

The Great Text Commentary.

PSALM CXVIII. 24.

**'This is the day which the Lord hath made;
We will rejoice and be glad in it.'**

THIS is unmistakably a Psalm for use in the Temple worship. It was probably meant to be sung antiphonally, on some day of national rejoicing (v.²⁴). A general concurrence of opinion points to the period of the Restoration from Babylon as its date, as in the case of many Psalms in this Book V., but different events connected with that restoration have been selected. The Psalm implies the completion of the Temple, and therefore shuts out any point prior to that. Delitzsch fixes on the dedication of the Temple as the occasion; but the most probable view is that which connects the Psalm with the great celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles recorded in Neh 8. In spite of the sneers of Sanballat and Tobiah, and the active hostility of the neighbouring tribes, the repair of the walls of Jerusalem had been successfully completed. The work was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul in the twenty-first year of Artaxerxes (444 B.C.). Nehemiah concludes his narrative with the words, 'And it came to pass, when all our enemies heard thereof, that all the heathen that were about us feared, and were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God' (6¹⁶). In the following month (Tisri) the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated with exceptional rejoicings. 'There was exceeding great gladness' (Neh 8¹⁴⁻¹⁸). The triumphant joyousness of the Psalm; its thanksgivings for recent deliverance from the hostility of surrounding enemies, its vivid consciousness that this deliverance is due to Jehovah's help alone, correspond strikingly with the circumstances and feelings of that time, as they are delineated in the Book of Nehemiah. Baethgen, who is very slow to recognize indications of specific dates, speaks with unwonted decisiveness, when he writes, 'I believe that I can say with certainty that Psalm 118 was sung for the first time at the Feast of Tabernacles in the year 444 B.C.'

This Psalm was the thanksgiving or recessional hymn after the Passover, and was therefore sung by Christ and the

Apostles at the end of the Last Supper. It is most probably the hymn they sang on the way to the Mount of Olives.¹

I.

THE DAY.

'This is the day.'

1. The verse of the text is best regarded as the continuation of the choral praise in vv.²²⁻²³. 'The day' is that of the festival now in process, the joyful culmination of God's manifold deliverances. It is a day in which joy is duty, and no heart has a right to be too heavy to leap for gladness. Private sorrows enough many of the jubilant worshippers no doubt had, but the sight of the Stone laid as the Head of the corner should bring joy even to such.

It would be a true thought, and a right one, every day of the year, as you open your eyes, to feel it a new-born day for a new-born soul, calling to new attainments, and new works of love; and entering upon it with a determination to be happy, and saying, 'This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.'²

2. But in our Lord's time the whole of the hundred and eighteenth Psalm was applied to the Messiah by the Jewish interpreters. Christ was the Stone, refused by the builders of Israel, but afterwards made the Head of the corner. His was the welcome, 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord'; to Him was addressed the prayer, 'Hosanna, save, I pray,' as on Palm Sunday, by the Jewish multitude. Thus it was very natural for the Christian Church to find in the words, 'This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it,' an application to our Lord Jesus Christ. What was the day in His Life which He made His own, beyond all others? Not His birthday; for that meant His entrance on a life of sorrows. Not His Ascension day; for that was the closing scene of a triumph already achieved. Not His Transfiguration day; it was a momentary flash of glory in a career of pain. Not the day of His Crucifixion; it was a great day for a ruined world, but for Him it marked the lowest stage of humiliation

¹ C. L. Marson, *The Psalms at Work*, 261.

² J. Vaughan.

and of woe. The Day of days in the life of Christ was the day of His Resurrection. It reflected new glory on the day of His Birth. It witnessed a triumph of which the Ascension was but a completion. It was to the Transfiguration what the sunrise is to the earliest dawn. It poured a flood of light and meaning on Calvary itself; and showed that what took place there was not simply the death-scene of an innocent Sufferer, but a Sacrifice which would have power with God to the end of time. Something of this kind is what was felt by the old Christians about Easter Day; and as it was the greatest day in the life of Jesus Christ, so for them it was the greatest day in the whole year. It was the day of days; it was the Lord's own day; it was the queen of festivals.

