

God's is the only absolute perfection; man's is relative, contained in the high destiny which bids him ever struggle towards the Infinite which he yet can never reach. There is no perfection so incomplete as the one which admits of no increase; *that* is the perfection of death, not of life.—  
A. M. FAIRBAIRN.

It is easily conceivable why this perfection is unattainable in this life. Faultlessness is conceivable, being merely the negative of evil. But perfection is positive, the attainment of all conceivable excellence. It is long as eternity—expansive as God. Perfection is our mark: yet never will the aim be so true and steady as to strike the golden centre. Perfection of character, yet even to the dying hour it will be but this, "I count not myself to have apprehended."—  
F. W. ROBERTSON.

### At Best.

THE faithful helm commands the keel,  
From port to port fair breezes blow;  
But the ship must sail the convex sea,  
Nor may she straighter go.

So, man to man: in fair accord,  
On thought and will, the winds may wait;  
But the world will bend the passing word,  
Though its shortest course be straight.

From soul to soul the shortest line  
At best will bended be:  
The ship that holds the straightest course  
Still sails the convex sea.

## The International Lessons.

Psalm i.

### THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS.

1. "In the counsel of the ungodly" (ver. 1), or, after the counsel, the plans, of the godless and unstable. The word "ungodly" is literally restless.

2. "The law of the Lord" (ver. 2). Not the law of Moses only. The word was used to include all religious instruction.

3. "The judgment" (ver. 5). Not the final judgment merely, every act of judgment on God's part, and even the judgment of men, which in the long run will not be on the wrong side.

It is never easy, it is often quite impossible to explain a song. Songs are written to be sung. Laboriously to explain their meaning is like breaking up your violin to find the source of the music in it. But the Psalms are the songs of another race and another time than ours. Perhaps we may be able to translate them into the speech of our children without crushing the music out of them.

The first Psalm is quite a children's hymn. Its theme is this: The good man is happy, and the bad man is unhappy. It is the earliest lesson in religion that children learn. In later life they will often come to doubt if it is true. And there are Psalms in this book which wrestle earnestly with that doubt, especially the 37th and 73rd. But it is true, always true, true here, and true hereafter.

The Psalm is divided easily into two parts of three verses each.

I. The Happiness of the Good Man. The first two verses tell us how we may know him—verse 1 telling us what he is not, and verse 2 what he is. Then the third verse tells us how his happiness shows itself.

(1) He is not ungodly, nor a sinner, nor a scorner. These are three stages in evil. If a man begins by being careless and godless, he will go on to worse things, open sin, and at last blasphemous scoffing.

(2) His delight is in the law of the Lord. He loves God's Word, the Bible itself, and the things that are in the Bible. He loves to read them, to think over them, and to do them.

(3) Such a man is like a tree that is planted near a running water—green, fresh, flourishing. He brings forth fruit in his season—he does good when he has opportunity. His leaf does not wither—you see that he is happy, and that he grows happier the longer he lives. And all he does prospers; for "all things work together for good to them that love God."

### II. The Misery of the Wicked Man.

(1) He is like the chaff—empty, unsteady, blown about by every wind—blown away at last.

(2) He shall not stand in the day of judgment. Of course he shall not stand in the great judgment day. But, more than that, he shall not escape the judgment of men. And in the congregations of the righteous, wherever good people meet, he is out of place; if he ventures in he is detected and cast out.

(3) The last verse tells us how all this comes about. It is all God's doing. We may forget Him, but He knows us, watches over us, sees that the good prospers and the bad perishes. It is just Browning's—

"God's in His heaven,  
All's right with the world."

ILLUSTRATIONS:—Ver. 1. Blessed,—this is the first word of the Book of Psalms, and this is the key-note of all its songs. Here, as frontispiece, is set the picture of the

blessed man, and here is the beginning of the blessed life. The after history follows it through many changes, through troubled days and gracious deliverance, until at last it reaches the land where sorrow and sighing are fled away, and, day and night, praise fills the holy temple.—MARK GUY PEARSE.

Ver. 1. The girl at the machinery gets the tips of her hair or the hem of her skirt caught between the wheels, and she is smashed flat in five minutes! If you put your fingernail in between the cruel rollers, they will draw your whole self in by degrees. So, Christian men and women, unconditional abstinence from all appearance of evil is the only safety; or rather it is the needful hedge behind which the young plants of goodness may grow.—ALEX. M'LAREN.

Ver. 4. When the flail of affliction, O Lord, is upon me, let me not be as the chaff that flies in Thy face, but as the corn that lies at Thy feet.—PHILIP HENRY.

