

THE LAST OF THE HALLEL PSALMS

by T. TORRANCE

MR. TORRANCE'S devotional expositions have been a welcome occasional feature in our pages for many years. In January, 1955, he contributed a study entitled "The First of the Hallel Psalms" (Ps. 113); we are now glad to have from his pen a companion study on the last psalm in the Hallel group—Ps. 118.

IN this, the last of the Hallel Psalms, 113-118, the spirit of jubilant thanksgiving finds fullest utterance. The speaker is Israel, or a representative of Israel, who speaks in the name of the nation". It made the grand finale of the liturgical praise service in the Temple.

The choir sang it when the Passover Lamb was about to be slain. It was also sung at the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles and latterly at the Feast of Dedication.

At the Passover season private families as it were joined in singing it so as to be in harmony with its being sung in the Temple.

The Hallels on other occasions could be chanted during the day eighteen times but at the Passover only at night for it was at night that in Egypt the Passover Lamb was slain.

On this night the Hallels were chanted in parts—Psalms 113 and 114 before the Paschal meal, and Psalms 115-118 afterwards. The third Hallel was known particularly as that of the cup of blessing, but all were such. The singing of the last three came after the filling of the fourth cup. There is no doubt that the Lord sang this 118th Psalm before He left the upper room.

This was Luther's favourite Psalm. It gave him strength and assurance in his great troubles when he stood alone, and there was no one courageous enough to stand by him.

The Psalm is divided into four strophes of seven verses in each, and concludes in verse 29 with a fine refrain.

It is worth while here to quote from Professor Forbes. "It has been remarked as a proof of the care taken for the preservation of

the text of the Psalm by the symmetrical numbering of the verses and strophes that the recurrence of Jehovah, the current name of God in this Psalm, is also regulated by number. Jehovah occurs ten times (the number of completeness) in strophes 1 and 2, and twelve times (the number of the tribes of Israel) in strophes 3 and 4, forming together 22 (the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet); while Jah occurs three times in the former two strophes, and three times in the latter two strophes—together six times which, added to the 22, makes 28, or four sevens, coinciding with the four sevens of the strophes.” To this it may be added that the word God occurs three times in verses 27 and 28, once as El and twice as Eloah.

The Psalm begins with an urgent exhortation: “O give thanks unto Jehovah, for He is good, because His mercy endureth for ever”. Thus it is consonantly a grand anthem of thanksgiving and ascription of glory to God. Nothing could be more becoming than this. A joyful expression of gratitude for mercies received and benefits bestowed is always heart-stirring and soul-elating. Thankfulness ever forms the high-water-mark of a noble spirit and a righteous culture. What can be so mean and inexcusable on the part of a recipient of mercy as a churlish ingratitude?

In the Psalm Israel speaks as an individual. The voice is that of Jehovah’s Servant. Its high-pitched key-note is mercy, the most melodious and the most mysterious of all the works of God. Its thrice repeated call to praise Jehovah for His mercy postulates its imperative importance.

Let the house of Israel say that His mercy endures for ever.

Let the house of Aaron say that His mercy endures for ever.

Let them now that fear Jehovah say that His mercy endures for ever.

These calls are essentially the same as in Psalm 115: 9, 10, 11:

O Israel, trust thou in Jehovah; He is their help and their shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield.

Ye that fear Jehovah, trust in Jehovah; He is their help and their shield.

The character of the anthem is intrinsically messianic. Dramatically it points to Jesus Christ. His advent formed the eager hope of Israel through whom all nations as well as Israel should be blessed. It behoves us then to consider the past, the present and the future features of this greatest of all the divine blessings. He who at sundry times and in divers manners made Himself known to the patriarchs, did so repeatedly to their seed, and became known as “the Salvation of Israel”. The threefold invocations to give thanks unto Jehovah make it plain that it should be done

nationally, religiously and individually. God who had been with His people in the past was with them now, and would be in the days to come. His mercy endured for ever. Verses 5, 6 and 7 establish this threefold aspect of His mercy—5 relates to the past, 6 to the present, and 7 to the future.