There is a little town called Feldkirch on the frontier of Austria, on the Ill, an affluent of the Rhine. It numbers under three thousand inhabitants. In the year 1799, when the armies of Napoleon were sweeping over the Continent, Massena, one of his generals, suddenly appeared on the heights above the town at the head of eighteen thousand men. It was Easter Day, and the morning sun as it rose glittered on the weapons of the French at the top of the range of hills to the west of Feldkirch. The town council hastily assembled to consult what was to be done. Defence was impossible. Should a deputation be sent to Massena with the keys of the town, and an entreaty that he should treat the place with mercy? Then the old Dean of the church stood up. 'It is Easter Day,' he said. 'We have been reckoning on our own strength, and that fails. It is the day of the Lord's Resurrection. Let us ring the bells and have services, as usual, and leave the matter in God's hands. We know only our own weakness, and not the power of God.' His words prevailed. Then from the three or four church towers in Feldkirch the bells began to clang in joyous peals in honour of the Resurrection, and the streets were filled with worshippers hastening to the House of God. The French heard with surprise and alarm the sudden clangour of joy-bells; and concluding that the Austrian army had arrived in the night to relieve the place, Massena suddenly broke up his camp, and before the bells had ceased ringing not a Frenchman was to be seen.¹

3. Again, we owe to the Resurrection of our Lord one of the most wide-spread and popular of Christian institutions—the Lord's Day, or 'Sunday,' as we generally call it. We cannot better describe Sunday than in the words of the Hebrew Psalmist, 'This is the day which the Lord hath made.' It is clear that these words cannot refer primarily to an institution which did not exist until centuries after they were written. Nor are they necessarily a direct prediction of it. But they give, perhaps,

¹ Baring-Gould.

the most accurate description of Sunday to be found in the Bible—a description all the more suggestive if it is undesigned. For there is no reason to think that the Lord's Day was instituted as in any sense a Christian Sabbath. It was from the very first a weekly memorial of the Resurrection, and its continued observance is the Church's abiding testimony to her belief in that supreme article of our Creed.

4. Easter Day is the parent of all days. For the Sunday is the mother of the week, and all the Sundays spring from this Sunday; and it would be well for us if we traced back all the days of the week to our Sundays, and all our Sundays to the Resurrection. They are to be congratulated who, when they wake every morning, receive life as a new creation, and take the day as something God has made especially for them.

It is a great criterion of a man's state how he meets the opening day,—whether his first thoughts are happy thoughts; whether the day rises gloomily on his mind, or whether it comes in speaking of peace, and love, and God, and happy duties, and pleasant things, for which that day is given. It is a great thing to have a resurrection, a joyful resurrection, every morning. Will not they have a blessed rising by and by from the sleep of death, who arise every morning as on the wing from the death of sleep?

Saint Simon, the famous courtier of Louis XIV., used to greet himself in the morning with these words, 'Get up, M. le Comte! you have great things to do to-day.'

So here hath been dawning
Another blue Day;
Think wilt thou let it
Slip useless away.

Out of Eternity
This new Day is born;
Into Eternity,
At night, will return.

Behold it aforeside
No eye ever did;
So soon it forever
From all eyes is hid.

Here hath been dawning
Another blue Day;
Think wilt thou let it
Slip useless away.²

² Thomas Carlyle.

II.

IT IS A DAY OF DIVINE VICTORY.

'Which the Lord hath made.'

It was a day of victory for Israel, a day of celebration due to the deliverance wrought by Jehovah.

