

MESSIAH IN THE PSALMS

I

PRAISE is the lifting up of the heart to God in adoration; in congregational praise unity in outward expression is attained by the use of a common form of words and a harmonious cadence.

The scope of praise includes the person, attributes, and works of God, and the believer's experience of God's righteous and gracious dealings.

The words used for praise must fulfil the following requirements.

(1) In regard to the person and attributes of God the words must be given by the Holy Spirit, as sanctified humanity cannot attain to adequate thought or expression.

(2) In the whole of the material absolute accuracy is essential, as the heart in praise is in an uncritical and impressionable state. Any error in doctrine incorporated in praise is apt to pass undetected into the content of belief.

(3) Songs of experience must be expressive of the experience of a representative believer, in order that everybody singing may sing with understanding where the experience agrees with his own, and with faith where the experience transcends his own.

It is as natural for men to attempt to cast their thoughts of praise into suitable rhythmical expression, as it is to put wise thoughts into proverbs, or kind thoughts into gifts. The writing of hymns to the praise of God, and the singing of such as suitably describe the feelings of the singer, has been a spiritually profitable exercise in all times. A hymn not infrequently develops a Scriptural theme of praise in the same way as a sermon develops the thought of a passage of Scripture.

It is when the question of compilation of a suitable collection of hymns to provide all parts of praise is faced that the difficulties become apparent.

For the praise of God's attributes the actual words of Scripture must stand as the only suitable medium. All human compositions offend and distress.

For the praise of His works, creation and providence, including redemption, Scripture provides the fullest and most satisfying material, and those human compositions are most successful which most completely incorporate Scriptural thoughts in a free form of paraphrase.

For the praise of His dealings with individual believers there is the primary requirement that the experience recorded should be universal and representative. To sing with sincerity I must recognize in it either an experience I have passed through, or one to which in my pilgrimage I am liable, whether I have passed through it or not. In the latter case, it is again necessary that the spiritual experiences for which praise is offered should be such as are founded on the Word of God; otherwise we are putting our trust in a man or woman for a leading which may prove to be absolutely unscriptural.

The difficulties in the way of providing a suitable manual of praise from the efforts of the saints are accordingly very great. Only a fraction of the subjects of praise can be touched, and these not in a convincing manner; for no saint is worthy of being followed with implicit faith in all that he has put on record as his experience, however honest he may have tried to be, both in doing and in writing. The things we sing become our effective creed in a way no formal statement can be, and any error there becomes indelibly impressed on the mind and heart by repetition and musical association, which dispose us to receive it without questioning. A little lie in a hymn goes sweetly home, and after a few repetitions is assimilated into our working vocabulary of religious experience.

When we consider that a manual of praise must not only serve the mature believer and direct the young convert, but be a guide to children from their earliest years and a witness of the way of life to the unconverted, the question arises whether God has left His Church unprovided for in a matter of such tremendous importance. Among the apostles who were inspired of the Holy Spirit to commit to writing the history and doctrine and destiny of the Church, was there none appointed to take this matter in hand? Could Paul not have produced one or two hymns brimming with missionary zeal, or John have

poured out his soul in adoration of the Word made Flesh; or Peter have embodied his ripe experience in a few warm words of Christian exhortation? Why should it be that in the distribution of offices—to some were given apostles, to some prophets, to some evangelists, to some pastors and teachers, but to none hymnists? In all the diversities of administrations and operations and gifts so fully noted in various epistles,—among apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, helps, governments, tongues, interpretation of tongues, discernment of spirits, the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing—why is there no mention of the gift of Christian song? Did the early Church not sing, and if they did, what did they sing?

The answer is clear, and equally clear is the fact that modern practice stands very largely condemned in its implied assumption that the Church had hundreds of years to wait before God provided her with suitable material for combined praise. When the risen Lord by the Holy Spirit opened the understandings of the disciples to understand the Scriptures, He taught them that their manual of Christian praise was already in existence in the Book of Psalms. Written hundreds of years before, it awaited the revelation of Jesus Christ to make its true import comprehensible to them. They needed no supersession of the most spiritual part of their worship, and no new manual of praise. They sang to the praise of the triune God, with a new understanding, and a deeper and fuller sense of the majesty and grace and justice of God, those psalms which they had always sung.

