

STUDIES IN PRACTICAL EXEGESIS.

II.

PSALM IV.

THE idea of a special providence is one that cannot be proved except by the logic of a believing heart. Faith has its intuitions, and the more we live by faith the more certain to us will its intuitions become. Another of these intuitions, which commend themselves to us the more we act upon them, is that many Biblical passages refer, not only to the original writer and his times, but to servants of God in every age, whether it be Jesus in His human ministry, or the followers of Jesus united to Him by a living faith. "Scripture," as a great preacher—may I not almost say, a great psalmist among the bishops?—has said, "is not a book from which inspiration has departed; it *is* inspired."¹ Why should it be thought a thing incredible that He who enabled psalmists and prophets to speak the word in season to the men of their own day should have infused Elisha's portion of the original inspiring breath into the written record of their songs and oracles? It may be objected that this is to make the reading of the Bible a sacrament, and that the apostles only recognised two sacraments. The answer is that we do not *make* it a sacrament; it *was* a sacrament before the Christian Church came into being; and since there is nothing Judaic about it, since it answers to a permanent religious need of human nature, it cannot be abolished. So far from abolishing it, the great Head of the Church again and again recognised its sacramental efficacy, not merely for the congregation but for the individual. I know that this enlargement of the definition of sacrament may savour to some of Romanism. But the fault of Romanism is, not that it recognises too many sacraments, but that it does not recognise enough. We

Alexander, *The Witness of the Psalms to Christ*, p. 247.

dare not limit the power of the Spirit to communicate a sacramental potency to the most commonplace form of daily life. This however is but a glance at a wide subject. All that I am bound to claim to-day is, that if the Scriptures are read in the right spirit, they will, or may, convey to him who reads a special, private message from God. I am well aware that in former times this happy faith was sometimes connected with illusions or even with superstitions. When, by a mere accident, St. Augustine, just before his conversion, heard a voice as of a child "singing and oft repeating, *Take, read; Take, read,*" and interpreted this as a Divine command to open the New Testament, and read the first chapter he should find,¹ he was under an illusion, which God graciously overruled to his spiritual profit. The nobler and worthier course however is to put aside all such arbitrary means of obtaining messages from heaven, and look for the blessing to come in the ordinary course of our Bible-reading. So full of significance is the language of Scripture, and so varied is the experience of its writers, that a thoughtful believer who looks out, as Elijah did, cannot fail to catch some still, small whisper to himself;² and the better he understands the historical sense, the more likely is he to find out the best spiritual sense. In a word, unconventional Bible study, rightly pursued, is the friend and not the foe of edification.

But though, as one of the epistles tells us, "*all inspired Scripture is profitable,*" and by a comprehensive study of it "*the man of God is thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (2 Tim. iii. 16, 17), yet there is one book which is specially owned by the Holy Spirit in His communings with the soul: it is the Book of Psalms. Of this book it may truly be said, that it not only was inspired in the past,

¹ Aug., *Confessions* viii. 12.

² Comp. an interesting report of a conversation at Trinity Lodge, Cambridge, on the question whether Shakespeare intended all the meaning which others found in his words (Cox's *Life of Bishop Colenso*, i. 34).

but is fraught with new and equally inspired applications day by day. Some of us have doubtless thought, when listening to some fine cathedral anthem, that musical genius has filled the words with a pathos that would have surprised the Psalmist himself. But surely this is not only, nor even chiefly, true of the genius of the composer :

“ Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter.”

Great as Purcell's genius was, there is a finer music than his, though it has never been expressed in musical notes. The greatest of musicians is the soul, whose changeful history may with equal justice be compared to a picture or a statue, and to a piece of music which is slowly being produced from the hidden recesses of genius ; with equal justice, I say, except that in the case of the soul there are two co-operating artists, and the greater of them is not the individual, but his God. And so it comes to pass that, as we read the Scriptures, and are conscious in some hitherto unfelt manner of the applicability of some sentence or even word to ourselves, it is equally our own spirit which finds this out and the Spirit of God who reveals it to us. In a word, the soul can infuse ever fresh pathos into the ancient Psalms—the pathos of its own experience. And I think it is useful—delightful it certainly is—to collect the instances in history and biography (and can we not supplement these from our own personal history?) in which those who have gone before have received messages through the Psalms—messages, I mean, from the God of love, who is the great Artist of our lives, and whose workmanship we should spoil if He did not give us suggestions and directions, rebukes and encouragements. Let us therefore begin our too short meditation on the fourth Psalm by recalling another incident in the life of St. Augustine.¹

¹ Aug., *Confessions* ix. 3, 4. (I quote from the translation in Griffith & Farran's Theological Library.) See also Bishop Alexander's beautiful poem, *St. Augustine's Holiday*.