These three verses, moreover, advance the reasons why thanksgiving and praise should be rendered to Jehovah. Heretofore Jah their Redeemer had answered the cry of Israel in distress, and Jah had set the nation in a free and spacious land. Jehovah was their ally and furthermore assisted those who were friendly to them. There was then no need to fear. With His Presence ever near, what could hostile enemies do to them, for He certainly would put them to confusion for His own Name’s sake?

Mercy is a vital and summary term. It carries with it the conception of a righteous, forgiving, saving, resuscitating, restoring, converting power. The triune mention of the Name of Jehovah attests this. Jehovah is the Holy One of Israel, and the Saviour thereof. With Him there is redemption for the sinful, the oppressed and the lost. Thence His Name is glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders.

The entreating of His Name brings with it a manifestation of His supernatural power over all the forces of sin, and a Satan-controlled world. He is Almighty. Nothing is too hard for Him.

His Name, as some aver, is simply an aggregate of His attributes, but it has to be remembered that He is a living God, working out His sovereign will in heaven and on earth. He is personally known by His word, His works and fellowship with Him.

Again, the saving power of His Name has nothing in common with, nor has it the least resemblance to, superstitious magic. To associate the Holy Name with the black arts of exorcism, sorcery, and witchcraft is to link it with doctrines of devils and seducing spirits, which is blasphemous. When Christ’s Name is entreated, Christ personally is entreated, and it is Christ Himself who puts forth His sin-cleansing, soul-healing and transfiguring power.

The repeated “I wills” in the Psalm evince this perfectly. He saves with the saving strength of His right hand (Psalms 20: 6; 17: 7). The triple mention of this makes a threefold cord of certitude that cannot be broken. “The right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly”; “the right hand of the Lord is exalted”; “the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly”.

The second strophe points the moral of the first: “It is better to trust (take refuge) in the Lord than to put confidence in man”. This is a truism, an all-important maxim. It cannot be gainsaid.

Why so? Because "the Lord is righteous in all His ways and merciful in all His works". Mercy and righteousness are intimate correlates. They complete each other, and work consistently as one. The ground of mercy is righteousness, for righteousness is that which distinguishes the eternal ethical character and transcendency of God. Upon this divine quality the universe is founded. On its sublime power depend human life and prosperity. Let its principles be observed and cherished and all good consequently follows. It is the pole star of correct conduct, the salt of the earth, the cement of society, and the salvation of men by the grace and mercy of God. This auspicious truth Jesus taught to His disciples when He said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these (needful) things shall be added unto you"

In the Old Testament as in the New righteousness and salvation are synonymous terms. "The Lord hath made known His salvation; His righteousness hath He openly shewed in the sight of the heathen" (Psalm 98: 2). "I bring near my righteousness and my salvation shall not tarry" (Isaiah 46: 13). "My righteousness shall be for ever and my salvation from generation to generation" (Isaiah 51: 8). Judah shall be saved and dwell safely, and His Name shall be called "the Lord our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 23: 6).

The ninth verse strengthens the adage of the eighth verse: "It is better to trust (take refuge) in God than to put confidence in princes". This in Psalm 146: 3 is, "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help".

However ominous, numerous and threatening the mass of evil men may be and however enticing the prestige and power of nobles, only He whose Name is "the Lord our Righteousness" can save Israel from the fury of enemies. This was proven on an occasion when neighbouring peoples encompassed Israel like a swarm of angry vicious bees, and their fury was quenched by Jehovah's Name as rapidly as a fire dies out among thorns (cf. Psalm 58: 9).

Emphasis on the power of the Name of Jehovah is given in verses 10-12 by a threefold declaration, and as it were in apposition to the threefold invocation in verses 2-4,

In the name of Jehovah I cut them off . . .