II

The chief obstacle to the use of the Psalms as the supreme book of Christian praise has been a lack of understanding as to their true character. Do they in the first place rank as historical or as prophetic writings? If the former is the correct category, and David merely recorded accurately his own experiences and hopes, then we have to treat his record of himself in the same way as we treat that of any other typical person of Old Testament history; learning from him of the great antitype sometimes by example, sometimes by contrast, and passing over a great deal of matter as of only local and temporary value. Under this view a few choice portions of the

Psalms are retained, or modified to adapt them to the requirement of Christian praise, and the great bulk of them pass into disuse.

If on the other hand David recorded prophetically not his own experiences, but, like Isaiah in chapter liii, those of the Son of David yet to be born, to suffer, to die, and to rise again, then his words have a much more comprehensive and enduring application than in the former case.

The question, "Of whom speaketh the prophet thus, of himself, or of some other man?" is just as pertinent in regard to the Psalms of David as in regard to the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, or any other passage in the prophets, yet it appears to be very rarely asked. The New Testament evidence as to the correct answer is as clear in the one case as in the other, yet a persistent blindness has been shown to the prophetic writings of David which is less in evidence towards those of Isaiah.

It is certainly not in the nature of things strange that a poet should project himself into the personality of another, and write in the first person the thoughts and experiences of his subject. A great deal of poetic writing, and especially of lyric poetry, falls within this category. Most poets, however, have as subjects of their compositions a number of widely differing characters, who are easily distinguished from one another, and from the poet himself. Were a poet to confine himself to the delineation of only one such character, and that one a person upon whom it was his constant aim to model himself, the difficulty of distinction between the poet and his subject would obviously be greatly increased. If David wrote prophetically about Christ, it is within this latter and narrow class that identification of the speaker must be attempted, and it is here that the question of historicity assumes paramount importance. If the song contains circumstances which were not and could not be true of the writer, but were fulfilled in the life of his prophetic subject, then the song cannot be treated merely as a loose kind of imaginative and idealistic presentation of the events of the poet's experience. Scripture standards of truth do not admit of such a thing, the Psalms themselves being the chief witness against it. It was in connection with a reference to a passage in the Psalms that Christ gave the full weight of His authority to the assertion, "The Scriptures cannot be broken."

In regard to those psalms which bear not only a statement of authorship, but also a description of the circumstances under which they were written, we may certainly expect some relation between the events and the words. But in no case is the relation one of simple narration. Under the stress of personal experience, David was inbreathed of the Spirit of God to pen an experience transcending his own. For example, psalm xviii, spoken to the Lord by David in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul, goes far beyond David's times and righteousness in its description and in its claims, and verse 49 is specifically referred to Christ in Romans xv. 9.

Psalm lix, of David, when Saul sent and they watched the house to kill him, speaks of one surrounded by the heathen, to whom God would reveal his rule in Jacob unto the ends of the earth.

In some cases the experience recorded in the Psalm is completely at variance with the behaviour of the historical David, which it illustrates rather by contrast than by correspondence. For example, psalm xxxiv, of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he departed, rebukes the guile and lack of faith which characterized David's actions at this period, and celebrates conduct of quite another kind. Again we have confirmation of the Messianic character of the psalm by the quotation of verse 20 in John xix, 36. Psalm lii, of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul that David was come to the house of Ahimelech, condemns the deceitful tongue and contrasts the speaker's trust in God, whereas in that incident David's tongue had not been guiltless of the sin which the psalm condemns.

The correspondence between the historical setting in which the psalm appeared and the burden of its prophetic vision is in some of these much closer than in others, but the completely truthful application rests in every case with the prophetic sense. The framework of the historical past is inadequate to uphold the superposed weight of truth and excellence, which demands for its support the historical future of Messianic fulfilment now contemplated in prophetic vision.

