

THE THIRD PSALM.

THIS is the morning hymn of the Psalter ; and it shews us a new dawn of hope rising on the darkness of a burdened heart.

Happily all critics, even the most advanced and sceptical, agree both in ascribing the Psalm to David and in finding in it a memorial of his flight from Absalom ; for we are thus spared that preliminary critical discussion which renders the approach to many psalms so tedious, and are enabled to apply an historical key to the interpretation of the Psalm without hesitation or doubt. The familiar story of David's flight has left so many traces on this brief lyric that, if we would apprehend its significance, we must call to mind some of the chief incidents of that story.

In the very year, then, in which, by the justice of his rule and the valour of his arms, David had achieved his most splendid conquests and touched the top of happy fortune, by his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah he plunged into the deepest abyss of misery. Despite his profound penitence, the deep-drawn sobs of which we may still hear in Psalm li., that great sin darkened his whole future course. The prophet Nathan had warned him¹ that, because of his sin, God would "raise up evil against him *out of his own house,*" and bring on him the very shame which he had brought on Uriah. And from the moment of that warning the memory of his sin and the apprehension of its punishment seem to have wellnigh unmanned and unkinged him. He fell more and more under the sinister influence of Joab and Bathsheba, and more and more neglected the plain duties of his royal office. He no longer led his armies in the field, or sat in the gate administering justice indifferently to all comers ;

nor did he restrain and punish the sins of his sons, or compose their strifes, or even resent and crush the first motions of treason. He appears to have sunk into "a devout apathy" alien to his nature, and from which he was only aroused as the revolt of Absalom threatened to overwhelm him. For four years Absalom had been stealing away from him the hearts of the people of Israel, sitting, undeputed, in the gate of justice, gathering round him a royal bodyguard, and thus putting forward pretensions to the throne which no Oriental monarch could misunderstand; and yet through all these years David sat still and made no sign. Even when the revolt, which he must have foreseen, broke out, his first thought was of flight, not of resistance. He felt, apparently, that this was the predicted punishment of his sin—a punishment against which it would be vain, and might be wrong, to strive. And so, attended by but a few hundred devoted servants and soldiers, he left his palace, stole through the streets of Jerusalem, and stood by "the Far House,"¹—*i.e.*, the last house on the extreme verge of the city, while his train defiled before him and crossed the brook Kidron. When they had crossed the brook and were on the way over Mount Olivet, he bade the priests carry back the ark, which they had brought thus far after him, to the tabernacle in Zion; (for David had outgrown the superstition which regarded the ark as a talisman or palladium, and which led the Israelites of the previous generation to carry it with them into battle. He is sure that God's presence is not confined to symbol or place; he shrinks even from seeming to claim the providence of God as his ally, for he feels that he may have deserved God's anger rather than his favour. And hence he utters the well-known pathetic words: "Carry back the ark of God into the city. If I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back again, and shew me

¹ 2 Samuel xv. 17 (Hebrew).

both it and his habitation. But if He should say, I have no delight in thee, behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seemeth good to Him.”¹

Bereft of the ark, David continued his ascent of Olivet, “and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot; and all the people with him covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went.” It was at this moment, when shaken by the fear lest he might be forsaken of God, he learned that, beyond all doubt, he was forsaken by the man whom he most trusted as a friend and most feared as a foe. He is told that the venerable Ahithophel, “whose counsel was as if a man had consulted the oracle of God,” had conspired with Absalom against him. Nor was even the loss of a counsellor so wise the heaviest part of the blow to David. What made it pain him to the very heart was that it brought up again the memory of his old sin, and deepened his conviction that God was entering into judgment with him. For Ahithophel was the grandfather of Bathsheba, the head of the house which had been put to shame by David’s transgressions. In all probability it was, at least in part, to revenge this shame that he had so readily conspired against his master and king, and had counselled Absalom to enter his father’s harem “in the sight of all Israel.”²

Even yet, however, the calamities of the day were not complete. For, as David and his little band struck down from the mountain into the road which led to the fords of the Jordan, they passed along one side of a narrow ravine in the territory of Benjamin. And, here, the foul-tongued Shimei,³ of the house of Saul, sprang out over against them on the opposite ridge, and hurled curses and stones at them, crying: “Get out, get out, thou man of blood, and thou man of Belial,” *i.e.*, thou murderer and

¹ 2 Samuel xv. 25, 26.

