

*THE NINETIETH PSALM RECONCILED WITH  
CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM.*

THE first impression made on one's mind by the reading of this Psalm is very depressing. Over the whole of it there seems to rest the dark shadow of a despairing pessimism. Specially sombre appears the aspect presented to our view by that contrast between the everlasting life of God and the brief life of men: "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night" (Verse 4); "The days of *our* years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (Verse 10). The Psalmist seems in the mood to indulge in melancholy reflections on the shortness of man's days. He accumulates figures of speech to make the fact as impressive as possible; comparing human life now to a swift river, now to a sleep, now to the grass which groweth up and flourisheth in the morning, and in the evening is cut down and withered. And the reference to the everlasting life of God seems intended to deepen the sense of transitoriness, by dwarfing the short period of our life on earth into utter nothingness; as if the purpose were to overwhelm us with depression, and breed in us such thoughts as the pessimist delights in:—What is the value of joys that must so soon come to an end? What the use of labour that is so soon to be interrupted? Life is what the worshippers of Brahma call *Maya*, delusion, mere seeming. Gladness and sadness, activity and passion, are all alike futile: let us resign ourselves to an apathy which is the nearest approach to the extinction of conscious existence.

The contrast expressed in the two Verses above quoted easily might be, and often has been, employed to justify such a sombre train of reflection. But it may just as easily, and certainly not less legitimately, be made to yield a more cheering and inspiring train of thought. Let me try, then, to shew how that contrast, and the whole Psalm of which it may be regarded as the keynote, may be made subservient to the purposes of consolation and encouragement. Let me endeavour to wrest this Psalm out of the hands of the pessimist, whose creed in brief is that human life, and indeed the whole universe of being, is vanity, a mistake, a thing that had better not have been; and to use it in the service of a Christian optimism which, while not denying the dark side of things, insists on looking at the bright side rather than at the dark, preferring to bask in the sunshine of Divine love rather than to spend life in the land of the shadow of death. I hope to make it appear that in pursuing this line of thought I am not contradicting the Psalmist or even deviating widely from the train of his reflections. For, on closer scrutiny, one finds that the Psalm is not so dark as it seems. There are rays of faith and hope appearing here and there, glimpses of light stealing through between the clouds, and lighting up the wintry landscape. Let us try to see, then, what can be made of this contrast between the eternal life of God and the fleeting life of man by those, and for those, who are required to rejoice evermore, to pray without ceasing, in everything to give thanks, and always to abound in every good work.

1. "A thousand years in thy sight are as yesterday when it is past:" "The days of *our* years are three-

score years and ten." Oh, humbling, depressing, crushing contrast! Yes, in one sense; but, on the other hand, what if the Eternal One gather up into Himself the lives of his children when they pass away from the earth, so that they become partakers of his everlasting life? What we see on this earth is a constant succession of lives, one generation passing away, another coming into its place. But there is a life which is not subject to the law of succession, spreading itself, like the firmament, over all the generations of mankind, and contemporary with every one of them. What if our fleeting lives be so connected with that upper eternal life, that death means, not the extinction of these lives, but a transference of them from the regions below to the regions above? "We fly away," says the Psalmist. Yes, but whither? What becomes of the bird that flies from our ungenial clime at the approach of winter? Such questions have suggested themselves to thoughtful minds in all ages. It was such a question the Saxon noble meant to ask when, at the council convened to discuss the momentous question, Shall we receive Christianity, he said: "The present life of man seems to me, O king, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad. The sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within is safe from the wintry storm; but, after a short space of fine weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space; but of what

went before, or of what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed." We know the answer which Christianity gives to the wistful question, Whither? But it is to be noted that our Psalm also has its answer, and a very good, substantially, indeed, the Christian answer. We fly away, Whither? To God, replies the Psalm in its very first sentence; to God, in whom the migratory spirit finds a home. "Lord *thou* hast been our dwelling-place in all generations." Mark the *our*: it expresses the consciousness of unity with the fathers who have long left the world, and who are conceived of as still existing with God. The Psalmist conceives of all the generations of Israel as one family, finding its bond of union, and having its habitation and home, in the bosom of the Everlasting One. It is as if he had said: We have been wanderers, strangers and pilgrims on the earth, in all our generations from the days of Abraham till now. But we have a home in Thee, O Eternal Adonai: it is our only but our sufficient home. The thought of it gives peace to our heart even in this mortal existence, amidst scenes of change and of trouble. And it is always there, ready to receive us, when we die, into the fellowship of those who have gone before. Surely life is not all gloom where one is able to cherish such thoughts of God and of the great hereafter as are naturally suggested by this pathetic word "dwelling-place."