What is the character of the New Testament evidence on the claims of the psalms to represent not the mind of David, but the mind of Christ? The answer is that both in quantity

and in quality it is overwhelming. First of all there is the teaching of Christ Himself, "That all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me." The special mention of the psalms, in amplification of the common method of reference to the Old Testament, indicates that they have a special place in the testimony of the things revealed regarding Jesus Christ. Again we may ask, What things? Undoubtedly that Christ should suffer and enter into his glory, as He himself taught the disciples on the way to Emmaus; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles, as Paul told Agrippa.

It cannot be too much stressed that the teaching of the Apostles, with their understandings opened by Christ to understand the Scriptures, is developed along these lines. In the thirty-seven quotations from the psalms in the Gospels and Acts, there is no laboured argument to prove that passages refer, not to David, nor to the righteous man of the theocracy, but to Christ. No such proof is necessary, and the correct application is made as a matter of course. Behind this simple and tacit assumption, common to all the inspired writers, we must recognize the authoritative teaching and example of the Master. In no other way can it be explained.

There are approximately one hundred psalms in which the first person singular is employed, and in sixty-seven of these there is one obvious speaker throughout. The identity of this speaker is a matter of acknowledged importance in the understanding of the psalm. If God be a God of order, we may not arbitrarily identify this single speaker as two different persons in different parts of his discourse. If the Holy Spirit by the mouth of an apostle attributes one verse to Christ, then we may not disjoin the whole remaining part of the psalm from the selected verse, and leave the latter screened off from contact with its fellows as a kind of monster, crowned and garlanded. Such appears to be the settled practice of numerous commentators. The psalms themselves are constructed on much more straightforward lines, and if one portion of a monologue is identified as Christ speaking, then the whole must be so understood, if our understandings are to be in exercise at all.

In Christ's own quotations from the psalms there is tremendous depth in the compass of a few words. Consider that in John xv. 25, "That the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause." Where in the whole law do these words occur? In the exact form quoted, they appear in psalms xxxv and lxix, and in the form "fought against me without a cause" in psalm cix, each of these a psalm of one speaker in calamity, each of them made notable by the appellation of "cursing psalms" often applied to them with more than a suspicion of contempt. Christ plainly sets His seal to the truth that in these psalms, David was not voicing the sorrows of David. Being a prophet, he spake before of the sufferings of *Christ*. The enemies of the speaker are not the private foes of the son of Jesse, but the confirmed opponents of the Son of God, and the curses following are pronounced by One to whom no haste can be attributed in the way to judgment.

Christ's identification of these psalms is followed by an abundance of other references to them by the apostles. In Hebrews ii. 12 we have Christ as speaker in the verse, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee," and in Romans xv. 9 a similar application is made. The Old Testament originals of these quotations can be found in psalms xxxv and cix referred to above, and also in the following psalms, elsewhere identified as of Messianic interpretation—xviii, xxii, lvii, cviii, and cxii.

The words "Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul; let them be turned back and brought to confusion that devise my hurt" constitute a Messianic prayer which reappears repeatedly in the Messianic psalms, twice in psalm xxxv, and in substance once each in psalms vi, xxv, xxxi, xl, lxx, lxxi, and cix.

Psalm lxix ranks as the most profusely authenticated Messianic psalm in the Psalter. In addition to Christ's own reference, quoted above, there are the following: "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up," referred to Christ by the apostles, John ii. 17; "The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me," referred to Christ in Romans xv. 3; "They gave me gall . . . and vinegar," fulfilled Matthew xxvii. 34 and John xix. 28, 29; "Let their table become a snare . . . and a trap; let their eyes be darkened, that they

see not, and make their loins continually to shake," quoted Romans xi. 10, 11 as the wrath foretold and now fallen upon Israel for their rejection of the Messiah; "Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents," applied by Peter in Acts i. 20 to Judas, the typical representative of unbelieving Israel, just as the Messiah was of the true Israel. The parallel passages to other psalms identified as Messianic number at least twenty.

