

PSALM LXIX.

PSALM lxix. is usually described as an imprecatory psalm. Most people know that it contains denunciations of enemies, and they are apparently content to know no more. The Psalmist is to them simply one who deals with *all words that may do hurt*. Yet while the Psalm consists of thirty-six verses, only seven of these are imprecatory, and the seven do not form the kernel of it. A broader description of the poem is necessary. If the reading of it which I am about to offer is correct, we may call it *a page from the inner history of a strong man at the crisis of one of his severest struggles*.

It is true that there are difficulties to be met. Psalm lxix. contains a great deal of language which is metaphorical,¹ so that it is hard to say precisely to what circumstances it refers, and yet the outline of a story may be traced with some confidence by the attentive reader.

We seem to see in this Psalm a leader of men in the midst of a great religious and patriotic task overcome for the moment by the contemplation of the failure of expected support on the one hand and of the rise of unexpected opposition on the other. He turns to his God, and the appeal almost of despair ends in the triumphant song of faith. It is, indeed, just such a psalm as Nehemiah might have written, if that strong man (like other strong men) had his times of depression.

Nehemiah was a member of the Persian Court and Cup-bearer to the King. For all we know to the contrary he and his fathers, back to the fifth or sixth generation, had never been in Palestine. He was in all probability the descendant of one who had been carried into captivity by Nebuchadrezzar some 150 years before. He had good reason to remain in Susa and enjoy the Persian king's favour,

¹ E.g. v. 21 is the metaphorical rendering of v. 20.

but he heard that his brethren in Judah were *in great affliction and reproach* (Neh. i. 3), and he was moved by religion and patriotism to take the far journey to Jerusalem to do what he could for his people.

His informant had not exaggerated the case. The walls of Jerusalem were full of breaches, the gates were destroyed, heaps of ruins obstructed the passage round the city. Nehemiah verified all this by his own observation, and then called the people together, told them that he came with the king's permission, and summoned them to action: *Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.*

At once opposition was aroused. The Ammonites, and Arabs, and Samaritans, neighbours who had encroached on the territory of Judah during the exile, did not wish to see the Jews once more united into a people with a walled city as their capital and rallying-place (Neh. ii. 19; iv. 1, 2). They assailed the builders with mockery and charged them with treason against the Persian government. Such words were certainly not without effect, for the Jews were few and weak, and the suggestion that the work was too great for them was too near the truth not to be dangerous. Some of the leaders stood aloof (Neh. iii. 5). But there was one heroic spirit which would not shrink. Nehemiah was in a new country, amid strange surroundings, far away from home and Court. But while his enemies threatened, he acted. Dividing the Jews into some forty working parties, he laboured to repair many of the breaches in the wall of Jerusalem at once. He sent his own servants to the work, and pressed on the building at every point. But while he laboured for the common good, he would not, though a king's deputy, exact from his fellow-countrymen any tax in money or kind for his own support. His table was well furnished and open, but the cost was his own (*ibid.* v. 14-18).

Work done in such a spirit told, but its very success raised fresh difficulties. When half the wall had been repaired, Samaritan and Arab and Ammonite were seized with jealous fury at the sight of that which had been achieved (*ibid.* iv. 7, 8). Vague threats were succeeded by plans of violence. The hearts of the Jews began to fail them, and they made the heaviness of the work an excuse for their fears: *The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall (ibid. v. 10)*. For a moment it looked as if the mockery and threats of the Samaritans would prevail; it seemed as if the feeble strength of the reviving Jewish people would collapse at the sight of so much ill-will. Even a nation does not live by bread alone; the moral support and the moral hostility of its fellows touch its very life.

Nehemiah knew that the crisis had come, and he met it with prayer and with work. His prayer is recorded; it reminds us not a little of a well-known passage of the Psalm we are considering: *Hear us; O our God, for we are despised, and turn back their reproach upon their own head, . . . and cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before Thee (ibid. vv. 4, 5; compare Ps. lxi. 20, 27, 28)*.

Notice that these are not mere words of imprecation. They are the prayer of a worker who asks for two things: first, that his work may be saved from hindrance through the recoil of the efforts of the enemy upon themselves; and, secondly, that these efforts may not go unpunished by God. There is no idle cursing nor wanton malice here; in its essence it is a prayer for help in time of need.

But with Nehemiah work followed hard on prayer. He felt, in spite of all difficulties, that the present was an *acceptable time* (Ps. lxi. 13). God had not brought him to Jerusalem in safety from distant Susa for nothing. In the face of fresh difficulties he reorganized his forces

Instead of continuing to send all his servants to help in the work of building, he now kept back half of them fully armed to form the nucleus of a defending force (Neh. iv. 16). Then he placed arms in readiness for his builders ¹ (*ibid.* v. 13), assigned to each of their chiefs his place, and set a watch. The courage of the people revived when they found that they had a real leader, so that Nehemiah could presently say, *We returned all of us to the wall, every man to his work.* The crisis for the nation at large was past. One resolute man had triumphed over the ill-will of the Samaritans, the fears of the Jews, and the disaffection of some Jewish nobles.