1. It was a *victory over doubt*. There had been abundant faint-heartedness among even the restored exiles. The nations around had scoffed at these 'feeble Jews,' and the scoffs had not been without echoes in Israel itself. Chiefly the men of position and influence, who ought to have strengthened drooping courage, had been infected with the tendency to rate low the nation's power, and to think that their enterprise was destined to disaster. But now the Temple is built, and the worshippers stand in it. What does that teach but that all has been God's doing? So wonderful is it, so far beyond expectation, that the very objects of such marvellous intervention are amazed to find themselves where they stand. So rooted is our tendency to unbelief that, when God does what He has sworn to do, we are apt to be astonished with a wonder which reveals the greatness of our past incredulity. No man who trusts God ought to be surprised at God's answers to trust.

We are told that the sun is nearest to us in winter, when it seems farthest away: so I comfort myself with the thought that God is often closest to us when we are coldest and He is most invisible. There is much that we cannot explain, which we may never explain. The more we think, the harder are the problems. But I look for light to the Lamb on the Cross, and there I learn that God *is*, that God is Love, that God is Light. Do you say: 'Ah! but there are so few signs of the day; the clouds are so dark, men around us are groping and losing their way; worst of all we ourselves are not sure of the path?' It is only too true. For narrow is the gate, strait is the way, and few there be that find it. But John Bunyan, in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, has told us that even when we cannot see the way, we yet may see the Light of the Cross in the distance. 'Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Do you see yonder wicket-gate? The man said, No. Then said the other, Do you see yonder shining light? He said, I think I do. Then said Evangelist, Keep that light in your eye.'¹

2. It was a *victory over the world*. Israel was but a feeble handful. Its very existence seemed to depend on the caprice of the protecting kings who had permitted its return. It had had bitter

¹ Forbes Robinson, *College and Ordination Addresses*, 140.

experience of the unreliableness of a monarch's whim. Now, with superb reliance, which was felt by the Psalmist to be the true lesson of the immediate past, it peals out its choral confidence in Jehovah with a 'heroism of faith which may well put us to the blush.' Faith in Jehovah makes men independent of human helpers. Fear of and confidence in men are both removed by trust in God.

In the risen Christ have we the victory over the world. Let us only put off the world, and we put on Christ. As children say to themselves, 'This is the spring,' or 'This is the sea,' trying to grasp the thought, and not let it go; as travellers in a foreign land say, 'This is that great city,' or 'This is that famous building,' knowing it has a long history through centuries, and vexed with themselves that they know so little about it; so let us say, This is the Day of days, the Royal Day, the Lord's Day. Christ entered into His rest, and so do we. We have had enough of weariness and dreariness, and listlessness, and sorrow and remorse. We have had enough of this troublesome world. We have had enough of its noise and din. Noise is its best music. But now there is stillness; and it is a stillness that speaks. We know how strange the feeling is of perfect silence after continued sound. Such is our blessedness now. Calm and serene days have begun; and Christ is heard in them, and His still small voice, because the world speaks not.²

3 It was a *victory over circumstances*. The very life of Israel as a nation was threatened. The enemy thrust sore with intent to make Israel fall. But now the trials are recognized to be from Jehovah. It is He who has corrected, severely indeed, but still 'in measure, not to bring to nothing, but to make capable and recipient of fuller life.' It is beautiful that all thought of human foes has faded away, and God only is seen in all the sorrow.

If we have a fresh and vivid feeling of Christ's nearness, if His presence is to us a blessed reality, each day will be for us a day of victory over circumstances. Sickness, death, the loss of friends, the opposition of those who have no true faith in and love for Jesus Christ, the bad tempers, the prejudices, the follies of those around us, the troubles and heartaches of the natural life, remain as before. But they no longer absorb attention. The eye of the soul is turned upward; it is fixed on the Divine and the Eternal. These outward troubles still have their importance. But they are seen in their true proportions; they do not obscure the higher realities. They are not feared.

² J. H. Newman.