Psalm cix, in addition to Christ's quotation and the two other references noticed above, is also quoted by Peter in Acts i. 20, with reference to Judas, "Let another take his office," an application which precludes any other than a Messianic interpretation.

III

A point which emerges in the above examination, and which is evident in every study of the psalms, is their absolute fidelity to truth, and absence of anything such as goes commonly by the name of poetic licence. David found himself hated, often with little cause; but the words "without a cause" are applied by Christ in a way which implies not only that no shadow of provocation could be adduced, but that the powers of divine benevolence had been in positive exercise. It is characteristic of the Psalms, as it is of Christ's words in the gospels, that the deepest and most spiritual interpretation will be found to be the truest.

We shall not err in grouping psalms xxxviii and cxix with the three specified above, as referring to Christ, for the speaker in them claims the help of God as one who is "hated wrongfully" and "perversely dealt with, and persecuted, *without a cause*."

There are several other psalms applied by Christ to Himself either directly or by implication. Psalm xli is directly quoted, "He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me." In psalm lxxxii occur the words, "I have said, Ye are gods." These are quoted by Christ in John x. 35 in such a way as to indicate that *the same person* who, without remonstrance on their part, called men gods in Old Testament prophecy, was himself sanctified and sent into the world by the Father, and on calling Himself the Son of God was declared a blasphemer. The "I" of the psalm was Christ speaking in prophecy,

and the "I" spoken to the Pharisees was from the lips of the Christ in person. They received the one and rejected the other.

In psalm cxviii. 22, "The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner. This is the Lord's doing: it is marvellous in our eyes," is in Matthew xxi. 42 applied to Christ by Himself; in Acts iv. 11 it is similarly applied by Peter, and in Ephesians ii. 20 by Paul. In the same psalm, the words, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord" are quoted by Christ, and used by the people, as the Messianic blessing applicable to Himself, this passage being seven times quoted.

On the cross, Christ, who alone had power to lay down His life, and power to take it again, spoke the words of psalm xxxi, "Into thy hand I commit my spirit", an executive word to which neither David nor any other mortal man had power to give effect in the full sense of the terms. This psalm also contains parallel passages to psalms xviii, xxv, lxix and cii all easily identifiable Messianic psalms.

Lastly, we have the risen Lord in Revelation ii. 26 referring to psalm ii and the Father's desire therein promulgated. Further references to the rod of iron of the same passage occur in Revelation xii. 5 and xix. 15. This psalm is also the subject of quotation in Acts iv. 25 by the early disciples, in Acts xiii. 33, Hebrew i. 5 and Hebrew v. 5—a sevenfold confirmation.

There are thus seven unchallengeable references covering ten psalms which Christ takes authoritatively to Himself. Had we no other direction than these, we should still have ample guidance on which to base an extended Messianic reference in the Psalms. But while these psalms do by their character and depth take us to the heart of the subject, they are far from exhausting its resources. We have as yet only touched a fringe of the apostolic witness to the theme that the spirit of prophecy in the psalms is the testimony of Jesus.

We begin with psalm xvi, which furnishes the text of a sermon by no less than two apostles. In this psalm occur the words, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life." If one allowed the psalmist any poetic licence, these statements might pass muster as applied to himself, or they might be suitably segregated and attributed partly to himself and partly to his divine subject. But Peter speaking

by the Spirit, on the day of Pentecost, cuts across any shifts of that kind. The psalm is spoken of one person, not of two; and that person cannot be David, for David fell on sleep and saw corruption. The psalm is not true of David, and cannot apply to him. It is correctly termed A Psalm of David because he wrote it, but not about himself; being a prophet, he spake of the resurrection of Christ, that *his* soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.

Paul at Antioch, after witnessing to the historic fact of Christ's resurrection, confirmed it as the subject of prophecy by the quotation of this same passage from the sixteenth psalm.