We are told, in one of the *Protestant Papers for the People*, that, at the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, Charles had bargained for the lives of some Huguenot domestics in his household, and amongst the rest for that of his faithful old nurse, Philippine Flipote. When the king fell into his last strange illness, it was whispered in Court, "If he opens his heart to take in true hope, it will be from the voice of old Philippine." And so it was. She spoke to him of "the blood that cleanseth from all sin, and speaketh better things than that of Abel"; and it was she who heard and treasured up his last words: "If the Lord Jesus will indeed receive me into the company of the blessed."

## Psalm ii.

### THE KING IN ZION.

1. "The kings of the earth set themselves" (ver. 2). It is a graphic picture of a council of men. The kings are seated together in divan, plotting and planning.

2. "Against the Lord and against His anointed" (ver. 2). No one would openly plot against the Lord; but to plot against a good man is plotting against the Lord, and chiefly against the Lord: so the Lord is mentioned first.

3. "Bands . . . cords" (ver. 3). The bands bind the yoke to the neck of the oxen, the cords serve to control them.

4. "Vex them" (ver. 5)—torment them, paralyse their efforts.

5. "This day" (ver. 7) is the day when he was anointed king.

6. "Kiss the Son" (ver. 12). The translation is very difficult, and will always be doubtful. Another rendering is "follow instruction."

THE second Psalm is as easily divided as the first. It is divided into four parts of three verses each.

I. The Poet speaks. He describes a great uprising of heathen nations against the Lord and His anointed king. Who is this king? Perhaps David, perhaps Solomon at the first. But God's king is the good man wherever he is found. And the nations who rise against him are evil men, who are ever ready to snarl and bite at a man who is more

godly than themselves. And Jesus Christ is the King above all, at whom they cried, "Crucify Him, crucify Him."

II. The Lord speaks. His words are few but weighty. He says, "Yet I have set My King upon My holy hill of Zion." The emphatic words are *My*. He who is on the Lord's side is on the side of the big battalions, of which Napoleon used to speak. But before these few words we have a picture of the attitude of the Lord in heaven towards the rebels. He laughs at and derides them—it is so vain to seek to fight against God. Yet they persist, and then He speaks to them in His wrath, and torments them in His great anger. This speaking and tormenting are enough. His King is safe upon Zion.

III. The King speaks. He tells the rebels and all men by what right he is King: the Lord has decreed it. And then He quotes the words of the decree: "The Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son." Could any king rule by a diviner right than that? And Jesus Christ is the King. The words at Christ's baptism, and again at the transfiguration are a commentary on this: "This is My beloved Son."

He is the Lord's Son, and so all the kingdoms of the earth are His; the heathen His inheritance, the uttermost parts of the earth His possession. It is a missionary hymn, for it proves the right we have to claim the world for Christ. And it adds the certainty that it will be His. "Thou wilt break them," that is, all who oppose, "with a rod of iron."

IV. The Poet speaks again. He has shown how vain it is to fight against God, he now gives tender and good counsel. Be wise, he says, be instructed; serve the Lord with fear, rejoice with trembling. No other position is proper but that of a servant, yet the servant of the Lord has much gladness, though it is gladness chastened with fear. "Blessed," he says at the last, "are all they that put their trust in Him." That is the secret of the joy that drives away slavish fear, for perfect love casteth out fear.

ILLUSTRATIONS:—Ver. 2. The manly motto of the Keiths, Earls Marischal of Scotland, of "They say: what say they? let them say," too often gives place in these days to "They say: oh, do they say so? Then we shall, or we shan't do it." We follow the multitude to do evil, and bend our knees to tyrant custom. Few of us dare to be different from others, for our aim is respectability rather than goodness. When others are crying, "Not this man, but Barabbas," we join in the cry in order that we may not appear "queer," or singular.

Ver. 4. A man in New York said he would be the richest man in the city. He left his honest work of chair-making, and got into the city councils some way, and in ten years stole 15,000,000 dollars from the city government. He held the Legislature of the State of New York in the grip of his

right hand. Suspicions were aroused. The Grand Jury presented indictments. The whole land stood aghast. The man who expected to put half the city in his vest pocket goes to Blackwell's Island, and then to Ludlow Street Gaol, where he died. Why? "He that sitteth in the heavens" laughed.  
—T. DE WITT TALMAGE.

