

THE FOURTH PSALM.

THIS is the evening psalm of the Psalter ; and it breathes the very spirit of the evening hour, the spirit of tranquillity and trust, of charity and peace.

It was composed, as our ablest critics are agreed, on the evening of the day, or to express and commemorate the emotions of the evening of the day, at the dawn of which David sang the morning hymn which we studied last month.¹ It was prompted, therefore, by the same or nearly the same set of outward conditions which have left so many traces on Psalm iii. The great change of the day was that David and his little train had safely crossed the fords of the Jordan, and were now encamped at the eastern side of the river, on their way to the city of Mahanaim. All else remained unchanged. They were still few in number as opposed to the “many” who had set themselves against them, still weak as compared with the “ten thousands” who were preparing to pursue them ; the curses of Shimei, the treachery of Ahithophel, the treason of Absalom, were still present to David’s mind, and must have fretted it into an intolerable agony of anger and despair had he not learned to cast his burden on the Lord.

But, though this Psalm was prompted by much the same incidents, we must not expect to find in it so many traces of them as we found in Psalm iii. For that was a morning, and this is an evening hymn ; and therefore it naturally and inevitably takes a more inward and spiritual tone. In the morning, we look forward to the events—the duties, difficulties, dangers—of the coming day, consider how we shall meet them, and ask grace to meet them aright ; but, in the evening, we retire within ourselves, ask how we have met them, what effects they have wrought on our

¹ See pp. 94 *et seq.*

moral life, and seek, before we sink into unconsciousness, to become at peace with the world, ourselves, and God.

Moreover, through the hours of this day of peril and suspense, and the incessant claims which it made on his care and forethought, the conviction had been growing in David's mind that God, so far from having abandoned him, was with him and for him, that He who can save by many or by few was on his side. Strong in this conviction, he had been able to meet the fears and apprehensions of his little band with a cheerful confidence which gave them new courage, and to still the clamorous discontent of those among them who, holding an abundance of corn and wine to be the chief good of life, fretted over their scanty rations and failing stores. And now, ere he sinks to repose, he gives thanks "for all the blessings of the light," and especially for the glad conviction that God is his gracious good Master and Friend again, places himself under "the Almighty wings," forgives his worst enemies even as God has forgiven him, and so is at peace with all the world as well as with himself and with his Friend and Judge in heaven. In short, so appropriate are his themes and his treatment of them to the evening hour that there is a marked correspondence between the hymn which David sang before "sweet sleep his eyelids closed" and the evening hymn which most Englishmen learn to lisp in their infant years, although it is very evident that good bishop Ken did not make the former his model or draw his inspiration from a Hebrew fountain.

Yet the one is hardly more distinctively Christian than the other. If any of my readers should have thought—as I chance to know that some of them did think—that I gave too large, too modern and liberal, a scope to the closing ejaculation of David's morning prayer, when I made "Thy blessing on thy people," mean, "Thy blessing on *all* thy people, on those who have betrayed and cursed me

and are compassing my death, as well as on those who have been faithful among the faithless," they will now be undeceived; for they will now hear David praying for his enemies expressly and by name, although he is more sure than ever that, in setting themselves against him, they have set themselves against God; they will now hear him praying for *them* even before and even more emphatically than he prays for himself or for the loyal spirits who were encamped around him, the whole burden of his prayer being that they may be brought to a better mind. To conquer them by force or dexterous strategy is not enough for his generous and gracious heart; they must also be conquered in the noblest way, restored to *his* friendship and service by being converted into the friends and servants of righteousness.

The Psalm opens with an appeal to God. David had said in his morning hymn (Psalm iii. 4), "Whenever I cry unto the Lord, He heareth me;" and now he turns that strong inward conviction into the prayer (Psalm iv. 1), "When I cry, answer thou me;" for what are our prayers, what can they be, but the translation of our strongest religious convictions into the language of petition and desire? and how could we ask God to hear us if we did not know Him to be a hearer and answerer of prayer?

But *this* is much more than a prayer. It is also an appeal. For when David cries to God as "the God of *my* righteousness," he means not only that the righteousness he has come to him from God, and that the righteousness he longs for must come to him from God; he also means that God will maintain his righteousness and the righteousness of his cause against those who have risen up against him. It is an appeal to the Searcher of all hearts as to the sincerity of his own heart and the justice of his cause; and it is an expression of his growing conviction that, because his cause is just, God will uphold and vindicate it.