The principle of interpretation employed above is particularly valuable, as it is one which is directly applicable to other psalms which have not been made the subject of special apostolic exposition. We have it laid down that if a passage in a psalm is not completely true regarding David, then it does not apply to David. Complete faithfulness in detail is an integral characteristic of the Word.

Two psalms receive special attention in Hebrews. The fortieth psalm is expounded as the utterance of him who came to put an end to the sacrifices of the Law by the sacrifice of himself. The hundred and second psalm, which is commonly treated as monologue, is there expounded as a dialogue. Hebrews i. reveals that the final verses of psalm cii. are the reply of God the Father, attributing creation and eternal existence to the complainant of the first portion of the psalm, who is thus revealed as God the Son. The division of verses by which the transition point occurs in the middle of a verse (24) has made havoc of the sense, reducing a declaration by God to the form of a prayer to God, but Hebrews i. 8, 10 are explicit on the true interpretation, "Unto the Son he saith."

A most instructive quotation, or set of quotations, from the psalms is that of Paul in Romans iii. 10-18. He is showing that the law has a writing of condemnation against every man, sufficient to stop every mouth, and bring all the world under the judgement of God. How does he substantiate the charge? By quotations concerning the wicked, taken from six psalms and a passage in Isaiah. In so doing he identifies "the wicked" not simply as David's private foes, nor yet as public sinners, but just as the sons of men by nature. In these psalms a line divides the righteous speaker from those whose depravity he

condemns, and the whole of mankind, David not excluded, are in their natural state found on the guilty side of the line. For the part of the sinless speaker there is no one left in the whole world but the sinless Son of Man. The psalms thus quoted are the fifth—Their throat is an open sepulchre; the tenth—His mouth is full of cursing; the fourteenth—There is none that doeth good, no, not one; the thirty-sixth—There is no fear of God before his eyes; and the hundred and fortieth—Adders' poison is under their lips.

There is no escape from the logic of the apostle. These are Messianic psalms, selected evenly over the whole psalter to marshal sinful humanity at the bar of divine law. But they do not exhaust the indictment, which can be recognized by the same features as continued in a number of other psalms, in which Christ is the only possible speaker, namely, iv, vi, vii, xii, xvii, xxviii, lvii, lviii, lix, lxiv, lxxiii, lxxxvi, cxxxix, and cxliv. In each of these, the wicked exhibit the same hateful propensities as enumerated above, directed against God in Christ, and must be identified in the same general way, if we accept the inspired apostle as our guide.

The same sweepingly Messianic application of the psalms is employed in Hebrews. After establishing the Godhead of the Son in chapter i. by reference to seven Old Testament prophecies—six of these being psalms, namely, ii, lxxxix, civ, xl, cii, and cx—the writer asserts with equal certainty His humanity, by quoting three further passages in chapter ii, two of these being from psalms. The first passage, “I will declare thy name unto my brethren,” is from psalm xxii, and has already been touched upon. The assembly referred to is not one which has yet been convened upon earth; but in the great congregation of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, the Redeemer Himself will lead the praise of the Father.

The second passage quoted is “I will put my trust in Him,” and it is adduced to prove that the Messiah is akin to His brethren. To which psalm are we to trace this expression, for it is an exceedingly frequent one, occurring in twenty psalms? It is surely significant that in quoting the psalms the apostles support their Messianic teaching by passages which are striking, not by being isolated, but by being common. We have here the counterpart of the identification of the wicked previously indicated in some twenty psalms by their speech, thoughts,

and deeds. The righteous One is unmistakably recognized by an unwavering trust. This is professed in the following psalms—vii, xi, xvi, xviii, xxii, xxv, xxviii, xxxi, lii, lv, lvi, lvii, lxi, lxxi, lxxiii, lxxxvi, xci, cxli, cxliii, and cxliv—every one Messianic in expression, and indeed thirteen of them have already been mentioned in this paper as to be so construed on other grounds.

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