For many years before his conversion this great saint (mentioned in the Anglican calendar on August 28th) had lived by teaching literature and the art of oratory. The nearer he came to the faith of the Catholic Church the less satisfaction could he find in the empty phrases and sophistical arguments which constituted, so to speak, his stock in trade. At last he resolved, as he himself tells us, to withdraw the service of his tongue from the talk-market, being wounded with the arrow of Divine love.¹ It was the vintage season, and a friend offered him his country house, near the lakes and mountains of Lombardy, that he might, with his mother and his intimates, spend some quiet, thoughtful weeks before his baptism. Augustine was never a narrow-minded pietist, and doubtless had other books with him beside the Bible; but not even Virgil spoke to his heart like the Latin Psalter, so suggestive by its rugged brevity of deep, mystic applications. "With what accents," he says, "did I address Thee, O my God, when I read the Psalms of David! and how was I by them kindled towards Thee, and on fire to recite them, if possible, throughout the whole circle of the earth, to subdue the pride of the human race? With what vehement and bitter sorrow was I indignant against the Manichæans" (the heretical teachers by whom St. Augustine had so long been deluded). "Would that they had then been somewhere near me," he continues, "without my knowing that they were there, could have beheld my countenance, and heard my words when I read the fourth psalm in that time of my rest, and how that psalm wrought upon me!" And then he goes through the psalm, applying it partly to himself in his converted state, partly to those who, like himself formerly, "loved vanity

¹ Some words of St. Augustine's have a history like the Psalmists'. "Sagittaveras Tu, Domine, caritate tuâ," is the inscription on a silver plate on a sarcophagus recently found at St. Mandrier, near Toulon, and thought to be that of St. Flavien, who was massacred by the Visigoths, in 512 (*Standard*, Oct. 9th, 1888).

and sought after lies," *i.e.* the vain imaginations of the heretics and the rhetoricians, partly, as in verse 3, to Christ, "the man that is godly, whom the Lord had chosen to Himself. I read on, 'Be ye angry and sin not,'" he says; "and how was I moved, O my God, who had now learned to be angry with myself for things past, that for the future I might not sin! . . . Nor were my good things now without; for they that would have joy from without soon become empty. Oh that they were wearied out with their want, and said, 'Who will show us any good?' And we would say, and they hear, 'The light of Thy countenance is sealed upon us.' Oh that they could see the Inward Light eternal, which I, having tasted, did gnash my teeth that I could not show them! For 'Thou hadst put gladness in my heart.' And I cried out, as I read this outwardly, and recognised its truth within: nor did I wish to be increased in earthly good, wasting time and being wasted by it, when I might possess in Thy Eternal Simplicity other 'corn and wine and oil.'" Next he proceeds to draw mystic meanings from the closing verse of the psalm. Two words strike him especially—"in peace" and "in the selfsame." He does not understand the verse aright, but he invents a new conclusion, more glorious but not therefore more beautiful than the true one,¹ and such as the psalmist himself would not perhaps have disavowed had he known the truths of Christianity. This is what he takes the verse to mean—"In peace will I lay me down in the Selfsame One, and take my rest, knowing that 'Death shall be swallowed up in victory.' And Thou, who indeed changest not, art that 'Selfsame'; nor are we to seek those many other things which are not what Thou art;

¹ As Trench remarks, speaking of St. Augustine's denial that "sleep" and "awaking" in Psalm xxxv. are to be taken literally, "Is not the wondrous mystery of our sleeping and waking well worthy of a psalmist's recognition?" (*Sermon on the Mount*, p. 58.)

‘for Thou, Lord, only hast made me dwell in hope’” (of the resurrection to eternal life).