In the name of Jehovah I cut them off . . .

In the name of Jehovah I cut them off.¹

The praise and glory of these deliverances the speaker ascribes entirely to divine intervention. Psalm 115: 1-3 states this clearly: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory,

¹ Cf. Exodus 23: 22, 23.

for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, 'Where is now their God?' But our God is in the heavens; He hath done whatsoever He pleased".

In verse 13 "by a lively apostrophe the enemy is addressed directly" and informed who was the Saviour of Israel: "Thou hast thrust sore at me that I might fall; but Jehovah helped me". Thou hast indeed. Thou hast done thy part, O Satan, and it has been adroitly done. Thou hast known all my weakest parts, and thou hast attacked me at the right time and in the right way. "But the Lord sustained me, and His power upheld me".

Verse 14, the last of the second strophe, makes a grand climax to the mighty victories related in the preceding verses. The rebound takes the form of jubilant praise and thankfulness. Israel sings again the Song of Moses at the Red Sea after the overthrow of the Egyptian host. "Jah is my strength and song, and is become my salvation". "They sing unto the Lord, for He hath done excellent things for them".

"True joy and rest of soul is ever the lot of God's redeemed people. The voice of national rejoicing and of salvation is among the righteous for they are safe under the protection of the Lord. Hence they have no need nor desire to partake of the vanishing mirth of the ungodly. Having peace of conscience and comfort of the Holy Spirit, with the liberty to cast all their cares upon Him who careth for them, they possess the lively hope of an incorruptible inheritance" (Henry and Scott).

Verse 16, the first of the third strophe, enlarges on this topic. The song of praise and thanksgiving is prominent in the tabernacle, or homes, of the righteous. Is not this as it should be? The unit of society is not the solitary individual, but the family circle. When that is sanctified by the fear and love of God, the Lord is their righteousness resulting in harmony of spirit and mutual affection. Who then can measure its holy ameliorating effect on the world at large?

Hearken now to their song. A threefold chorus rings out loudly: "The right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly"; "The right hand of the Lord is exalted"; "the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly". These exultant exclamations are also part of the Mosaic Red Sea Song. History here repeats itself. "These make another of the trinal repetitions of this Hallel Psalm" (Alexander). The right hand of the Lord is that full of righteousness (Psalm 48: 10). On this ground the Psalmist, speaking for Israel, avers, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of Jah. Though Jah has chastened me sore, He has not given me over unto death". Owing to

my chastening I can sing all the more, and rejoice all the greater. Israel shall not perish. Jehovah will preserve His chosen people. Compare John 10: 27-29: "I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish".

As birds of the same feather flock together, so do God's people. It is their divinely given instinct to seek each other for reciprocal help, counsel and encouragement. A church accordingly becomes a paramount necessity for spiritual fellowship and the united worship of God, their Saviour and Upholder—their Heavenly Father. The order of worship takes the form of praise, prayer and meditation on the Word of Revelation.

By this means also they separate themselves from the doings and pursuit of the carnal-minded, but testify to all men of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the lost may be found and the Kingdom of God extended.

The Israelites had their church. It stood enticingly on Mount Zion, a strong eminence in Jerusalem, the City of Peace. Thrice yearly the tribes of the Lord came here, to keep their three great festivals, where in God's house He recorded His saving name. When the blood of the atoning sacrifice was sprinkled on the altar and on the mercy seat which covered the Ark containing the Ten Words of the covenant of salvation, He extended His mercy and justifying righteousness to the worshippers.

To this the last three verses of the third strophe refers. On arrival of a band of pilgrims at the two-leaved door of the Temple the wistful song arose: "Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them and I will praise Jah: this is the gate of Jehovah into which the righteous shall enter. I will praise Thee, for Thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation". With what vivacious earnestness and expectancy these sentences would be sung! For entrance brought the singers into the presence of their Lord and Saviour. Sounder theology than theirs could not have been sung. The echo of the 100th Psalm, and of the 117th, is clearly heard therein.

