

The Power of Praise.¹

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'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.'—
Ps. cl. 6.

THE Book of Psalms has been spoken of as a mirror in which all feelings of the human heart find their reflexion. 'All griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, and anxieties' find their portraiture in one part or another of it. It is a book made up of the compositions of men who felt and realized the various aspects and sides of life, who were sometimes bowed to the ground by its distresses and miseries, sometimes awed by its majesty, sometimes lifted up by its brilliancy and splendour, sometimes puzzled and confounded by its problems, sometimes dismayed by its transitoriness and apparent vanity, sometimes nerved and encouraged and comforted by the hopes and anticipations and prophecies which seem to lie embedded in it. Life as it is, life as we hope it will become, the life of the body, the life of the soul, life as the poor man knows it, life as the king knows it, life as it presents itself to the sufferer, life as it is welcomed by the successful, life overshadowed by trouble, life radiant with happiness, life in the humiliating hour of defeat, life in the glorious hour of victory, life chilled by doubt, life warmed by faith, life in its simplicity, life with all its entanglements and perplexities—this and nothing less than this is the theme of this wonderful collection of sacred verse. It is catholic in its comprehensiveness, catholic in the width and range and sweep of its appeal, catholic in its knowledge of human needs, catholic in its treatment of human life. It may safely be said that the religious spirit of man will never outgrow the Psalms. Coming though they do out of a distant and remote past, lost beyond discovery though the origin of many of them undoubtedly is, they still hold a unique place in the literature of daily Christian life. Whatever the blemishes and imperfections of the Psalter,—and it undoubtedly has its blemishes and imperfections,—it is to a peculiar degree the handbook of the Christian worshipper.

From a volume in which so many feelings and

moods are represented, we ought not perhaps to select one characteristic and say that it is paramount. But the most superficial and careless reader of the Psalms can scarcely fail to be impressed with the place that the language of praise occupies in them. It is not only that the Psalter, as Jewish hands arranged it for us, culminates in a great and sustained outburst of praise: but throughout it the strain of praise is never long absent. It does not come here and there, but continually. It is not like an occasional patch of colour introduced at rare intervals, but rather like a gorgeous thread running through almost the whole texture, broken off in places, it is true, but soon to be resumed and carried on in all its old richness and beauty, and impressive splendour. Again and again do the hearts of the Psalmists go out in gratitude and thanksgiving to the 'giver of all good gifts.' Again and again do we find the stream of praise forcing its way, like some mighty river, over the obstacles which would seem to bar its progress and to forbid its advance. Again and again are we made to realize the passionate faith which the writers had, not only in the power and greatness of God, but also in His goodness, in His beneficence, in His watchfulness over men, in His wise direction of human affairs, in His bountiful forethought, in His measureless love. Again and again we see how strong, how stable, how irrefragable is their belief that above all the waves of sorrow, above all the storms of injustice, is the Sun of undying righteousness, from Whom no evil or wrong is hidden, who will assuredly in the end clear away all shadows and all clouds, who will at last make His undimmed light felt in every corner and cranny of the Universe. We find in the Psalms the power of patience, the power of sympathy, the power of endurance, the power of repentance, the power of prayer: but side by side with them—I had almost said overarching them—we find in all this wonderful intensity the power of praise.

The power of praise! That praise which men and women to-day so often lack. That power which at times is beaten out of us by the blows of adversity. That power which at certain moments it seems almost a mockery to remind men of.

¹ A sermon preached in St. Andrew's, Stoke Newington, London, on Wednesday evening, 6th October 1897 (being the Harvest Festival).

That power which comes to most of us at best by fits and starts, but which does not come to stay with us, which is an abiding guest in so few souls. Take this man. You speak to him of praise: and he guides you to an ill-furnished, unhealthy garret, and asks you, 'What praise is possible?' Or you speak to another, and he shows you stretched in death his favourite child or his beloved wife, and he also asks you, 'What praise is possible?' Or you speak to a third, and he tells you that he is the victim of incurable pain. Or to a fourth, and he lifts the veil of privacy and shows you the spectre of an awful disappointment; or to a fifth, and he shows you his life parched up by the fierce fever of modern existence; or to a sixth, and he points you to the signs of utter exhaustion which is condemning him, not out of middle life, to an early and tragic grave. And each one asks you, 'What praise is possible? What claim is there on me to be thankful?'