2. The brevity of human life is saddening to think of, not merely because death seems to put a period to our conscious existence, but still more because it brings all our activities to a final pause. When the day ends,

busy labour ceases ; and so when Death strikes the hour, the brain ceases to think, and the heart to devise new schemes of usefulness, and the hands to toil in the execution of purposes long cherished. Now this thought is certainly very depressing, for there are many noble-minded men who are much more interested in the work of life than in life itself, and who desire continuance of life mainly because it affords further opportunity for labour. To such it may very naturally cause a pang to be overtaken by death in the midst of a worthy enterprise half executed. Think of Moses, for example. I do not positively affirm that he wrote this Psalm, though Delitzsch regards it as certain, and even Ewald admits that he might have been its author, if only the tradition could be relied on ; but, leaving the authorship of the Psalm undetermined, I may at least very legitimately take the Leader of the Exodus as an apt illustration of my argument. Think of Moses, then, trained by a very remarkable experience to be the deliverer of Israel, labouring faithfully for forty years to execute the Divine purpose, and, after all, doomed to die in the wilderness, within sight of the promised land. In view of such a doom we can imagine him saying to himself with a certain bitter emphasis : " The days of our years are threescore years and ten. Would they were more ! Not for the mere pleasure of living, for that I care little ; but that I might finish the work which God has given me to do." But if Moses had any such sad thoughts, he knew, if he really was the author of this Psalm, how to extract consolation from the everlasting life of God. For the Psalm does contain consolatory thoughts of a temper and force sufficient to reconcile us even to the interrup-

tion of our activities by death. In the first place, the Psalmist recollects that his work is in reality God's work. When he first speaks of it, he says: "Let *thy* work appear unto thy servants" (Verse 16). Only in subordination to this truth is the work afterwards called man's: "Establish thou the work of *our* hands upon us" (Verse 17). But the work being God's, two inferences follow. First, God can establish the work done by the men of one generation, so that it shall not be in vain when they have passed away from the scene. God lives on, and is always there to see that the labour of his deceased servants shall not come to nought, but be carried on unto completion, and so be established. But, secondly, God can do more than merely carry on and establish the work of his servants. He can cause it to assume far larger dimensions and far fairer proportions than it could ever have attained in their hands. This thought is finely expressed in the prayer: "Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children." The "glory" referred to is the glory of a plan worked out, of a great historical drama carried out to its last act. The Psalmist has faith in the future coming of such a glory, and that faith makes him content to die while his own work as, for the time, God's instrument, is yet unfinished; just as Simeon was content to die when his eyes had seen the infant Redeemer. He was content not merely because he believed that God could finish his work without him, but because he believed God would find other instruments in the next generation better fitted to do the work that still remained than he could ever have been.

These thoughts of the Psalmist are most rational

grounds of comfort in view of the certain fact that we shall die, leaving many a piece of work half done, and many a scheme affecting the kingdom of God far from its consummation. What we call our work is really God's work : this is one consideration which well laid to heart will comfort us concerning the labour of our hands. God deigns to use us in the carrying out of the purposes of his Providence, but we are in no wise necessary to Him. No matter who we are, He can do without us. This consideration, so consolatory in itself, is abused when it leads us to say, "It does not matter whether I work or remain idle : with me or without me, God's purposes will still be carried out." The right use of the reflection is to check self-importance and despondency ; to prevent us from thinking that when we die it will go ill with the Divine kingdom. Again, it is surely a peace-giving thought that, though we, the workers of threescore years and ten, pass away and leave our task unexecuted, God, the Everlasting Worker, is always there to carry on *his* work to its consummation—to a glory which we could never have achieved. This is a truth we are slow to learn. It does not come easy to any of us to believe, what nevertheless is most true, that, so far from there being any occasion of regret when our work is interrupted by death, it may even be very advantageous to God's work that our work should come to an end. It would be a poor outlook for the kingdom of God on earth if God's servants, even the best of them, were to live hundreds of years instead of threescore and ten. They would become a set of intolerable obstructives, wanting everything to stand still at the point at which their minds ceased to grow, and making it their special busi-