St. Augustine is not an accurate interpreter, least of all of the Old Testament; but his wonderful spiritual insight makes even his mistakes instructive. See how vividly he realizes that the enemies referred to in the psalm are the enemies of the Church, and enemies who professedly at least belong to the household of faith! The Manichæans of whom he speaks were, in fact, not less dangerous to the Church than heathen persecutors, and fascinated many who asked of the Scriptures more than they were meant to give. This shows us how to read some of the psalms. The foes against whom we pray are not only without but within the Church. All forms of moral and intellectual error are foes, not to be put down by force, but to be prayed against, subject of course to the proviso, “Thy will, not mine, be done”; for it is not God’s will to put down error until the Church of Christ has made honey of it: every form of widely spread error springs from the Church’s unconsciousness of some truth which is the appointed antidote of that error.

But St. Augustine not only expostulates with the Church’s foes in the name of the Church, he speaks as one who has himself suffered from their wiles. We need not be like him in this. Let simple-minded believers keep their simplicity, if Providence has placed them where they can rightly do so; and let none think to find out truth by beginning with the study of what the common Christian consciousness pronounces to be error. But it is to those who, through their own experience or that of others, have learned to know the errors of the times, that this psalm chiefly appeals. Nothing is gained by shutting ourselves up in a castle of unreasoning faith, if sooner or later the gate is sure to be burst open. That so-called Christian training which discourages familiarity by discussion with problems

of modern thought results too often in the production of more heretics, and at the best is a cowardice unworthy of any one who can presume to say, *I believe in the Holy Ghost*. By all means be loyal to Christ in thought and word and deed, but remember that no formula, even if it were expressed in the words of the Bible, could exhaust that "all truth" into which Christ promises to lead His followers. It is the duty of an educated Christian to listen calmly and kindly to what he believes to be error, and find out what the missing truth is to which this error points the way; and it is the duty of properly trained Christian ministers to assist him in his quest. The young Augustine's fault was in listening to Manichæanism before he had studied Catholicism. But he became all the more useful afterwards as a teacher of the Catholic faith through the knowledge which he had acquired of heretical thought. I do not say that he is perfect as an apologist; no, the grounds which he offers for accepting the faith of the Church would not be sufficient for any thoughtful man in our own day. But as a teacher of positive truth he stands far higher than he would have done without such a long and intimate acquaintance with unbelief and error. And we must not shrink from contact either with unbelief or with heresy, whether in books and magazines or in private intercourse, at least if we would be well-grounded and broad-minded Christians of the school of St. Paul and St. Augustine.

The strength of the author of the *Confessions* did not, as I have said, lie in exact interpretation; nor can I commend the use of commentaries which follow his injudicious leading. As a commentator, he may be said not so much to interpret the psalms as to rewrite them; the psalmists would indeed have been surprised at the injury often done to their own grand thoughts. I do not object on principle to rewriting the psalms, but I do object to the most elo-

quent sermon which forces the psalmists to say what is not even in germ contained in their words. I believe that some of our hymns may, in a high sense, be styled rewritten psalms, and I wish far more of them could receive this glorious eulogium. When will our poets take up the harp once swept by the hand of David? Sometimes, I know, they have done so. I cannot make my own the sad complaint of one whom I have ventured to call "almost a psalmist," and who is, as I think, unjust to some of our noblest strains of sacred poetry.

"I read again that wondrous song,
So strongly sweet, and sweetly strong,
That ancient poem, whose music shivers
With a chime of rolling rivers
Through the forest of the psalms.

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'And why,' I thought, 'must she be still,
The Muse, that with her hallowed fire
Those chosen shepherds did inspire
Of Bethlehem and of Horeb's hill?

* * * * *

In Christ's own Church must she rest now,
Fair, angel-fair, but frozen, like
A marble maid, whose death-white fingers
Enclasp a harp, o'er which she lingers
Stone-silent, but may never strike?'¹

No doubt our sacred canticles are a very wilderness; but amidst the tangled growths could we not find fifty worthy companions of the 150 songs of Zion—rewritten, glorified Christian psalms, as full of genuine, wholesome, human feeling, and of many-toned, radiant poetry, and of essential religious truth as the psalms of Israel?²

Meantime let both preachers and hymnists beware of

¹ Alexander: *Poems*, p. 67 ("Super Flumine").