² 2 Samuel xvi. 20-22.

³ *Ibid.* 5-14.

scoundrel; "*the Lord* hath delivered thy kingdom into the hands of Absalom, and hath trapped thee in thine own wickedness!" Hard and cruel words for the fugitive monarch to hear; and all the harder because, in part, they were true: harder still because he feared they might be altogether true. Had not he shewn himself "a man of blood" in his dealing with Uriah, and "a man of Belial" in his dealing with Bathsheba? Might it not be true that the Lord had taken his kingdom from him and given it to another? Hence he will not suffer Shimei to be slain. The Lord, he says, may have moved him to utter the curse. At least he can but hope that "the Lord will look on his tears, and requite him good" for the evil that has been spoken of him. And so, spent and weary, David and his servants camp by the fords of the Jordan, unable, until at least they have rested and slept, to put that deep and rapid stream between themselves and their foes. They have no defence but in God; and even He may be against them, and not for them.

Meantime their fate is being determined in Jerusalem. Ahithophel has besought Absalom to let him pursue the fugitives that very night, that he may come upon them while they are weary and weak-handed, and throw them into a confusion from which they would be unable to recover. David once slain, as in the confusion he easily might be, all the people, even those most attached to him, would turn to Absalom "as a bride turneth to her husband."¹ The counsel was "good," and, had it been taken, the conspiracy would, in all likelihood, have succeeded. But God had listened to David's prayer, and "turned the wisdom of Ahithophel into foolishness" in the foolish ear

¹ 2 Samuel xvii. 3. This verse, which in the Authorized Version makes no sense at all, should probably be read thus: "And I will (by smiting the king) make all the people turn to thee, as a bride turneth to her husband. Thou seekest but the life of one; and all the people shall remain in peace."

into which it was poured. At the prompting of Hushai, Absalom decided to wait for daylight, nay, till all the host of Israel could be [summoned to his banner; and his decision cost him the kingdom. For very early in the morning, apparently before dawn,¹ David and all the people who were with him, crossed the river; and ere long hundreds and thousands of his bravest soldiers found their way to the standard of their old captain, and proved, in the issue, too strong for the hasty, though far more numerous, levies which Absalom led against them.

Now it is on the morning after this critical and momentous night that we meet David in our psalm. Rising, as was his wont, before the break of day—and possibly roused even earlier than was his wont by the tidings sent him from Jerusalem—he reviews his position, and finds it, in his more cheerful morning mood, take a very different shape and hue to that which it had assumed in the weariness and dejection of the previous night. Not that he attempts to lessen or disguise the imminent and deadly peril in which he stands. The whole nation has, apparently, risen up against him. The revolt is headed by his son, and guided by the ablest and craftiest of his statesmen. As yet hardly any have declared themselves for him except his foreign guards. The odds, therefore, are overwhelmingly against him, and he is fully sensible of his danger. “How *many*,” he cries, “are my adversaries!” And, again: “*Many* rise up against me!” And, again: “*Many* say of my soul, No help for him in God!” And, again: “*Ten thousands* have set themselves against me!” (Verses 1, 2, 6).