ness to prevent both God and man from carrying on the work in higher ways and to a higher end. Even as it is, too many degenerate into obstructives before the short period of human existence is fulfilled: how much greater would be the evil if men's lives were very greatly lengthened! We may be thankful, then, even for the sake of God's work, that man's life on earth is so short, if only we bear in mind that, after our bodies have mingled with the dust, God will do far greater things without us than ever He did by us; if only we remember the exhaustless resources, the infinite inventiveness, of the Divine Mind, concerning which the Prophet says, "There is no searching of his understanding;" if only we also remember the creative power of God, his unbounded capacity to do new things — an attribute which speculative philosophers and narrow-hearted Christians agree in denying or ignoring. The former tell us that God exhausted his power in creation, and has no reserve strength to work miracles. The latter too often think, though they may not openly say, "God can do nothing greater by the Church, in the Church, or for the Church, than He has done in the past. Oh, weak purblind mortals, whose days are threescore years and ten, why will ye thus drag God down to your own level? "Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?"

3. It sometimes happens that a man's lot is cast in times when his life consists not so much in work as in *suffering*. Such a time was that of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, when the chosen people had nothing to do but drag out a weary aimless life, till death came



to relieve them. Such a time, too, was that memorable period in Scotland's history, from the restoration of Charles II. in 1660 to the Revolution in 1689, when our persecuted forefathers were hunted and shot down, and found a grim comfort in singing such Psalms as the Ninetieth, because they expressed a sense of misery as intense as their own. Such times may be said to be watches in the night of a Providential day, when good men wait—oh, with what unutterable longing!—for the dawn. These are times in which it is a very misery to live, when death seems more desirable than life, and the common span, not too short, but much too long. A good man living in such a time seems to himself to be under the perpetual frown of God, and complains, with the Psalmist, "We are consumed by thine anger, and in thy wrath are we troubled." Men living in happier times may sit in judgment on such utterances, and, with an air of superior wisdom, pronounce them superstitious, and suggestive of utterly false and unworthy views of the Divine character. Ah! it is easy for the happy and the prosperous to take bright and cheerful views of Providence, and to call God Father; but what would they have thought and said had they lived in one of the night-watches? Would they have found it quite so easy to believe that God was good, and to cherish a spirit of filial trust? And yet to maintain such a spirit, even when our days are darkest, is not impossible. The thought of God's everlasting life may help a man, even in the worst times, to realize the fact that such words as "anger" and "wrath" do not express the whole truth about God—that they express, indeed, rather the appearance than the reality of things.

If we lay to heart the words, "A thousand years are in thy sight as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night," it will at once occur to us that what seems to human vision a long, dreary, interminable period of misery, is to God but as a portion of a winter night, and man's seventy years dwindle into a few hours. But if so, what becomes of that "wrath" of which we are apt so grievously, and not altogether unnaturally, to complain? It is transmuted into a mere passing frown. "His anger endureth but a moment;" "In his favour is life;" "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." Then the thought of God's everlasting life relieves the gloom of an evil time in another way. The most bitter ingredient in a good man's lot at such a time is, not the mere suffering which comes upon himself, but the dark thought forcing itself into his mind that God has ceased to care, if He ever cared, for the right; that He has abandoned his purpose; that He does not mean to carry out the undertaking which He initiated, and which He put it into the hearts of his servants to espouse with ardent and generous enthusiasm. God has brought us into this wilderness on pretence of leading us to the promised land, and, lo! He leaves us here to rot. He inspired me, Moses, with a patriotic ardour, which led me to prefer the freedom of my race to all the treasures and honours of Egypt; but now here I am, a man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He hath led me and brought me into darkness, and not into light, and hath filled me with the bitterness of defeated hope. When thoughts like these come into our minds, we need to remember that a thousand years are in God's sight as a day in ours. Do we think it strange

that a man should delay the execution of his purpose for a day? Do we infer from that that he has abandoned it? Why, then, should we imagine that God has abandoned his purpose because He defers its fulfilment for a generation, not to speak of a millennium? Why should we assume that Israel is never to get into Canaan, because she does not go up and possess it in our day? Nay, why should we despair of seeing a happy turn of affairs even in our own day? Let us rather hope in God, that He will yet give us cause to praise Him. Let us remember that the atmosphere above the clouds which obscure our vision is bright with the clear shining of the Divine Love, a light which will yet break through the clouds, and fall with cheerful quickening warmth on our saddened and weary hearts. And, remembering this, let us take up the prayer of our Psalm: "Return, O Lord, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants. O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil."