For, observe, on what he bases his confidence. Many a time he has been in a "strait place," in a "tight" place, a place too narrow and confined, and God has enlarged it, or has brought him out of it into a large place. Only on the night just past he had been in one of the straitest places he had ever passed through, when, weary and weak-handed, he had feared to be surprised by many foes and strong. Yet even this strait place had been made spacious enough for him; he had struggled through it unhurt; and now that Absalom had decided to summon all Israel to his banner "from Dan to Beersheba," weeks must elapse before the assault can be delivered against him, weeks which will at least give him time to turn round and to take the best advantage of this unexpected and auspicious delay. Just delivered from this strait place, from conditions so narrow and perilous, and with many similar deliverances lying in the background of his memory, he is confident that the God of his righteousness will deliver him once more, and vindicate the justice of his cause.

With this brief exordium, David turns his thoughts at once upon his foes. For if his righteousness is God's righteousness, then his honour is God's honour, and in slandering him the partisans of Absalom are talking, are lifting up their mouths, against God. To these partisans, and especially to the magnates, the captains and statesmen among them—for the Hebrew phrase, "O ye sons of men!" in Verse 2 denotes the leaders of the conspiracy rather than their followers—he now addresses himself. He is thinking of Absalom, Ahithophel, Shimei, and their peers, when he cries: "How long will ye turn my glory into shame?" God was his glory (Psalm iii. 3); to slander and assail him was therefore to "turn his glory into shame;" it was to deny that his cause was just and that it was the cause of God. Why, then, do they do it? Simply because they "love vanity" and therefore "seek after lies." Simply

because they take the shows of life for its realities, its empty shows and vain shadows for its sacred and abiding realities. Simply because they put their trust in numbers, wealth, popularity, instead of in the truth and righteousness of a cause; and, having once adopted an unrighteous cause, snatch eagerly at any lying pretext which seems to justify it or any momentary and partial success which seems to indicate that it has the sanction of heaven. *They* have chosen Absalom for king; the great bulk of the people have ratified their choice; and hence they too readily infer that *God* has chosen him. *They* have deposed David from the throne; the ten thousands of Israel have assented to his deposition; and hence they too hastily conclude that *the Lord* has taken the kingdom from him and has given it to another.

God's judgment, however, as David solemnly reminds them in Verse 3, turns on quite other criteria. He chooses not the wise, or the strong, or the opulent, but the *good man*, or the godly man *for Himself*, and, sooner or later *marks* that man *out* as his choice. And, with all his faults and sins, David is conscious that he loves God and is devoted to his service. He is sure, therefore, that God *hears*, and will hear, his *cry*, and come to his help, and prove the cause of his enemies to be based on vanity and lies—to have no pith in it, no power to endure. And I suppose that not only do we admit, but that his very enemies would have admitted in their calmer moods, that David was much more like a good or godly man than Absalom his son, of whom, whatever his other virtues or charms, godliness was hardly a characteristic. They were lying, therefore, when they cast up David's sins against him. Not that he had not sinned—sinned heinously and grievously, but that it was not his sins which really weighed with them, any more than it was Absalom's freedom from sin which drew them to him. Had they wished to choose

for their king the man who loved God most and served Him best, they would have chosen David, and not Absalom. Again, therefore, it is against *God*, and against his anointed, that they conspire and fight, let them pretend as they will that it is God who has taken the kingdom from David and given it to his son.

But to fight against God and his anointed is of all enterprises the most futile and perilous. Hence David bids them (Verses 4 and 5) *tremble* at the certain and horrible defeat which awaits all who oppose themselves to the Divine will. He beseeches them that they *sin not*, that they cease from their sin: he beseeches them to *commune with their own heart on their bed*, i.e., to meditate in the night-watches on the true nature of the enterprise they have so lightly and wantonly taken in hand; to *be still*, i.e., to silence the voices of passion, revenge, and ambition, that the cause they have adopted may reveal itself to them in its true and native colours: and he assumes that if they do thus quietly and sincerely consider their ways, they will see the choice they have made to be a wrong choice, will renounce their sin, as he prays them to do; and that they will *offer the due sacrifices* for their sin, and return to their *trust in the Lord*. It is impossible to read these verses without perceiving how strong the conviction had grown to be with David that his cause was just and would be maintained by the God of justice; or without feeling how noble and generous was the spirit which no mere conquest could satisfy, which could be satisfied with nothing short of the conversion of his enemies into the friends and ministers of God.

In Verses 6 and 7 David's thoughts come back from his distant enemies to the friendly circle immediately around him, and we learn that in his own camp there prevailed a spirit too similar to that which ruled in the camp of his enemies; for here too were many who put their trust in

