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# FIVE PSALMS

(I, XXVII, LI, CVII, XXXIV)

A NEW TRANSLATION WITH  
COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONARY

By

NORMAN H. SNAITH, M.A.

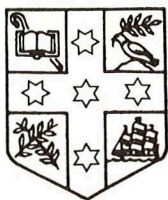


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## INTRODUCTION

THE Psalter in its present form was the hymn-book of the Second Temple. It contains the praises and prayers of Israel in the days when the People of God were as much Church as they were State. It is impossible to fix the date of any particular psalm with confidence. This is partly due to the almost complete absence of internal evidence, and partly also to the fact that many psalms have been edited and reformed to meet the need and experience of succeeding generations. In any case, the psalms belong to every age, and in them every one of us can see the heights and depths of his own religious experience. Some psalms may be as early as David; some of them are certainly as late as the time of Judas the Maccabee; most of them probably come from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

The Psalter is divided into five books, corresponding to the Five Fifths of the Law. These five books, however, bear only a partial relation to the way in which the Psalter was compiled. From this point of view the Psalter falls into two sections. The first three books, Psalms 1—89, were compiled from a number of earlier hymnaries; the remainder of the psalms form a number of groups, apparently added group by group because of their liturgical uses.

Originally there was a Jehovist Psalter, that is, a Psalter in which the name for God is His personal Name Jehovah, 'Davidic' because all psalms were ascribed generally to the sweet singer of Israel, just as all the Law was ascribed to Moses and all the Wisdom Literature to Solomon. This original Davidic Jehovist Psalter extended from 2—41, with 1 and 33 added later. The second Psalter was an Elohist Psalter, that is, one in which the Name used for God is Elohim, the ordinary

Hebrew word for 'god'. This Psalter extended from 42—83, and was compiled from three hymnaries, a Davidic collection, 51—72, and two Levitical hymnaries, Korahite, 42—49, and Asaphite, 50 and 73—83. Ewald suggested, many years ago, that the Davidic psalms originally came first, for then the 'lonely' Asaphite psalm would be joined to its fellows.

The second part of the Psalter is compiled of various groups, the Moses group, 90—100; blessing psalms, thanks psalms, a Davidic group, Hallelujah psalms, the Pilgrim Psalter, 120—134, and so forth. Throughout the whole Psalter there are cross-references to another hymnary, the Music-master's collection.

The psalms are not representative of any particular phase of Hebrew religion, but of the whole of it—prophetic, priestly, legal, ethical, penitential, individual, national, everything. That is why it is truly called the Praises of Israel, and this applies not only to Israel of old, but to the true Israel of God in every generation and of all peoples.

## Psalm I

### LIFE

**The happy man is the man who does not follow the advice of crooked men, does not loiter in the path of the wayward, and does not sit in the circle of scoffers. On the contrary, he applies himself continually to the Law of the Lord, and studies His Law day and night. He is like a tree transplanted by the water channels. It produces its fruit in its season, and its leaves never fade. Whatever happens, it flourishes.**

**This is not the case with the crooked, far from it. They are like chaff blowing down the wind.**

**When therefore the Testing comes, the crooked and the wayward cannot stand, nor are they to be found in the community of the upright.**

**The reason is this. The Lord is always near in the path of the upright, whereas the path of the crooked wanders away, and perishes, and is lost.**

The first psalm has been described as the fitting prelude to the Praises of Israel. It is better to regard it as an introduction to the Reading of the Law. From pre-Christian times the Jews have been accustomed to read the Law, that is, the Pentateuch, in their synagogues, portion by portion and Sabbath by Sabbath, from beginning to end. In order that they should never cease from reading it, it is their custom on the last Sabbath, after having read the last verse of Deuteronomy, immediately to roll back the scroll to the beginning and to read the first verses of Genesis. Among the Babylonian Jews the whole of the Law was read every year, and this custom ultimately prevailed; but in Palestine the cycle was three years. Every reading from the Law was followed by an appropriate reading from the Prophets. This reading is called the Haphtarah, and herein is

the origin of the custom of reading two lessons in Christian worship. There was also, most probably, in Palestine, an arrangement by which the Psalter was similarly recited during a three-year period. Whatever the details, there is no doubt that the first psalm was recited on the first Sabbath, that is, on the Sabbath when the first portion of the Law was read. This psalm is probably one of the latest of all the psalms, and was, in our opinion, placed in its present position at the time when the Psalter was arranged for this triennial cycle.

The psalm draws a clear-cut distinction between two ways of living. One way leads to Life, and the other to Death. The contrast is between the way of the upright and the way of the crooked, for these are the root meanings of the words which the Revised Version translates by 'righteous' and 'wicked'. The upright man is the man whose whole energies are absorbed in the Law. The study of the Law is his delight and continual occupation. The usual translation of the Hebrew word is 'delight', but *chephetz* is a word which changed its meaning during the centuries. Originally, in the days before Hebrew was a language separate from others in the Semitic group, the word meant 'attention'. In Arabic it came to mean 'excited attention', and so 'excitement'; but in Hebrew the development was through 'delighted attention' to 'delight'. But already in the latest Biblical Hebrew the word came to mean 'occupation', 'daily work', and, if the psalm is indeed late, that is what it can mean here. In that case the psalm emphasizes the regular study and reading of the Law. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Ben Sirach interpreted the psalm in this way, when he contrasted the lot of the scribe who 'meditateth in the Law of the Most High' with that of those who 'maintain the fabric of the world, and in the handiwork of their craft is their prayer' (Ecclus. xxxviii. 24-xxxix. 11).