Ver. 12. Mr. Spurgeon relates that he deemed it a strange thing when he saw on a country weather-cock the motto, "God is love"; and he asked his friend if he meant to imply that the Divine Love can be fickle as the wind. "No," said he, "this is what I mean—*whichever* way the wind blows, God is Love: through the cold north wind, the biting east wind—still God is love, as much as when the warm, genial breezes refresh our fields and flocks.

### Psalm xix.

#### GOD'S WORKS AND WORDS.

1. "The firmament," or the expanse; the great roof, as it were, that stretches over our heads. Of course the teacher will point out the parallel structure of these poems—how the two lines always go together, the second repeating the thought of the first and carrying it on.

2. "Day unto day uttereth speech" (ver. 2). One day shows the glory of God, and passes the story on to the next.

3. "There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard" (ver. 3). It is better to omit the word "where." Then the meaning is that day and night utter God's praise in silence; no voice, no language have they, yet they tell of the glory of God.

4. "Their line" (ver. 4) is their measuring-line. Wherever day and night are known they measure or mark out that region as their own, in which to declare God's greatness.

5. "The fear of the Lord is clean" (ver. 9). This is another title for the Law. It plants the fear of God within us. And "clean" means pure, the opposite of immoral or impure.

THERE is so complete a change of subject and of style at the seventh verse of this Psalm that many expositors believe that the second half is a separate Psalm. But, striking as the division is, the two parts fit well together. In the first part (vers. 1-6) the poet describes the glory of God in nature; in the second (vers. 7-11) he magnifies the law of God, and makes it honourable. Now the law of God is not thought of as a thing by itself, but in its relation to us. "The law of the Lord is perfect, *converting the soul.*" It is the means whereby I may become "a new creature." Thus we have in this Psalm the two "creations" which sum up the whole teaching of the Bible—the first creation through Christ, and the second, the new creation, *in* Christ Jesus. Hence the Psalmist most appropriately ends with a short prayer to be kept from hidden sin (vers. 12-14). These are the three parts of the Psalm—

I. The Glory of God in the First Creation. "When I look up into the heavens," says the writer of the 8th Psalm. So the Psalmist does

now. But it is not the littleness of men he thinks of; it is the greatness of God, of the God who made and preserves them all. It is the first and most natural thought. And it is the sun in its mid-day power that most fully displays God's glory. Yet he never thinks of worshipping the sun as if it were its own maker, far less also his maker and preserver.

II. The Glory of God in the Second Creation. The sun is proof of the great glory of God. But there is a better proof than even the mid-day sun in its splendour. It is the law of God. It is the power of the truth of God; what we call His moral greatness expressed in His commandments, and in His mighty working within our hearts. It is the law, not in itself, but in its effects, that wakes the Psalmist's wonder. How full his thoughts are; how rich his expression of them! Let the various epithets be gathered together in this way—

The Law . . . . is perfect . . . converting the soul.  
The Testimony . . is sure . . . making wise the simple.

The last thought is the great reward that falls to him who keeps them. And immediately that suggests the need of strength and help, and so he ends with prayer.

III. The concluding Prayer. The Psalmist sees two rocks ahead; two kinds of sin are in his way—hidden faults and open presumptuous transgressions. He prays to be kept from both.

ILLUSTRATIONS:—Ver. 1. A man may learn infidelity from books and from men, but never from nature.—*Uncle Ezek's Wisdom.*

Ver. 1. Man so often calls for *preachers*—ought he not much rather to desire a proper *ear* for hearing them? for, in truth, we are surrounded with preachers wherever we turn our eyes. There are preachers in the firmament above, preachers in the earth below, preachers within us and preachers without. What a sermon it is which the firmament of heaven alone preaches to us—the sky, whether azure and serene or overcast with stormy clouds! The heaven, with its marvels, declares the glory of God by the magnificence of day as well as by the magnificence of night.—THOLUCK.

Ver. 7. A worker in connection with the London Missionary Society, at the foot of the Himalayas, tells of converts "terribly in earnest"—not rich or intellectual, but steadfast in their adherence to the Saviour. Long before the sun rose they were on one occasion found praying and reading the Bible. They were warned that poverty and persecution might await them, but their answer was: "We put our trust in God; we want to know more of Him." One of them, a cartwright, had vowed money to the district deity if his wife recovered from illness; but she was long an invalid, and during that time he had benefited by Christian teaching. On her recovery he used the money to erect a school-shed for the mission—the earnest of a more finished structure, as the power of redeeming love breaks down opposition and proves increasingly mighty.

