whether earthly or hellish, can remove Him from His throne. The reins of government are always in His hand.

He is *a universal King*. There is no part of the universe that is not under His sovereignty. "The Lord most high is terrible; He is a great King over all the earth" (Psalm xlvii. 2).

He reigneth over the nations. "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?" (Daniel iv. 35). He is a King "Who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephes. i. 11). He has no prime minister and no parliament. He is the sole and absolute Ruler of the Universe. But, though His power is absolute and His sovereignty universal, He worketh all things for good to them that love Him, to them whom He has effectually called according to His gracious and eternal purpose. He is mindful of His covenant promises to them, and He wields His power for their present and eternal good.

It is an immense comfort to His redeemed people to know that He reigns. They know that no power in the universe can frustrate His purposes of mercy towards His blood-bought people.

He is *a saving King*. It is His arm of power which has brought salvation to His people. Their salvation is wholly of Him. Apart from Him there would have been no deliverance from the awful consequences of sin. Of Him, however, each believer can say, "God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth" (Psalm lxxiv. 12).

Despite His majesty, His glory, His power, and His universal and absolute sovereignty, each believer can speak of being in personal relationship with Him. He can say, "O Lord of hosts, *my King*, and *my God*", and, as He is the only object of worship,

behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth" (Psalm cxiii. 6). He dwelleth "with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit . . ."

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the language of every believing heart is, "I will extol Thee, my God, O King; and I will bless Thy name for ever and ever" (Psalms lxxxiv. 3; cxlv. 1).

V

Fifthly, the Object of our worship is our Creator. He is "the Lord our Maker". We are to worship and bow down to our Creator. The psalmist believed that "God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them" (Genesis i. 27). He did not regard himself as one who was evolved from some ape-like creature. "It is He [Jehovah] that hath made us" (Psalm c. 3). We owe our natural being to Him.

Each Spirit-taught worshipper and grace-saved sinner is ready to say, "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me" (Psalm cxix. 73). "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." "He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it" (Nicene Creed, *Westminster Confession*, IV, 2).

Of the Lord our Maker we also say, "The sea is His, and He made it, and His hands formed the dry land." He "made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is" (Psalm cxlvi. 6).

But we also owe to Him our spiritual life and being. We were dead in trespasses and sins, but He, being rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, and saved us by His grace. Hence, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

"He is our God" and "our Maker". We owe all our temporal and spiritual mercies to His almighty power and grace. What more fitting than that we should worship, bow down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker? Let us indeed have grace whereby we may serve Him with reverence and godly fear.

VI

Note further that the worship of God's people should be characterized by joy and thanksgiving. "O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms."

Singing is an expression of joy. It is a happy spiritual exercise when we sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord. The psalmist says, "Let *us* sing." He calls upon all the Lord's people to sing. Their praises are not to be rendered by deputy. A soloist or a choir is not to render praises for the people of God. They themselves are unitedly bidden to sing. They are to sing not to the praise and glory of themselves, but "sing unto the Lord." He is present in the assemblies of His people. His ears hear their praises as well as their prayers, and He knows how much of man-pleasing, self-gratification and pride may be mingled with their singing.

A child of God may be a good singer, and therefore he needs to beware of cherishing the thought of how well he sings when he unites with others in singing spiritual songs. Spurgeon says, "It is to be feared that very much even of religious singing is not unto the Lord, but unto the ear of the congregation. Above all things we must in our service of song take care that all we offer is with the heart's sincerest and most fervent intent directed towards the Lord Himself."

The spiritual exercise of singing should be influenced by the recollection of Divine mercies.

Moses and the children of Israel sang a song unto the Lord when He had marvellously saved them out of the hand of the Egyptians. They said, "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation" (Exodus xv. 1, 2).

Deborah and Barak sang praises unto Jehovah when He had saved Israel from the power of Jabin the king of Canaan. "Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel" (Judges v. 1-3).

What reason the Israel of God have to sing praises unto Jehovah. He is continually saving them from temporal dangers,

but above all He hath saved them with an everlasting salvation according to His own purpose and grace given them in Christ Jesus before the world began. He is indeed the Rock of their Salvation. Unto Him, then, let their songs be sung. Let them make "a joyful noise" unto the Rock of their Salvation. They need not sing too loudly so as to distract the attention of other members of the congregation, and if they can avoid it, they need not sing out of tune. Love to the brethren should make us considerate as to the manner of our singing. Yet it should be a joyful exercise, and it will be so, if our hearts are deeply sensible of the rich mercies of our Covenant God. There is abundant reason for the psalmist to say, "Let Israel rejoice in Him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King" (Psalm cxlix. 2).

VII

In conclusion, our worship should be spiritual and rendered with a consciousness of the Divine presence.

"God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." There can be no doubt that there is a great deal of mere outward form and ceremony in much of the so-called worship of the present day. The tendency merely to please the ear and the flesh in connection with public worship is becoming increasingly prevalent, more or less, in all denominations. Such worship is not pleasing to God. It is vain.

Isaiah's prophecy concerning Israel might well be said of many professing Christians to-day, "This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me. But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew xv. 7-9).

When real spiritual worship is rendered to Jehovah the worshippers "come before His presence". In other words they "enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus". They draw near to "the throne of grace". A deep consciousness that we are in the Divine presence will deliver us from mere formalism in worship. It will also influence the worshippers to draw near humbly and with heart adoration. The posture of the body may vary with circumstances, but in all worship, "the Lord looketh on the heart". The true worshipper says, "Bless

the Lord, O my *soul*: and all that is within me, bless His holy name.”

Spurgeon well says, “Soul music is the very soul of music.”

O thou my soul, bless God the Lord ;
And all that in me is
Be stirred up His holy name
To magnify and bless.

Bless, O my soul, the Lord thy God,
And not forgetful be
Of all His gracious benefits
He hath bestowed on thee.

THOMAS HOUGHTON.

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