

The Re-discovery of the Psalms.

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II.

What they tell us.

THE road or street we have to walk along, perhaps every day of the year, becomes so familiar to us that we cease to observe its points of interest. But one day we have an experience that opens our eyes. We go forth under the stress of a great emotion, some overpowering joy or sorrow, and features that under ordinary circumstances we pass by unnoticed suddenly and, as we recall later, startlingly impress us. The Book of Psalms may be compared to an old and familiar road. It has been trodden by the feet of the saints, and we, less worthy, have followed in the worn and hallowed tracks. But familiar habit has often blinded our eyes to the beauties of the way, and we have passed them by unheeded. It is not so to-day. Our minds are obsessed by one absorbing topic which, while it has caused much of what has ordinarily interested us to be blotted out, has given us a new vision of some great outstanding truths.

I.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

A very prominent idea in the Psalms which the war has invested with tremendous significance is that of THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD. 'The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.' 'The Lord reigneth, let the people tremble.' God's providence is manifest in nature. 'The heavens declare the glory of God,' and the 'earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof.' His sovereignty is manifest in history. All events are ordered by Him, and He is supreme over all. The 46th Psalm, along with the 47th and the 48th, may be taken as representative of a large class in proclaiming this idea. 'God is our refuge and our strength.' 'He is king over all the earth.' 'He will be our guide even unto death.' Hence God's enemies, the enemies of God's people, will be scattered. There is never any doubt in the Psalmist's mind as to the triumph of right. God is on the side of right, and on the side of those that obey Him. He is their 'Sun and Shield,' and always 'at their right hand.' Nor is His merely local or temporary triumph. All

nations must acknowledge Jehovah. None can stand against Him, and one day His will shall prevail over all for ever. In the moments of despondency to which one is sometimes tempted when, to our weak faith, God seems indifferent, and His presence and power and willingness to help are too feebly realized by us, the unfaltering optimism of the Psalms is a bracing tonic. 'O bless our God, ye people. Which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved.' Even in the so-called Imprecatory Psalms, where we find a vindictive hatred of the enemies of Israel that we feel to be directly contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, it is the sovereignty of God that is the underlying thought. We recall the rude and violent character of the age in which these utterances were spoken, and we can eliminate their barbaric and unchristian spirit. We see that what they really stand for is a passionate and uncompromising zeal for God and for God's righteousness, and a correspondingly measureless hatred of wrong and oppression. During the Indian Mutiny the 79th Psalm was felt to be an almost literal interpretation of the appalled and outraged public sentiment of the time. There is much in the mere language of the Imprecatory Psalms that we feel it is impossible to use to-day. But we can appreciate still the white heat of indignation and loathing when we recoil with horror from the 'frightfulness' of a ruthless and unscrupulous enemy. 'Fill their faces with shame that they may seek Thy name, O Lord, that men may know that Thou, whose name alone is Jehovah, art the most high over all the earth.'

II.

THE SENSE OF THE CROSS.

The Psalms are appealing very strongly to us just now because they have so manifestly THE SENSE OF THE CROSS. Many have told us recently that in France and Flanders where the fighting has been severe, and even the churches have been reduced to ruins, the image of the Cross

has invariably remained intact, standing solitary and arresting amidst the surrounding desolation. The fact is wonderfully suggestive of the place which the Cross holds in the eye of the world to-day. In the untold suffering of thousands of stricken hearts, and in the magnificent self-sacrifice of our soldiers, we have learnt anew that

All through life we see a Cross,
Where sons of God yield up their breath;
There is no gain except by loss,
There is no life except through death.

And we are realizing, in consequence, a new fullness and richness of meaning in the Cross of Jesus, as not merely the unique event it is in history, but as the supreme example of the great law of the higher life. Of course, we do not find this idea consciously present in the Psalms in the fuller light in which we now see it. There is a hint of it, perhaps, in the classic expression of the law of sacrifice in the 40th Psalm, quoted by the writer to 'the Hebrews as realized in 'the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.' Our Lord, too, when He hung upon the Cross, repeated the opening words of the 22nd Psalm as if to claim the fulfilment in Himself of the idea of the 'righteous' sufferer. But the distinctive note in the Psalms in this connexion—and it is this that is giving them their present appeal—is *the continual record of suffering in them side by side with a continuous and unfaltering faith and hope.* These writers were great sufferers, sometimes, as we gather, because of their own sins or because of national sins, for they believed strongly in the close connexion between sin and suffering. But most frequently their sufferings were those of 'the righteous.' Though they had sinned, their fault was surely as nothing in comparison with that of the heathen who were oppressing them (Ps 59^{3, 4}). It was a real problem, and it is the way in which it was met that is so helpful to us. The suffering of the righteous is accepted in the spirit of sacrifice, the very spirit of the Cross. Following close upon the bitter cry of perplexity and anguish come the indomitable and triumphant expressions of unshaken faith in God. 'Be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.'

III.

THE CONDITIONS OF TRUE PEACE.

As we read the Psalms to-day we seem to find a new emphasis upon what they tell us of THE

CONDITIONS OF TRUE PEACE. Times of calamity are times of heart-searching. 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' We feel we have a clear conscience in regard to the initiation of the great war. Yet as a people and as individuals do we not need chastening and cleansing? Are there not crying evils amongst us that we have tolerated too long? Have there not been disquieting symptoms in our national life even during the course of the war that may well lead us to ask, Are we worth fighting for? Do we deserve to win? Are we able, when the time comes, to bring in the 'new world' which we hope is to 'redress the balance of the old'? Amidst this wholesome chastening of spirit the great Penitential Psalms and other similar utterances throughout the Psalter bring us a message that is always needed. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? . . . He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' 'The meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.' In the 106th Psalm the sacred writer reviews the long history of his people, and finds the source of all their troubles of the past in forgetfulness of God and in rebellion against His law. In the 1st Psalm, on the contrary, as if to strike a note that shall vibrate through the whole book, we are given the secret of a happy and prosperous life. 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly . . . but his delight is in the law of the Lord. . . . For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.' The war, with all that it is teaching us, is making such words ring true in our hearts with an insistence that will not be put by. Every competent observer of the times is telling us that we stand at the parting of the ways as to what henceforth shall be the ideals which shall shape and control the destinies of the future. It will be well with us and with those who come after us to the extent that we follow this teaching of the Psalms. A humble penitence, an utter dependence upon God, a simple obedience to Him and to His law of righteousness are the imperative conditions of a true and lasting peace.