the outward and temporal elements of life rather than in the inward and spiritual. His camp, as was inevitable, was ill supplied. Even Ziba's two hundred loaves of bread and his bunches of raisins and of summer fruits for the young men to eat, and his skin of wine for such as were faint in the wilderness, were an unexpected and most welcome boon.¹ But what were these among so many? The relief, the pleasure with which the gifts of the pastoral chieftains of the wilderness were received when David reached Mahanaim—a pleasure which still lingers round the emphatic catalogue of the wheat and barley flour, the parched pulse and beans and lentiles, the honey and butter and sheep and cheese they brought with them,² shews how much David and his followers had suffered on their way thither, how hungry and thirsty and weary they were as they passed through the intervening strip of desert. And this lack of corn and wine would be sure to breed fear and apprehension, doubts of the success, if not of the righteousness, of the cause in which they were engaged. "The heavens themselves do frown on us," would be the thought of many hearts. We need not wonder to hear, therefore, that among the followers of David there were those who scanned the horizon with anxious eyes, looking for a succour that did not arrive, and asking almost hopelessly, *Who will shew us any good?* meaning, Where are we to look for corn and wine? What chance have we, who lack the very necessaries of life, of making a brave stand in our own defence? and how can we hope to overcome the ten thousands arrayed against us?

To these distressed and discontented spirits—always a commander's chief burden and anxiety—David sets himself to teach the lesson which he himself has learned, and which fills him with courage and hope. The conviction has been growing upon him all day that God is with them

¹ 2 Samuel xvi. 1-4.

² *Ibid.* xvii. 27-29.

and for them, and in the light of God's favour he finds a *gladness* which renders him indifferent, superior, to the trials of the passing hour, a joy beyond the joy of harvest. Thus, indeed, he proves himself to be the good man whom God has marked out for his own; and he would fain instil this sustaining preference of inward over outward, of spiritual over temporal, good into the hearts of his dejected followers. Let them lift up their eyes from the low horizon which they have "haunted with the inquest of their beseeching looks," to the lofty hills from whence their help will really come; let them turn from man to God, and they too will get a deeper gladness into their hearts than any abundance of corn and wine could give.

In the last Verse the evening hymn itself sinks to rest. "The iambs with which it closes," says Delitzsch, "are like the last strain of a lullaby, and die away softly as if themselves falling asleep." And, even should these Hebrew iambs be Hebrew to us, we can all feel the tranquil composure with which David here commits himself to the care of One who never slumbers nor sleeps. His thoughts, which at first flew away to his distant enemies, and then came back to his own camp, now close their wings within his own tent. Last night, to his infinite surprise (Psalm iii. 5), he had lain down in peace and slept undisturbed. And, now, he argues from the past to the present, and is sure that his head will no sooner touch his pillow than he shall *forthwith fall asleep*. The God of whose support and favour he is convinced, and who alone can *make him to dwell in safety*, will be with him and guard him through the watches of the night: why then should he fret himself with care or be perturbed by fear?

As we study this Psalm we cannot but admire the "soft invincibility" of David's spirit, the tranquil courage with which, confronted by malice, hatred, revenge, and sur-

rounded by discontent and apprehension, he commits himself and his cause to the Divine Protection, and calmly falls asleep. We cannot but wish that, amid our trials and perils, our cares and fears, we could shew a spirit and a courage like his. Yet the secret of this calm and sustaining temper of the soul is patent enough. That secret is told in two words,—kindness and unworldliness; the charity which enables us to love even those who hate us, and that detachment from the world which enables us to rise above its low ideals and aims. What is most peculiar and noteworthy in the Psalm is that David cherishes no revenge against his enemies, cruel and implacable as they were; and that he does not resent the clamorous discontent of his friends, much as they distress him by demands he cannot satisfy. Could his voice reach the leaders of the revolt as they were about to lie down on their beds that night, they would hear nothing harsher from him than a prayer that they would give themselves to self-scrutiny and self-inspection, and so be led to repent of their sin and renounce it. If his pining and fainthearted followers could but overhear him, they would receive no other rebuke of their discontent than the prayer that, with him, they may learn to find “the chief good and market of their time,” not in an abundance of corn and wine, but in the favour of God, which is life, and in his loving-kindness which is better than life. And when our chief care is to bring those who have wronged us to a better mind, and to teach those who love us a more excellent way than as yet they know, we too shall have risen into that pure and undefiled service of God which alone can bring a steadfast and growing peace into our hearts.

The great lesson of the Psalm is, therefore, a lesson in the right ordering of our affections and aims. The enemies of David and the friends of David fell into a common mistake; they found their chief good in the visible and temporal elements of human life, rather than in its spiritual

and invisible elements ; in abundance, in enjoyment, in worldly power and success ; and hence they were agitated and perturbed by every shock of change and loss : while David himself made God—that is to say, David made truth, righteousness, charity—his chief aim and good ; and hence he can lie down and sleep in peace when change and loss have wrought their worst upon him. A surer hold on God, a more confident persuasion of his favour, the conviction that by the very punishment of his sins he is being made a better man and drawn into a closer fellowship with Him,—only this can make him truly and deeply glad ; while all they want for gladness is plenty of corn and plenty of wine.