In 1745, Louis Rang, the brother of a minister who only saved himself from the scaffold by flight, a young man of twenty-five years of age, and himself a minister of the Protestant religion, was arrested at Livron. He was thrown into prison at Valence, and condemned to die at Grenoble, March 2nd, 1745. In vain the President of the Court had offered him his life if he would abjure his faith. He had rejected all offers. His sentence was that he should be hung in the market-place at Dié, and that his head should be severed from his body and exposed on a gibbet opposite the little inn at Livron, where he had been arrested. On his way to the scaffold, he sang v. 24 of Ps 118. His voice was drowned by the roll of drums. With his eyes raised to heaven, he reached the foot of the scaffold, fell on his knees in prayer, then mounted the ladder and met his death.

A few weeks later, Jacques Roger, a venerable man of seventy years of age, forty of which he had spent as a Protestant pastor, was betrayed to the government and arrested. Ordained at Würtemberg, and therefore one of the few regularly ordained ministers, he had braved the law which made it a capital offence to return to France. For forty years he had escaped, often by a hair's breadth, the pursuit of the soldiers, who had tracked him like a wild beast. The officer in command asked him who he was. 'I am he,' he replied, 'whom you have sought for thirty-nine years; it was time that you should find me.' Condemned to death at Grenoble, he spent his last hours in encouraging some Protestant prisoners to be true to their faith. When the executioner and his assistants arrived to take him to the place of execution, he received the summons cheerfully, quoting the same verse which Louis Rang had sung on the scaffold (Ps 118²⁴).¹

III.

IT IS A DAY OF GLADNESS.

'We will rejoice and be glad in it.'

The Israelites 'leaped for joy'; they 'danced for joy' because of the victory that Jehovah had wrought. It was the manifestation of a gladness which filled and overflowed the whole being. Theirs was a joy that could not be restrained. Yet the 'day' in which unmingled gladness inspires our songs had not yet dawned, fair as were the many days which Jehovah had made. If sadness was ingratitude and almost treason then, what sorrow should now be so dense that it cannot be pierced by the Light which lighteth every man? The joy of the Lord should float, like oil on stormy waves, above our troublous sorrows, and smooth their tossing.

Our religion must be joyful because we have Christ with us, and therefore cannot choose but sing, as a lark cannot choose but carol. 'Religion has no power over us, but as it is our happiness,'

¹ R. E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life*, 225.

and we shall never make it our happiness, and therefore never know its beneficent control, until we lift it clean out of the low region of outward forms and joyless service, into the blessed heights of communion with Jesus Christ, 'whom having not seen we love.'

1. It was the *gladness of reaction*, a reaction from anxiety and sorrow, doubts and trials.

So it was at the time of Christ's Resurrection. The Apostles had been crushed by the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. They could not have imagined beforehand that One so popular, so powerful, so gifted, so good, would die like a malefactor amid the execrations of the populace, and be buried away out of sight. They had trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel. Their disappointment, their despondency, their anguish, were exactly proportioned to their earlier hopes, and, as is always the case in the life of feeling, one deep answered to another. When He was in His grave all seemed over, and when He appeared first to one and then to another on the day of His Resurrection they could not keep their feelings of welcome and delight, traversed though these were by a sense of wondering awe, within anything like bounds. 'Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.' Their joy at seeing Him corresponded to the agony which had preceded it. The rebound was proportioned to the recoil.

Our joy will sometimes be made sweeter and more wonderful by the very presence of the mourning and the grief. Just as the pillar of cloud, that glided before the Israelites through the wilderness, glowed into a pillar of fire as the darkness deepened, so, as the outlook around becomes less and less cheery and bright, and the night falls thicker and thicker, what seemed to be but a thin grey wavering column in the blaze of the sunlight will gather warmth and brightness at the heart of it when the midnight comes. You cannot see the stars at twelve o'clock in the day; you have to watch for the dark hours ere heaven is filled with glory. And so sorrow is often the occasion for the full revelation of the joy of Christ's presence.²