But though the odds are overwhelmingly against him, he refuses to be overwhelmed by them. Only yesterday, perturbed by the sudden shock of change, he could think only of his sin, and doubted whether God Himself had not changed, as men had changed, and turned to be his

¹ 2 Samuel xvii. 22.

foe. When Shimei had cursed him, cried out that there was no help for him in God, and affirmed that God Himself was fighting against him, his heart misgave him; he feared that God might have inspired the curse. But he has had time to reflect and to collect his soul—time to remember his penitence as well as his sin, time to remember that God had promised to pardon his sin as well as to punish it. And as he thinks of all that God had done for him and promised to do, he feels what God *is* to him and to all who put their trust in Him. He still lies open to peril indeed on every side; but God is his “shield,” as He had been that of father Abraham. A discrowned fugitive, he is plunged in shame; but God is his “glory.” With bent and shrouded head, and fallen countenance stained with tears, he had fled from palace and throne; but God is “the lifter up of his head” (Verse 3).

The ark is no longer with him. He had not felt worthy to keep it with him. That ancient symbol of the Divine Presence and Favour was once more safe within its curtains at Jerusalem. Yet, none the less, though he is separated from the holy mountain, not by distance alone, but also by the foes who have driven him from the sacred precinct, he is sure that, wheresoever and whencesoever he cries unto the Lord with his voice, his prayer penetrates to the Divine Presence, is heard and answered from the holy mountain (Verse 4): nothing can separate him from God, the God who “dwells between the cherubim” of the ark.

So utter a revulsion of feeling, a change of mood so radical, startles us, and sets us on asking what can have produced it. And the answer given to that question in Verse 5 is, at first, as surprising as the change of mood for which it is to account. David has passed a quiet night; no alarm has been sounded; no fierce pursuing foes have disturbed his rest. “*I laid me down,*” he says, with a growing accent of wonder; “*I fell asleep: I woke up*

again! That can only be because the Lord was with me, because He sustained and has determined to sustain me. Even *I*, hunted and cursed by men; even I who distrusted God and feared that He too had abandoned me; even I have tasted of his goodness this very night!" And from this near small mercy he argues up to the large continuous mercy of God. He takes his stand upon it, and looks back with grateful retrospect, forward with courage and hope, and puts away all fear let the peril be what it may (Verse 6): "I will not be afraid of the ten thousands who have set themselves against me."

If that seem too large and bold an inference to draw from a fact so common and small, the fact itself may perhaps grow larger as we consider it. For David knew, as well as Ahithophel, that the night on which, through the mercy of God, he had slept in peace and safety was the turning-point of the whole enterprise; that, had he have been attacked *then*, he must have been overcome. And if one of these old and experienced statesmen knew that night to be of such critical moment that, when he saw that "his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and arose, and gat home to his house, in his own city, and put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died,"¹ why should not the other also see in it the point on which his fate revolved, and infer that he had now solid ground for confidence and hope; that he need no longer torment himself with fear of the ill-guided ten thousands who were arrayed against him? That he had been suffered to lie down in peace, that, on such a night, he had been able to sleep at all, that on this bright morning he had woke up in health and safety,—all this was of the best omen: God's protection through these most perilous hours was a pledge and prophecy of a Care and a Love that would never fail him.

Yet, though he has this strong inward assurance of the

¹ 2 Samuel xvii. 23.

Divine protection and help, he does not fail to *ask* God's protection and help; the implicit promise of the night only whets the edge and inflames the fervour of his morning prayer (Verse 7). He calls on God to *arise*, as he himself had just arisen from his couch; for God is said to "arise" when He visibly intervenes, when He takes a decisive part, in human affairs. He prays to God for *help*, as if to silence and rebuke those who had said, "There is no help, for him, in God." And, strong in the faith which the peace of the night has bred in his soul, he sees the answer to his prayer coming to him "from the holy mountain." Moved by the memory of earlier happier days, the answer to his prayer takes a peculiar form in his thoughts. He conceives of his enemies as infuriated wild beasts rushing on their prey; and he foresees that as of old he himself had smitten the lion and the bear so God will "smite in the jawbone" of his pursuers, and "break the teeth" with which they would fain rend him.