But the Samaritans now began to attack Nehemiah himself. They professed to believe that the building of the walls of Jerusalem would be misinterpreted at the Persian Court, and that the builder was exposing himself to the danger of a charge of treason. Accordingly they invited Nehemiah to meet them in conference outside the city (*ibid.* vi. 1-7). He answered in the memorable words: *I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.* Then they prompted some of their confederates in Jerusalem to tell the governor that he stood in danger of assassination, and to suggest to him that he should take refuge for a while in the temple. Again he answered in the simple words of true greatness: *Should such a man as I flee? and who is there who being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in* (*ibid.* vi. 11). This one man never flinched, and so in fifty-two crowded days of faith and fear, of prayer and work, the great task was finished, and Jerusalem stood up once more a walled city with gates and bars! Even the enemy *perceived* (as Nehemiah says) *that this work was wrought of our God* (*ibid.* v. 16).

Such is the outward history of an episode I dare to call great, though it belongs to a little people. Was its inner

¹ In addition to this each man carried some weapon (Neh. iv. 17, 18).

history ever written, in the Psalter, for instance, which is full of inner histories? And would not that inner history, if it could be discovered, tell of deeper fears and of a severer mental struggle in the hero of the story than the public record of the book of Nehemiah gives us? No positive answer can ever be given to these questions, but a comparison of Psalm lxix. with the account of Nehemiah's work suggests with very great force that this Psalm is the record of the Jewish governor's hopes and fears as he poured them out before God while the issue was yet undecided. Let us see how the leading passages answer to this suggestion.

The Psalmist begins his prayer in deep depression of spirit, and yet (as the closing verses show) his heart was stout enough at the core. Men as strong as Nehemiah have their times of doubt, almost of despair. The Psalmist complains that the ground has given way beneath his feet, the waters threaten to overwhelm him (v. 2). Such language is not at all unsuitable in the mouth of the man who had left the sunshine of a court to face and to share the lot of a small and oppressed people. But though he has made a great sacrifice, he is assailed with calumny in the new land, his motives are misrepresented, he is obliged to protest: *I paid them the things that I never took* (v. 4 P.-B. Vers.). Here surely speaks the king's deputy, who would not levy any tax for himself, and yet kept open table for his people (Neh. v. 14-18). Again, we see that the Psalmist feels, as Nehemiah felt, that all rested on his shoulders, the cause of the people of God was in his hand: *Let not those that wait on thee* (so he prays) *be ashamed through me, O Lord* (v. 6). Still more telling is the fact that the source of all the trouble is the same in both cases. The Psalmist's cry, *The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up, and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me* (v. 9), is the very motto of Nehemiah's

career, for zeal on behalf of Jerusalem was in its essence zeal for the house of God. The holy city and the Holy House were one.¹

The parallels do not cease here; they are to be found throughout the Psalm. When the Psalmist complains that the elders *who sit in the gate speak against him* (v. 12), we are reminded of the fact that Nehemiah's adversaries were drawn in part from the leaders of his own people. We pass on to the next verse, and at once we meet a phrase which breathes the very spirit, the indomitable spirit, of the king's cupbearer from Susa: *My prayer is unto thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time*. How was the time *acceptable*? Everything seemed to be against the Psalmist! Yes, but to the penetrating glance of faith the *acceptable time* is not the smooth time (which either does not come at all or else does not stay!), but the time at which fresh effort can avail to turn the doubtful event to victory. To Nehemiah, conscious of a Divine guidance watching over him from the court of Susa to the ruined walls of Jerusalem, the crisis at which the enemy put forth his fullest resistance was God's *acceptable time*—was indeed the hour of victory for those who were not afraid to work for God.

Lastly, it may be said that the hopes of the writer of the Psalm were precisely those of Nehemiah: *God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah* (v. 35).

Turning back now to the Psalmist's imprecations against the enemy, we see them in their true context and in their due proportion. We compare them with Nehemiah's own prayer against the Samaritans and their allies recorded in the book of Nehemiah (iv. 4, 5). The foes are not private ones, but public; the imprecations are not the expression of an idle hatred, but a prayer that a dangerous national enemy may be punished and reduced to impotency.

Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written

¹ The *Holy House* is an Arabic name for Jerusalem.

for our learning (Rom. xv. 4)—St. Paul did *not* say, *For our imitation*. Psalm lxix. is not a model prayer for Christian men, but Christian men may learn a good deal from it, if they will. Let those who feel how deeply portions of this Psalm fall below the level of Christian Charity and Christian Placability see to it that on a like occasion they do not themselves fall, either in word or thought or deed, equally far below it! And while they blame the old Hebrew's bitterness, let them recognize and imitate his resolution and his faith. The Psalm writer, be he Nehemiah or another, is a light, a broken light of God, and those who have seen it are responsible to the Source of all light to act in accordance with the vision which has been shown them.

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