The very saddest man that ever lived was our Lord Jesus Christ; but that truth enfolds another—the very gladdest man that ever walked the earth was this same Jesus. This is not contradictory. The capacity for grief is the measure of the capacity for gladness. The depth is the height. He who never sinks never soars. The keen sensitiveness to sorrow is also and necessarily the keen sensitiveness, in every healthy soul, to joy. He who sank as no other did to darkest depths of sorrow, rose as no

² A. Maclaren, *A Year's Ministry*, 145.

other could to sunny heights of bliss. The tide that goes furthest out, leaving stretches of sand and shaggy rocks to be smitten by the fierce sun, is the tide that comes furthest in, sweeping with its force far up the coast, whilst it laughs and sings in its strength and fullness. The perfect human nature of our Lord, having every faculty developed perfectly, had this in its completeness—the *faculty of gladness*. Think of Adam standing upon the earth, the God-made man, with everything within him so attuned that every breath and influence of earth broke into music as it touched him and went up to heaven in praise. So stands the Second Adam, the sinless Man Christ Jesus, His life a perfect harmony; a soul whose every string responded perfectly to the touch of God's finger.¹

2. It was the gladness of a great *certainty of present blessing*. Jehovah had answered His people; they were standing again in His house; they were conscious of His favour. So the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord; not because they saw Him only, but because they knew He was with them. Their sight was an assurance of His presence, and so brought them joy.

Count up all sources of gladness;—there is none that can compare with the consciousness of God's favour. 'Thy favour is better than life.' When He saith, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' we do enter into the joy of the Lord. As surely as the sunshine can chase away dull winter, and deck the earth with beauty, and cover once again the bare black trees with foliage, and fill the hedgerows with flowers, and give to the dull fields the rich promise of the harvest—so surely can the gracious shining of God's favour fill the soul with deepest peace and richest

¹ Mark Guy Pearse, *Short Talks for the Times*, 226.

joy. To walk hand in hand with Him is Paradise restored. Do we not all of us know what it is to feel the fever of our life rebuked; and as the burden of care falls from the shoulders, we rest in such a blessed sense of God's love to us that we wonder whether doubt or fear can ever find a cranny through which again to creep?

3. It was the gladness of *confidence for future service*. Israel would yet serve God, and draw the nations into the community of God's people. God had a work for His chosen people, and He deemed them fit to perform it.

The risen Christ calls us not only to begin a new life, but to go on with it, with renewed zeal and carefulness. Let us be of good courage. Day by day we shall find that our steps are not in vain; we shall find that we can do what we once thought impossible. We shall find that that way of serving God with a perfect heart, which seemed so difficult, becomes not only easy, but the very joy of our hearts.

To have the heart to do a great good and the power is the fulfilling of our joy. Conscious fitness for the work that God has appointed us means a great joy in it. What a man can do well he can do easily, says Ruskin; and what he can do well, he does gladly. He is no true and healthy worker who does not find in his work a joy, an inspiration, a triumph.

Give me to sleep, give me to wake
Girded and shod, and bid me play
The hero in the coming day.²

² R. L. Stevenson.

The Pilgrim's Progress.

BY THE REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D., EDINBURGH.

The Second Part.

It is not proposed to discuss the Second Part of the *Pilgrim's Progress* in anything like the same fulness with which the First Part was treated. This and the following articles are mere sketches, with suggestions for study, and notes upon such parts of the allegory as are new in this part.

The *sequel* is, and must always be, an all but irresistible temptation to writers whose books have sprung from living imagination. Nothing in our literary history is more natural, or more touching, than the tears which Charles Dickens shed at the

death of Little Nell; and the parting with the children of one's imagination must be like the breaking up of an old home. Yet, with some notable exceptions, such continuations are seldom as successful as the original story. Dumas and Thackeray have perhaps been more fortunate in their sequels than most writers, and Hugo's great Trilogy, while the characters are different in each of its parts, has attained a completeness of guiding principle which sets it apart by itself. On the other hand, Meredith has found few who love his