The final verse of the Psalm is by far the finest in thought, though not in form. Shimei and "many" more had affirmed, "There is no help for him in God." And, now, David replies: "To Jehovah belongeth *the help*,"—the only full, complete, and efficient help; help for body and soul, help in life and in death; the help which really saves a man from himself and his sins as well as from his adversaries and fears. But if David thinks *first* of himself and his own salvation, he cannot, as a true king, think of himself before God without also thinking of his subjects, and praying that they too may be saved. The ejaculation which closes the Psalm also crowns it. For "*Thy blessing on thy people*" means, "Thy blessing on *all* thy people; on the ten thousands who have set themselves against me, as well as on the scanty hundreds who are with me and for me. Thy blessing on them all, though they have rebelled against me, and whatever the issue of this strife with

them may be: even though I should suffer defeat and death, God bless his kingdom, the people whom He has called to be his witnesses, and his praise, in the earth."

And so the Psalm mounts to its climax, and David, in the very spirit of David's Son and Lord, requites evil with good, a blessing for a curse. Well may Ewald say when he reaches this heartfelt ejaculation: "This one short word throws a bright lustre upon David's noble soul"; and Perowne: "What a glimpse it gives us into the goodness and generosity of that noble heart!"

The third Psalm, then, is as fine a specimen of the historic psalm as the second is of the dramatic or Messianic psalm.¹ Its verses are absolutely crowded with historical allusions which illustrate its meaning. It is fairly saturated with the story of the hour which gave it birth; so that those who here read it in its connexion with that story for the first time cannot fail to gain a new and wider insight into its significance.

And because it sprang straight from the heart of a man of like passions and like conditions with ourselves, it finds an echo in our hearts; it is rife with instruction even for us. For we too know what it is to sin, and to be punished for our sins. Though we should have repented of our transgression, nay, even though our transgression has been blotted out by the Divine forgiveness, the stream of consequence which our transgression set in motion may long flow on unchecked; and that punishment of our sin which God means for our good may be mistaken for a sign of his anger. As the punitive results of our transgression overtake us, and compass us about, leaving no clear way of escape, men may say of us, or we may say of ourselves, as many said of David, "No help for him in God." Who that has lived to mature years has not been, at times, thus

¹ See pp. 13, *et seq.*

seized upon and compassed about by the sins and errors of his youth till the past has seemed all dark with guilt, and the future with despair? Which of us has not had at least to suffer from the sins of others, from the unruly and untamed passions of those whom we have loved as he loved Absalom, or from the defection of friends whom we have trusted as he trusted Ahithophel? And which of us has not permitted these mists of earth to obscure the very light of heaven?

What we need, therefore, what we need most of all, is that ingrained trust in the Mercy and Care of God which could never be long suppressed in the heart of David; which taught him in his utmost peril to make God his "shield," and in his deepest shame to look to God as his "glory" and the "lifter-up of his head." For if we are sincerely penitent for our sins, we too may be sure that God has forgiven our sins, even though He should still punish us for them; and sure that this very punishment is intended for our welfare. And it may help us to this most helpful confidence in God if we observe how it was that David rose out of his temporary despair into his habitual mood of courage and hope. We may find, indeed, a deep practical wisdom in the fact that a single night's undisturbed repose sufficed to restore his wavering faith; that, simply because he had lain down, and slept, and woke again, he could infer, "Jehovah sustaineth me," and resolve, "I will not be afraid though all things and all men should still seem to be against me." For if a small near good, a blessing so common as a few hours sleep, should thus reassure us, by convincing us that God is still with us, that He has neither forgotten nor forsaken us, *when* need we be without that most consolatory and sustaining conviction? (In our worst shame, in our deepest sorrow, in our most impoverishing loss, something is still left to us. And if, instead of wilfully turning away from the

comforts and blessings which remain to us, or even weakly resenting that the sun should still shine and human life go on as of old when we have lost so much or are plunged in so dark a grief, we were thankfully to reckon up the mercies still lavished upon us, and from the least of them all to argue up to the large unfailing mercy of God, we too should gratefully acknowledge, "the Lord still sustains us and will sustain," and feel that we were not un comforted in our grief, nor wholly impoverished by our loss.) To my mind there is nothing in this psalm more charming or more valuable than the homely wisdom with which it teaches us to make the best of what is left to us, to find in small and common gifts the pledge of an infinite bounty, and to see even in a few hours sleep not only some compensation for the loss of a throne, but also a clear prediction that the throne is *not* lost after all.