The fourth strophe opens straightway with a figurative term, "stone". Of what, or of whom, is it emblematical? The patriarch Jacob provides a clue. He associates the Stone with the Shepherd of Israel, therefore, the Angel who redeemed him from all evil. One thing is certain. Jesus identified Himself with the stone when He said to the chief priests, "Did ye never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected is become the Head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes?'" (Matt. 21: 42). "As this Psalm was sung by the people at the last

Jewish festival He applied the proverb to Himself as one rejected by the Jews and their rulers, yet before long to be recognized as their Messiah whom they had denied and murdered, but whom God exalted as a Prince and a Saviour to give repentance to Israel and the remission of sins (Acts 5: 31)" (Alexander).

The exaltation of the Stone betokened the triumphant resurrection of Christ, the crowning act of man's redemption, which exchanged for sin, death and hell a justifying righteousness, new life in Christ and the sure hope of eternal glory. Herein, like the sun in the heavens, shone for all to see the love of God in His universal yearning desire to rescue the erring, the lost and the forlorn; while it left those utterly inexcusable who neglected, rejected or disdained His saving grace, mercy and peace.

The sacrificial worshipful ritual of Israel clearly symbolized these redeeming glories to come with the Messiah's advent. Each festival was accounted a Day of the Lord, a Day of Salvation. The custom, therefore, was to cry then "Hosanna", which meant "Save now, O Lord: I beseech Thee, send now prosperity". The word "now" is not only a particle of time but also a particle of earnest entreaty. In Psalm 116: 4, 5 the formula is, "O Lord, I beseech Thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord and righteous; yea, our God is merciful".

The twenty-sixth verse is, "Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord: we have blessed thee out of the House of Jehovah". This priestly blessing received its fulfilment at the approach of Jesus to the holy city when the multitude, carpeting His way with their garments and luxuriant foliage and waving palm branches of victory and salvation, hailed Him with a similar acclamation, "Hosanna to the Son of David: blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest" (Matt. 21: 9). This indeed was a day of days fraught with eternal issues of the greatest moment.

The first words of the twenty-seventh verse, "El is Jehovah", recalls Israel's leading article of faith: "Hear O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah". The rest of the verse is "who hath shewed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords unto the horns of the altar".

Light here denotes mercy, the light of God's presence, the Shekinah light, as in Psalm 27: 1, "the Lord is my light and salvation"; and as in Psalm 43: 3, "O send out Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead me unto Thy holy hill, and to Thy tabernacles". Since light has the connotation of mercy, the reference to the binding of the festival sacrifice is better understood, for

mercy is the sequence of the offering of sacrifice. The binding signifies the necessity of the festival sacrifice, for nothing short of that availed for salvation. This is why Jesus, bound in spirit, steadfastly set His face towards Jerusalem to make His soul an offering for sin—to be a sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than those on Jewish altars slain.

The twenty-eighth verse, the last of the fourth strophe, is conspicuous by having two names for God. One, as in verse 27, is *El*, the Almighty One; the other is *Eloah*, the Supreme Object of worship. The verse is, "Thou art my *El* and I will praise Thee: Thou art my *Eloah* and I will exalt (extol) Thee".

No religion is worth the name if not personal. The pronoun "my" indicates this. It makes devotion to and love of God a blessed reality, bringing the soul into fellowship with the Saviour, who gives Himself in the fulness of His being to all who sincerely came by faith to Him. Then the desire to praise Him for His goodness, and extol Him for His mercy becomes first nature to the believer. He cannot forget that Jesus loved him and gave Himself for him.

This, the last and longest of the Hallel Psalms, having completed its sublime circular route of four sevens, now very appropriately links itself by verse 29 to its first verse by repeating it verbatim: "O give thanks unto Jehovah for He is good, and His mercy endures for ever".

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