4. There is yet another way in which the leading thought of this Psalm may be made to minister to Christian hope. The contrast between our life and God's may help us to look with cheerful patience on the slow march of Providence, on the gradual, but sure, evolution by which the redeeming purposes of the Divine Love are unfolded and brought out. Even in comparatively happy times, when there are no such burdens and miseries to be endured as those of Israel in the wilderness, or of our forefathers in the years of persecution, earnest men are often made to feel that

God's work does not advance at as fast a rate as they would like, and indeed can scarcely be said to advance at all. And so they get disheartened, and work and pray in a spiritless manner. In this respect men are like children who, having sown a seed in the ground, expect a plant to spring out of it in a day. The assumption is that, if God means to favour a cause, or to grant success to an enterprise, He will do it soon, or even at once. Now, the fact is that this assumption is the reverse of true. It is God's way to work slowly, through a long period of preparation, and then suddenly at last: first, slow growth—through blade, and ear, and full corn; then suddenly the harvest. We must not, therefore, infer from the slow progress of a historical movement that it is not of God. Very often, the quicker the success, the less of the Divine is there in it. "Slow, but sure," is one of the marks of Divinity. For not only is it true that a thousand years are to God as one day to us, but it is also true, as St. Peter tells us, that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years" are with us. We know what the effect of a thousand years *past* (for of a thousand years to come we cannot know the effect) is upon the human mind. We regard things that happened a thousand years ago very calmly, without any of the passion which thrilled the breasts of the men who lived when the events we now read of in history were taking place. *That* is the way in which God regards events the very day they happen. They are to Him as if they had happened a thousand years ago; so calm is the Divine temper, so far from the impatience and haste characteristic of us men who live but threescore years and ten. This comes of his being the Everlasting One. Yet, strange to say, while God

takes things so calmly and never hurries, He at the same time never forgets. A thousand years are to Him as one day to us. He is as much in earnest in his purpose at the end of a millennium as we are with ours the day we form it.

It would help to cheer us if we could lay this thought to heart, numbering our days, not merely to realize their brevity, but to realize, by contrast, the length of God's years. We have but a short time to work, and it is well to remember that, that we may be diligent. But God has a whole eternity wherein to work, and it is well to remember that also, that we may cease from fretfulness and impatience at the slow progress of the Divine Kingdom. It is by so numbering both our years and God's that we attain unto a wise heart. A wise heart is one that can at once labour devotedly and wait patiently. A foolish heart is a heart that starts with enthusiasm, and, on encountering discouragements and delays, forthwith cools down into indifference. How many such foolish hearts there are! how many unsteadfast hearts that grow weary in well doing, forgetting the word, "In due season ye shall reap, if ye faint not!" And how many there are which are foolish in a still sadder sense—the hearts of triflers, without an aim, looking neither before nor after, numbering neither their own days nor God's eternal years! Of human life generally the Psalmist says, "We spend our years as a tale that is told;" more exactly, as a whisper, a murmur, a passing sigh, a light inarticulate sound, lasting a moment, then forgotten. And of the trifler's life this is emphatically true; for there is nothing real in it—nothing that abides. It is a life which no rational man would care to live, since every

rational man has wisdom enough to know that life, to be worth living, must have a serious purpose.

Even with this wisdom, however, we must not be content. We must strive to cherish hopeful views of life, such as we have seen this Psalm, when properly interpreted, suggests, or earnest purpose and manly energy will die out of our souls. *We* do not need to go back to the Old Testament in search of motives to such a life, but it is surely well to find that even so sombre-looking a Scripture as this Psalm can be made to teach the lesson that St. Paul taught when he said, "Be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." The Psalm teaches us that our labour is not in vain in respect of reward, for the bosom of God is the eternal home of all faithful souls; nor in respect to the continuance of our work after we are dead, for God is there to carry it on. Our life, according to the teaching of this Psalm, is not vain, even if our work consist not so much in doing as in suffering; for the dark watch of the night is but the prelude of a new dawn, and the weary waiting only prepares longing hearts to welcome the dawn. Our life is not vain, finally, though it may seem to have produced no sensible advance of the great cause of truth and righteousness; for the movements of Providence, as becomes the Eternal One, are slow, and, like the movements of the planets, noiseless and invisible; yet, though slow, nevertheless sure, and certainly helped on by every genuine earnest life. The prayer of the faithful—"Establish thou the work of our hands upon us"—never fails to be fulfilled, though the fulfilment may not always be patent to our dim eyes.