Now it is between these two aims and ideals that we all have to choose ; and on our choice our peace depends. When we ask “ Who will shew us any good ? ” is it a bettered character, or is it only bettered conditions, easier and more affluent circumstances, for which we long ? is it “ corn and wine,” or is it “ the light of God’s countenance ” ? Reason itself teaches us that we cannot be at rest while we, who are to endure for ever, possess and seek only the good things which will comfort us for but a few brief years, which may make to themselves wings and use their wings even before we die, and for which we may have lost all relish long before they leave us. The very constitution of our nature, its very capacity of aiming at and enjoying that which is eternal, forbids us to be at peace until we have set our hearts on a good as lasting as ourselves, a good of which no shock of change can deprive us, a good which will continue to unfold new satisfactions and new charms as our powers are enlarged and refined and our life rises through stage after stage of its unending progress. No increase of corn and wine, no abundance of those happy accidents of fortune of which corn and wine are types, can possibly satisfy an immortal spirit. Nothing can satisfy

it short of a continual growth in wisdom, righteousness, and love under the genial and fruitful light of God's uplifted countenance.

This is the clear dictate of Reason as it is also the great lesson of our Psalm. And, in this Psalm, it comes to us with all and more than all the force of a logical demonstration. For it is not in the hour of his prosperity, but in an hour of the utmost adversity, that David thanks God for a gladness with which no abundance of corn and wine could have inspired him, and a peace not to be shaken by any sense of loss or any fear of peril. Had he urged this lesson upon us when he was a happy father strong in the love of brave and stalwart sons, or a happy king strong in the loyalty of devoted subjects and splendid in the lustre of victorious arms, we might have put it from us with some show of reason; we might have said, "It is all very well for *him*, possessed of all that makes life rich and honourable, to say that he has a gladness and a peace wholly independent of these happy outward conditions, and far deeper than any they could inspire: let him be put to the proof, let him lose the blessings of which he speaks so lightly, and then we shall see what his peace and gladness are worth." We cannot say that, and so, with some show of reason, put away his lesson from us. For when he utters it, he has lost all that he had. He is dethroned, dishonoured, impoverished; a man whose adversity is embittered by years of previous luxury; a father whose very life is sought by his son; a king whose glory has been turned to shame; a fugitive whose existence is in peril, and whose cause is upheld only by a few well-nigh hopeless followers. It is from the very depths of loss and shame that we hear David's tuneful voice assuring us that the joy of the Lord is our true strength, that to be at peace with Him is better than to have full barns and presses running over with new wine, better than royal authority and power, better even than

the love of children and the loyalty of subjects; better, in short, than any or all the happy accidents of joyful fortune. Can we refuse to listen to *him*? Can we doubt that the grace which sustained him will also sustain us? Must we not admit that he had found the true and chief good of human life? Shall we not join in his prayer: "Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord, and so give us a peace and a gladness which the world, and the changes of time, and the accidents of fortune, can neither give nor take away."

There is still another point of view from which this Psalm gains force and pathos. It is, as we have seen, an evening hymn, a hymn which David sang and intended others to sing, as the hours of rest drew nigh. And every reflective man must have felt that there is something strangely calm and impressive in these evening hours, and that, as he has communed with his own heart upon his bed and been still, all things are apt to wear a new aspect and take other proportions. As the fever of the day cools out of nerve and brain, and we sink toward the repose which so closely resembles that of death, we are often conscious that the pursuits and aims of life assume a different and more solemn aspect. Just as the moon sheds over the landscape a light more calm and spiritual than that of day, so our thoughts in the watches of the night are more spiritual, more serious, more sensitive to the touch and impact of conscience, than those which occupied our waking thoughts; and hence many of the objects which we then eagerly pursued and found full of charm lose much of their lustre and value; while aspirations, desires, fears, which were then dormant, kindle into a strange, and often an unwelcome activity. In sleep we seem to stand as near to death as life; and the solemn shadows of death project themselves across the aims and pursuits of life; and, ah, how mean and trivial, how sordid and

evanescent and worthless, many of them now seem to be! Unless they have some touch of immortality in them, how vain and empty, how flat and unprofitable seem all the uses of this world! Unless we have cherished thoughts and pursued aims which extend beyond this present life, what is our life worth to us? Unless we have served God and our neighbour in the toils and duties of the day, and enjoyed Him in its gratifications and pleasures; unless all changes of outward condition have helped to build up in us a character which He can approve, what are we the better for all our labours and gains? Can we be content, is peace possible to us, so long as we feel that, should the slumber of repose pass into the deeper slumber of the grave, we should leave all we have behind us, and enter into a world into which we can carry none of the aims we have hitherto pursued, none of the treasures we have amassed? At such moments of reflection as these, what are "corn and wine" worth as compared with the love and favour of that God who rules in all worlds, and those priceless inward possessions which time cannot corrupt nor death filch from us?

S. Cox.