There are three types of wicked men. First, there are those who are crooked and deformed, as a child with a damaged limb grows increasingly inept with the

years. Secondly, there are those who miss the mark, for lack of skill, perhaps, in the beginning, but in the end by confirmed error of persistent habit. Lastly, there are the scoffers, who sin, not from lack of care or of knowledge or of strength, but deliberately, 'with a stiff neck' and 'with a high hand', who delight to confuse good and evil and to make a mockery of holy things. All wicked, whatever the steps by which they progress in evil ways, follow a path that turns aside, a crooked way that leads to death.

The simile of the tree is from Jeremiah xvii. 6-8. There the prophet draws a contrast between the fate of the desert scrub, barely maintaining an unequal struggle against the adversities of the parched lands, and the continued fruitfulness of the tree which is planted by an ever-flowing stream. In the psalm, the latter half of Jeremiah's picture has been combined with elements from the description of the unexampled fertility due to the miraculous river of God in Ezekiel xlvii. 1-12. The tree of the psalmist has been transplanted from the uncertain desert to the irrigation channels, where no vagaries of the weather can ever cause a moment's anxiety. Still further, an indication of the comparative lateness of the psalm is to be seen in the fact that 'trusting in the Lord' has become 'meditating in the Law'.

When the testing comes, the crooked man cannot stand, nor is he to be found in the community of the upright. Some have explained this time of testing as the Grand Assize at the End of Days. Others have thought of the continuous judgement of history. The psalmist may have thought of either, or of both. Yet again, he may be thinking in terms of some annual deciding of fate such as we know was enacted ritually in Babylon in the sixth century B.C., or as the later Jews imagined to take place in Heaven at the New Year.

The two ways are contrasted in the last verse. God knows the way of the upright, and because God knows it intimately, it is the Way of Life. The word translated

'know' is used of the most intimate personal relationships of life, and such closest intimacy is indicated here. His knowledge is emotional and personal, rather than intellectual. There is no step of the way with which God is not immediately intertwined.

For the explanation of the latter half of the verse we must turn to Deuteronomy xxvi. 5: 'My father was a perishing (wandering) Aramaean.' The word combines the ideas of 'perishing', 'wandering', and 'lost'. It describes the fate of the desert nomad who finds himself off the caravan route, lost in the trackless wastes. The same word is used of the fate of the caravans of Tema and Sheba (Job vi. 19—20). Compare also Psalm cvii. 4—7. In the desert men wander to die, but God leads them to the road that means life. The first psalmist knows that the way to life is the way of closest fellowship with God.

### Psalm XXVII

#### CONFIDENCE

**The Lord is my light and safety ; I fear none. The Lord is my impregnable fortress ; I am afraid of no man. When aggressors assailed me, and sought, like wild beasts, to devour my flesh, it was not I, but they, my adversaries and my foes, who stumbled and fell. If an army were to besiege me, my courage would not fail. Even if the battle were to rage right up to me, yet still I would be confident.**

**One thing have I asked of the Lord, and always it will be my chief desire—to spend all my life in the House of the Lord, and there, in His Palace, to gaze on and to contemplate His loveliness.**

**When the day of trouble comes, He treasures me in His Shelter, hides me in the secret place in His Tent, or lifts me high on a Crag that none can**

**climb. Now, in the time of my need, He will give me the victory over all the foes who are surrounding me, so that I can feast right joyously with Him in His Tent, and sing psalms and hymns to the Lord.**

**Hear my voice, O Lord, when I cry. Be gracious to me. Answer me. My heart said, 'Seek ye Me'. It was Thou that wast speaking there. I am indeed seeking Thee. Hide not Thyself from me. Turn not Thy servant away in anger. I have no help but Thee. Leave me not, forsake me not, Thou God who alone canst save me. Even though my father and mother were to forsake me, the Lord would still take care of me.**

**Teach me Thy way, O Lord. Lead me along a level path, because of those who are keenly watching for me to fall. Give me not over to the will of my adversaries. False accusers have already taken their stand against me, and are maliciously muttering threats of violence.**