The power of praise! Here they are, these great multitudes which throng our streets. How they jostle on each other! how they trample on each other! They go past us in their thousands; some with the marks of sin upon them, some with the traces of disease upon them, some with the hand of starvation upon them, some with the curse of a parent's fall upon them, some worn out with drudgery, some ill with anxiety, some with tears upon their cheeks, some with sorrow in their hearts too deep for tears. They go past us, the maimed with the strong, the crippled with the active, the beggar with the millionaire, the woman who has all that money can give her with the woman who knows not where to turn for a meal, the child reared in the lap of luxury with the child brought up in dirt and squalor and misery, in the odour of the gin-shop, in the sight of vice. You speak to a man of the power of praise, and he shows you these crowds filing past you,—these crowds of suffering souls, this awful mixed mass of everyday humanity,—and he asks you whether the power of praise is not farther than any other from our reach, whether the gospel of praise is not the most impossible and incredible of all the messages which have ever sought entrance into the heart and conscience and mind of man?

The power of praise! As we say the words, there rise up before us the wrongs and injustices of life. 'The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.' The reward is not always

to the righteous. The punishment is not always to the guilty. There is such a thing as successful sin: there is such a thing as the triumph of wickedness. It is the injustice of life that gives it such pathos. We could bear better the spectacle of its sorrows, were it always true that sorrow was the penalty for wrong-doing. We could bear better the sight of pain, were pain always the recompense of revolt and disobedience and unfaithfulness and denial. We could bear better that there should be hunger and disease and want, were hunger and disease and want never the companions of what is upright and virtuous and deserving. We could bear better to see men and women trodden down, if they fell only before the consequences of their own misdeeds. But it is otherwise. This man suffers; but it is not because either he sinned or his parents. This other man sinned and sinned deeply, as did his father before him, but he is prosperous and surrounded with comfort. This woman is dying by inches in a workhouse: this other woman is untouched by pain or want. But the first may be one of God's saints: the second may be the type of all that is most cruel, and most vicious, and most covetous, and most worldly in the nature of women. Think of the horrors of the asylums. Is it always profligacy which is responsible for them? Think of the agonies of innocent children. Where is the guilt which called these miseries upon their heads? The power of praise! Is it right, is it allowable to speak of it? The duty of praise! Is it fair, is it reasonable to bid men remember it, and acknowledge it, and be true to it?

We read, however, the Psalms to very little advantage if we fancy that these riddles and perplexities, at which we have just glanced, are new; if we say to ourselves that they are more or less peculiar to our modern days; that they did not, could not, come to those of old time, to those who lived nearer the dawn of history, when the world was younger, when the chariot of life ran more smoothly and lightly, with less difficulty, and at less cost. Be sure of it these old writers and thinkers did not know less than we of difficulty and trial and strain. Pain was not less pain then, than it is now. Sorrow was as bitter, disease as hideous, death as cruel. They themselves show us in these very Psalms how oppressed they at times were by the burdens of problems which they could not solve, by the weight of facts which they knew not

how to explain. We have in the Psalter—who indeed can miss hearing them?—the tone of bewilderment, the tone of disappointment, the tone of questioning about to pass into denial, the tone of surprise and complaint at what seemed the Divine neglect and indifference. Men knew then as now that the ‘ungodly are often in such prosperity, that they come into no misfortune like other folk: neither are they plagued like other men.’ Men knew then as now that goodness appeared at times to be useless, and virtue and honour to be of no avail. ‘And I said then I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency.’ Men knew then as now—then not less than now—the facts of poverty and destitution and wrongful suffering. They saw, as do we, the wreckage of what ought to float, and the floating of what ought to be wrecked and sent to the bottom. They saw, as do we, hopes blighted and goodness outraged, and ambitions shattered, and noble ideals brought in ruins to the ground, and sincere efforts received with ridicule, and purity of heart mocked and trampled under foot. They saw that pride seemed to pay better than humility, that falsehood seemed more profitable than truth, that malice seemed stronger than love, that violence and rapacity and revengefulness seemed to lord it over gentleness and self-surrender and meekness and forbearance. They saw these things, and yet they were not confounded by them. Their faith might hesitate for the moment, but in the end it was triumphant; their lips might stammer for an instant, but only for an instant. The language of their lives is the language of trust and worship and thanksgiving and praise.