Yet the Psalm has kindred lessons for us of no slight value; as, for example, this: that our knowledge of what God's will is, so far from rendering prayer unnecessary or unmeet, should prompt us to pray that his will may be done. Because God has kept him through the night, David is sure that God will keep and help him in his struggle with his foes,—God's help in little things being a pledge of his help in the greatest; but his confidence does not close his mouth; it only lends urgency to his cry, "Arise, O Lord; help me, O my God!" That is to say, though he does not know in what way God is about to help him, he heartily consents to that way whatever it may be, and is even sure that God's way must be best.

Now if, in like manner, when we are oppressed with shame and grief, with care and fear, we should argue from a small present help to the larger help we need, and so become confident that God's will is our welfare, it would be no small comfort to us were we to turn this springing and germinant assurance into prayer, both because we know

God's will and know it not. We know his will to be our welfare; and therefore we can ask without fear or hesitation that his will may be done: for in asking his help when we know that He means to help us, we are in no danger of asking what He cannot bestow. But we do not know *how* He means to secure our welfare, in what form his help is to come; and therefore, with David,¹ we should ask Him to do as seemeth Him best, to help us in any way He will, and thus both bring our wills into a happy concert with his, and assure Him that we are of one will with Him. "Happy the soul in such a posture found!" for what grief can be all grief, or what loss all loss, if in the heart of it all there be the conviction that God is bent on our well-being—is promoting it even by the very loss or grief He calls us to endure—and that we are willing to accept well-being in whatever form he may send it?

There is still another lesson for us in the closing words of the Psalm. David could not seek his own welfare and salvation only. He is willing even to be saved in a way that shall seem a loss and shame to men, so that *they* are saved and blessed. His very foes must be saved before he can regard his salvation as complete. And hence he prays for a blessing on the people who had risen up against him. Nor is there anything which will so enlarge our straitened hearts, or bring such comfort to our grief, or so teach us to find in loss itself a gain to match, as this tender gracious consideration for the needs and the griefs of our neighbours. To seek the welfare of others is to secure our own. And if we can rise to the heroic height of David, and honestly forgive those who have trespassed against us, because God has forgiven our trespass against Him, we shall find that by one such act of forgiveness, even of the little wrongs which are done us in daily life, we have drawn nearer to God, and have brought Him nearer to us, than by a thousand prayers.

¹ 2 Samuel xv. 26.

This Psalm then, will be a true morning hymn to us if it teach us to draw auguries of large future good from the common and apparently trivial gifts of the passing hour; if it teach us to turn our confidence in the infinite and inalienable goodness of God into prayers that his good will may be done, in and by and for us, in his own way, *i.e.*, in the best way; and if it also teach us to ask for and to seek the welfare of all men, even of those who have most wronged us, as we seek our own: for to have learned these lessons will be in very deed to turn the night of life into a new and happy day.

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MAN'S POWER TO FORGIVE SINS.

ST. MARK ii. 10.

It seems not unreasonable to suggest a doubt whether the somewhat trite interpretation of this passage which passes current among commentators can be fairly maintained, or yield a result which quite satisfies the notable peculiarity of our Lord's words. Does the ordinary acceptance of this clause fairly and fully represent its logical connexion with the circumstances? And as, in the slightly varied narratives of the Synoptical writers, this saying of our Lord alone is repeated with literal accuracy, is it not probable that some special significance may be latent in its exceptional form,—a significance which the ordinary interpretation fails to recognize? It is the purpose of the following pages to attempt an answer to these enquiries.

The reasoning of the Scribes, "among themselves," or "in their hearts," which our Lord perceived and rebuked, had been to the effect that the word of forgiveness uttered by Christ implied a blasphemous claim, on his part, to