Dr. Moffat told of a tribe he once visited where the power of Christ's love was strikingly evidenced. He was told that losses of property or friends never moved the stern hearts of these men; but when he spoke to them of Jesus the sternness was melted, and the men shed penitent tears as by faith they gazed on Calvary. Unto Him hearts that seemed the coldest have bowed in allegiance.

## Psalm xxiii.

## THE LORD MY SHEPHERD.

1. "The still waters" (ver. 2). The Hebrew is "waters of rest," so that it is not a description of the waters themselves, but of the rest and refreshment which the cooling waters give to the thirsty sheep.

2. "He restoreth my soul" (ver. 3). He refreshes or renews my life.

3. "The valley of the shadow of death" (ver. 4). We can scarcely disturb this meaning so bound with the most sacred associations. Yet the sense may be no more than the valley of deep gloom, or deep darkness as the Revised Version has it in the margin. In Palestine the sheep have often to pass, on their way to new pastures, through deep gleans where wild beasts abound.

4. "Thy rod and Thy staff" (ver. 4). The shepherd's crook; it is a club to defend and a staff to guide.

5. "Thou anointest my head with oil" (ver. 5). It is the customary act of the host to his invited and welcome guest. It is the oil of gladness.

THE more lyrical, that is to say, the more truly poetical, a song is, the less will it stand dissection and explanation. Having pointed out the right translation, what remains for us but to make the children read and learn the beauty and the rest of this 23rd Psalm? It is a song of the ways of a gentle shepherd, who in the last two verses becomes a king. First he tends his sheep, and then most royally and publicly entertains his guest. And the shepherd? "I am the good Shepherd"—there is no answer so simple as that, none so true and appropriate. What does he do for the sheep? He provides food—"I shall not want"; and drink—"beside the still waters"; rest—"he maketh me to lie down"; guidance—"he leadeth me"; and protection—"thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." But there is one thing more. It is not mentioned here. "The Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep."

Then the figure changes. He is a king, and I am his guest, and he prepares a banquet for me in public, so that my adversaries see it. He makes

a home for me; the king's palace is my home. "That where I am there ye may be also," said the Shepherd-King. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

ILLUSTRATIONS:—Marion Harvey, a servant girl, twenty years of age, was executed at Edinburgh in 1681 for assisting in the escape of a Cameronian preacher. When annoyed on her way to the scaffold, she said, "Come, Isabel, let us sing the 23rd Psalm," which they did; and having come to the scaffold, she said, "I am come here to-day for avowing Christ to be Head of His Church, and King of Zion. Oh, seek Him, sirs, seek Him, and ye shall find Him!"

Ver. 2. Old Betty, a devoted servant of the Lord, who had been very active in deeds of love and charity, was at last brought to a bed of rheumatic pain, where she lay for months suffering and helpless. When asked if the change was not hard to bear, she replied, "No, indeed. When I was well, I used to hear the Lord say, day after day, 'Betty, go here; Betty, go there. Betty do this; Betty, do that.' I used to do it as well as I could. Now, I hear Him say every day, 'Betty, lie still and cough.'" Ah! here was a trusting sheep, ready to go where the Shepherd would lead, ready to do His bidding.

Ver. 2. I was leaning over a gate one day watching the flock as they rested in the green pastures. "When do your sheep lie down, shepherd?" said I. "Well," said he, "I don't know; I suppose it is *when they have had enough*."

Only the Lord can give His sheep that. Presently there came the master of the flock. "When do your sheep lie down?" I asked. "Only when they are very comfortable," said he.

Only the Lord can make His sheep lie down. And this is the first thing. He maketh me to lie down, and *then* He leadeth me.—M. G. PEARSE.

Ver. 3. An old farmer was asked to ride one of the horses of a merry-go-round. "No, thankee," said he; "when I rides, I wants to be a-join' somewhar." Led by Him, we shall not move in a monotonous circle, but we shall be going somewhere; and that somewhere is heaven, to be forever in the eternal fold, under the tender care of the Good Shepherd.

Ver. 4. When Dr. Duff, the Indian missionary, was travelling in the Himalayas, he saw a native shepherd followed by his flock. The man frequently looked back, and if he saw a sheep drawing too near the edge of the precipice he would go back and apply his crook to one of the hind legs, and gently pull it back till the animal joined the rest. Going up to the shepherd he noticed that he had a long rod, as tall as himself, and, twisted round the lower half, a thick bar of iron. With his long rod the shepherd could strike any dangerous animal such a blow as would make it flee. The staff refers to God's hold of the sheep, and the rod to His defence against enemies.