And we, to whom the Revelation of Christ has been vouchsafed—we who can look at life with the Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection in our memories—shall we allow ourselves to be overcome by the temptations which these Psalmists, although they lived in the comparative darkness of the first dispensation, so successfully, so nobly, so faithfully resisted? To us the light has come; to us the gospel has been given; to us the key has been offered; to us the meaning and the end of life have been revealed, not through the suggestions of our hearts, through the promptings of our better selves, but by the testimony of a life. In the Son of Man—one with the human race, one in whom all mankind was

gathered up and harmonized and completed, one who was perfectly and finally that which each one of us, even the best, is only incompletely and tentatively—in Him, born, suffering, crucified, risen, ascended, we may see the why and wherefore, the interpretation and justification of God’s dealings with us. His ways are made clear in His Son. To us who believe in Jesus Christ, once the wearer of our mortal flesh, the sharer of our human life, now

Through the veils of time and space,
Passed into the holiest place;

to us who look to Him, not as some semi-mythical nebulous figure, half hidden from view by the errors and imaginations of His own time, but as a true historic Person, about Whom we know with certainty and accuracy all that we really need to know; to us, be the spectacle of the world what it may, intellectual depression is a thing impossible. Our hearts may bleed for human sorrows, our consciences may droop under the knowledge of our own sins, our souls may overflow with sadness at men’s wilfulness and depravity and hardness, at their lust and sloth, at their idolatry, their ignorance, their cruelty, their vileness, but the mind will none the less lift itself up to the Divine throne to praise and glorify the Eternal Majesty, to pay Him honour and reverence, to offer Him the unstinted homage of fervent faith. For the gospel bids us, as it were, step outside life and estimate it, not as it passes us in the streets or lanes, not as we see it in the hospitals or asylums, not as it is brought to our notice in the slums and gin-shops of a great capital, but as we behold it summed up in our Lord and Saviour. We watch Him, the perfect Son of Man—who ‘knew no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth’—ministering to others in perfect faithfulness, but Himself repudiated and rejected, a man of sorrows, a wanderer without where to lay His head. We watch Him persecuted and reviled. We see Him dragged to the court of Caiaphas, to the judgment-seat of Pilate. We see Him scourged and raised on high amidst the mockery, the jeers, the insults, of those whom He came to save. We witness all this, and it is to us like the personification of sorrow at its deepest, of injustice at its worst. There we have, as nowhere else in the long history of the world, the triumph of iniquity and corruption, the triumph of all that is base and horrible and infamous. ‘It seemed,’ as a modern writer has

said, 'as though all the virtues might be crucified, and crucified with impunity, at Jerusalem, while all the vices were enthroned at Rome.' Yes; for the time it *seemed* so. But we know that in reality it was not so. Calvary and its horrors were not the end. It is in the light of unbroken glory, and of perpetual peace that we lose sight of our Lord and Master. And just as in His earthly ministry is He, so to speak, the embodiment of our present life, so in His risen splendour is He the prophecy of all that that life shall one day issue in. We see in Him the goal of human existence. He is at once the Revealer and the eternal pledge of the destiny of man.

And therefore I venture to say that the words of praise can only be absent when the faith of the heart fails. We cannot be Christians and fall back into the language of despondency, or complaint, or bewilderment. We cannot say we do not know what it all means; for we *do* know what it all means. Pain, whether deserved or undeserved, is a discipline. Like our great Representative, we 'learn obedience by the things which we suffer.' The end of pain is glory—glory unthinkable, unspeakable, glory such as eye has not seen nor ear heard. Wrong may for the moment be victorious, but its victory does not last. God may *appear* to be blind and negligent, but He has not in reality 'forgotten to be gracious, nor is His mercy clean gone for ever.' Sickness and penury, and the blows of misfortune, and the failures of justice—for these there is no abiding kingdom. Men may be their victims for a night, but 'joy'—the joy of deliverance—'cometh in the morning.' For the Christian such thoughts are not fancies and speculations, and vague possibilities; they are not hopes which have about them the atmosphere of uncertainty; they do not belong to the dreams and foreshadowings with which the human mind is apt to amuse itself. They are certainties. They are as certain as that Christ died and rose again. We believe in them because we believe in Him.

Do not let us, then, come to this harvest festival as though it were no more than some little oasis in the midst of a barren life. Do not let us say to ourselves, 'Whatever else is hard and cruel and unjust and unreasonable, we have at anyrate this much to thank God for, that He gives us our daily bread.' Let us rather realize that the blessing of the harvest is but part of a great system of blessing within which you and I and all created things for

ever move; that the thanksgiving for the harvest ought to be but a portion of one unending psalm of praise poured forth by our hearts to the ever-blessed Trinity. 'It is not only for the joy and wealth in life that we thank Thee, O God: it is not only for what there is in it of present happiness and contentment and sufficiency that we praise and bless Thy Holy Name. We praise and bless Thee for life as a whole. We thank Thee for its discipline, for the struggles through which it is passing to its appointed end, for the efforts by which it is rising somewhere nearer to Thee. We thank Thee that good men do not toil for naught, and that brave men do not fight in vain. We thank Thee that in the end the crown is not with the unjust, nor the sceptre with the evil-doer. We thank Thee that there is a Heaven for the downtrodden and the outcast; that the verdicts of men are not final; that this life is not all. We thank Thee for the revelation of those once hidden meanings of human existence, which men in olden times felt after but could not reach. We thank Thee for Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Redeemer, our eternal Guide and our unfailing Light. We thank Thee out of full hearts, in all the assurance of faith,—with all created things, with everything that hath breath, we praise Thee, O Lord.'