² Bishop Alexander's estimate of the Hebrew psalms I can accept with but little deduction, but I do think his depreciation of Christian hymns is excessive. Much fairer and more historical is the view of hymnology taken by the writer of an interesting article in the *London Quarterly Review*, April, 1888.

rewriting the psalms in a wrong sense, and let all of us reverence Him who inspired the psalmists by studying the message which He gave through them to the men of their times. By sheer spiritual insight, St. Augustine caught a part of this message, but he left much behind. Another part was recovered in the age of the Reformation; and we cannot doubt that still more will yet be found, now that God has begun to revive our zeal for the study of the Scriptures. I have no leisure now to study the fourth psalm as a whole, and to show how, in his preoccupation with Christian doctrines, St. Augustine overlooks some obviously correct meanings as full of edification as they could be. I will merely dwell in conclusion on the sixth verse, which needs no rewriting to convey a special message to men of our own time.

I suppose it is true that, both from within and from without, the Church and the English nation are beset by threatening dangers. Yet we, like the psalmist, ought to refuse to be afraid, remembering that the story both of England and of the Church is full of Divine lovingkindness.

“ See what marvellous lovingkindness Jehovah hath shown me ;

Jehovah heareth when I call unto him.”

This is what ought to be the language of every true Christian and every true Englishman. There are no doubt only too many in our land who cannot join in this expression of gratitude and confidence. How gloomy appears the prospect both for our nation and for mankind to some of our purest-minded writers! How earnest, but how sad they are! “ Who will give us a glimpse of good fortune ? ” they say ; and what they mean is, “ Durable good fortune will never be ours.” We have no more illusions left, the world is growing old, our nation has seen its best days, and must yield at last to the universal law of death.

I do not say that the psalmist meant all this. His hori-

zon and that of his companions was too narrow. Israel had not yet engaged in commerce, and still courted isolation. The good fortune which the speakers long for, but dare not hope to see, is the peaceful enjoyment of their fields and vineyards, and abundant harvests and vintages. These blessings being for the present denied them, they consider that God is displeased with them, although, as they think, there has been no failure in their performance of their duty towards Him. This insisting upon a material reward of obedience to God's law is the weak side of the old Jewish religion. It was a pathetic illusion of some of the best men that piety ought to lead to earthly prosperity; we studied one remarkable instance of it last month in the thirty-second psalm. But this fourth psalm was written by a man who had surmounted this common error; he knows better himself than to insist on temporal blessings when he has that within his reach which is better than life itself. "Jehovah, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us." This might mean, "Thou alone, O God, canst restore prosperity to us." But it really means more than this. For the psalmist continues,

"Thou hast put gladness in my heart

More than they have when their corn and their wine are increased."

He does not mind passing through the "vale of misery," for he knows how to make it full of fountains. Every true pilgrim has a staff of Moses to draw living water from the rock. He will not indeed see God's face in perfection till he wakes up (according to the sublime figure of another psalmist) from the sleep of life.¹ But a reflexion of Divine glory accompanies him through life, as the pillar of cloud and fire accompanied the Israelites in the desert. A prose-

¹ Ps. xvii. 15, assuming my own interpretation to be correct; viz. that "when I awake" = "when life's short day is past." Comp. the last line in Blanco White's famous sonnet, "If light can thus deceive, wherefore not life?"

poet has said of the glow of sunset, "O my friends, are not these the gates of glory, wide open for departed spirits, that they may sail in on wings into the heart of eternal life?"¹

I would rather apply the same figure to the daily experience of the Christian, and say that just as the light of the setting sun bathes even the meanest houses on the other side of yon river in a stream of glory, so this spiritual light elevates and enriches the inner consciousness of the poorest and least prosperous of Christ's disciples. It is not to the other world alone that those beautiful words of Psalm xxxvi. refer :

"For with Thee is the fountain of life ;
In Thy light do we see light."

Nor is it only of the new heavens and the new earth that the oracle was spoken, "Behold, I make all things new." Yes ; the sun of the love of Jesus which makes all things new to those who love Him.

"Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us."

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THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST.

(HEB. vi. 1, 2.)

THIS passage undoubtedly bristles with difficulties. Take up any commentary, and you will soon find how various and conflicting are the views that have been taken of its meaning. Close the book and meditate upon the solution which the writer himself prefers, and we shall be surprised

¹ The Ettrick Shepherd in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. But how much finer is the expressive Scottish!