This, we know, ought to be the voice of us all. We know that murmuring and discontent and rebellious language and faithless thoughts should have no home with the Christian believer. But there are times when to all of us praise is difficult, or more than difficult. The heart is dry and the lips refuse to speak. In such hours as those, let us ask our Father which is in Heaven to bring us to a truer appreciation, to a better knowledge, to a deeper understanding of the gospel, which is our precious and wondrous inheritance. Let us seek from Him an increase of faith in that Christ who, in the wonderful words of the Epistle to the Hebrews,—words to which I have already made allusion,—'learnt obedience by the things which He suffered,' 'who because of the suffering of death, is crowned with glory and honour.' We have this great stream of interpretation flowing from the grave of the Son of Man. Let us pray that our eyes may be opened to it. Whatever comes, whatever shapes cross our path, whatever be 'the fever and the fret,' whatever be the scourges with which we are scourged, and the crosses which our aching shoulders are called on to bear, let us remember

—and let us pray God to ever remind us—that we may find in the Vision of the Risen Lord, strength to endure and struggle and prevail. With that vision before our eyes we can thank and bless God. With that vision before us we may look out on such things as the success of a Turkish empire, or the ravages of an Indian plague, and not lose our faith. With that vision to help and encourage and instruct us we can watch this chequered scene

of life, and without shutting our eyes to one of its horrors, or one of its miseries, without closing our ears to one cry of despair, or one moan of pain, we can take on our lips the great words of praise in our Eucharistic office, and say in all the fervour of sincerity, in all the fulness of devotion, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts: heaven and earth are full of Thy glory; glory be to Thee, O Lord Most High.’

Requests and Replies.

It would probably interest your readers if you could tell us what was the population of Israel: (1) In patriarchal times; (2) in the times of the Judges; (3) during the monarchy; (4) after the division, Judah and Israel respectively; and (5) the result of the census of Quirinius as it affected Palestine? —E. T.

THE data are scanty, and some of them open to suspicion. (1) When the family of Israel migrated to Egypt, they numbered 70 souls (Gn 46²⁷). At the Exodus it is stated that there were 603,550 ‘able to go forth to war in Israel’ (Nu 1²⁰ 2³²), which would give a total of 2 or 3 millions in the wilderness. (2) We learn from the Song of Deborah, an undoubtedly authentic document, that in the time of the Judges, the levy of warriors from the various tribes was 40,000 strong (Jg 5⁸). Wellhausen is of opinion that this statement proves the statistics of the Exodus to be ‘quite worthless’ (*Hist.* 215), though, of course, there are other ways of accounting for the diminution of the fighting force. (3) David’s census, according to 2 S 24⁹, showed the number of ‘valiant men that drew the sword’ to be 800,000; according to 1 Ch 21⁵, 1,100,000, which would give a total population of at least 4 or 5 millions. (4) Jeroboam is said to have brought into the field an army of 800,000 men from Israel, which Abijah defeated with 400,000 from Judah (2 Ch 13⁸). Jehoshaphat’s vast army of 1,160,000 would indicate that in his time the population of Judah alone had increased to over 5 millions

(2 Ch 17^{14f}). It need scarcely be said that many historians and critics are unable to accept the Chronicler’s figures. Wellhausen says roundly that ‘in the statistic information of Chronicles, so far as it relates to pre-exilic antiquity, we have to do with artificial compositions’ (*Hist.* 215). Professor Bennett, in his *Book of Chronicles* (*Exp. Bib.*), leaves the matter uncertain (pp. 65, 368, etc.). (5) The ‘result’ of the census of Quirinius is not preserved. With regard to the population in the time of our Lord, we have the statement of Josephus that there were 240 cities and towns in Galilee, none of which had fewer than 15,000 inhabitants (*Vit.* 45; *B.J.* iii. 3, s. 2). That would give a total population of over 5 millions in Galilee alone. It seems scarcely credible, though no doubt the district was densely peopled. Belgium, which is about ten times as large as Galilee, has 6 millions. We must make allowance for Josephus’ ‘tendency to boasting,’ as Schürer says.

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Is there any Concordance in existence to the Apocrypha?—D. W. P.

THERE is Cruden’s. It is not reprinted in modern editions usually, but old copies containing it are easily found. The S.P.C.K. Concordance also covers the Apocrypha; but it is simply a reprint of Cruden.—EDITOR.