**If I had not been confident of seeing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living . . .**

**Wait for the Lord. Be strong and stout-hearted, and wait for the Lord.**

Here is a psalm of complete confidence and full assurance. Nothing that can ever happen can make this man fear. The first psalmist found serenity in the study of the Law. His peace is the gentleness of smoothly-flowing waters, prospering in quietness, remote from the rush and the clatter of the world of men. The twenty-seventh psalmist is no recluse. For him things are happening, tempestuously, tremendously, and from every side. He writes of sieges and battles, of men like wild beasts for fearsomeness and fierceness, of enemies watching keenly for his slightest slip, and of false, lying witnesses already in the witness box, muttering violence and inventing every kind of lie. Yet, in spite of every intimidation, the psalmist remains confident. He knows that in his day of direst trouble God will take care of

him. He thinks of the hut in the vineyard where the watcher shelters whilst the grapes are ripening, of the nomad's tent and the secret place within where the wanderer hides his valuables, or of the precipitous crag which none can scale. Tradition had it that Israel sheltered in huts during the desert wanderings; God still has a Hut in Zion. Of olden time He dwelt within curtains; the Tent of Meeting still has its successor. Zion is the Mount of God, still strong and firm, and there still is the Rock, the very stone, so the Rabbis held, on which Isaac was to have been sacrificed. Even if, in the last extremity, his parents forsake him, the psalmist knows he will still be safe, for God will never leave him desolate.

All this the psalmist had learned, first in contemplation of the loveliness of God at the Holy Shrine, secondly in the story of God's mighty saving acts of long ago, and thirdly in his own heart. He had not only the witness without, but also the witness of the Spirit within. This last is the final test, and the sure seal. Because of this last experience, crowning all other testimony, the psalmist is supremely confident. 'I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to guard that which I have committed unto Him against that day.' In the midst of alarms and excursions, this psalmist knows something of the peace that passes understanding.

The reason why the psalmist rejoices in the victory which he knows God will win for him is that he will be able to feast joyously with God in His Holy Temple. The usual translation refers to the offering of 'sacrifices of joy', but the reference actually is to that joyous meal, wherein worshipped and worshipper both shared, one of the features of the religion of Old Israel. According to all earlier Old Testament sources, there were two kinds of sacrifices in pre-exilic times. One was a gift-sacrifice, the tribute paid to the Lord of the land, to Jehovah the King. It was by way of acknowledgement that all gifts were from God. Everything was His,

'every beast of the forest' and 'the cattle upon a thousand hills' (Psalm l. 7-15). This sacrifice was by no means a meritorious gift, nor was it a means of winning God's favour, although there were tendencies among the common people to regard it as such. The psalmist is referring to the other type of sacrifice, the *zebach*. This word was the original word for 'slaughter', every slaughter. In primitive times, the blood was poured out for the god, and the slayer ate the flesh. In the time of the Temple, part went to the altar as food for God, whilst the major portion went to the worshippers for the common meal. The psalmist, therefore, is looking forward to happiest communion with God. It is the sequel to the saving act of God, that work of deliverance which God will accomplish for the man who trusts in Him. The psalmist turns to God, not primarily that he may rejoice at the discomfort of his enemies, nor even that he may see good, but that he may know more intimately the God who has spoken most of all in his own heart, and has bidden him to come. Peace and confidence are to be found in fellowship with God, and there alone.

## Psalm LI

### JOY

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy goodness. Blot out my transgressions according to Thy manifold mercies. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. I fully admit my transgression. My sin is always on my mind. I have sinned against Thee, against Thee alone. I have done what is wrong in Thy sight. Thou art indeed just in reproving me, and right in condemning me.

Here am I, cradled in wickedness, and born a sinner. Yet in me, deep down within me, Thou

desirest truth, and wouldest have me to know wisdom in my very heart.

Purge me with hyssop (as in the ritual cleansing), that I may indeed be free from sin. Wash me, that I may be whiter than snow. Make me to hear words of joy and gladness, that I may rejoice, even though my bones be broken in the cleansing.

Cover Thy face, so that Thou canst not see my sin. Blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew within me a spirit that is firm for the right. Cast me not away from being with Thee. Do not take Thy sacred Spirit from me. Give me back the joy that comes from knowing I am safe with Thee. Uphold me with a spirit of complete devotion. Then will I teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee.

Save me from the deadly sin, O God, Thou God my Saviour, then will my tongue tell loudly forth Thy righteousness. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. Thou dost not wish for sacrifices that I should give them, nor hast Thou any pleasure in holocausts. The true gift to God is a broken spirit. Thou wilt never despise a broken and humble heart.

Bring prosperity to Zion. Build again the walls of Jerusalem. Then Thou wilt delight in true sacrifice (whole offerings and holocausts). Then will they offer bullocks upon Thy altar.

This is the psalm of a penitent sinner, who has found the joy of salvation, and knows wherein is His strength. He knows what are the demands of God. Man must be free from sin. 'Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.' He confesses from his own experience that the standard God demands is completely beyond his reach. How can Man, born a sinner, ever hold to the Truth, or know that wisdom which is of God? The belief, therefore, in the essential

sinfulness of Man is an inheritance from long, long ago. We do not accept this doctrine in those crude forms in which it has from time to time been expressed. There is, however, a modern heresy of which we do well to beware. It is the doctrine, arising, for the most part, from Herbert Spencer's facile generalizations from the earlier evolutionary theories, of the certainty of Man's continuous development until he reaches highest Heaven. The old ambition enshrined in the story of the Tower of Babel, has received new life. Its new form is that Man is essentially good, that he is growing better and better generation by generation, and that Man is indeed the 'measure of all things'.

We ought to recognize what a mass of weaknesses we inherit. The habits of our fathers grow easily in us. We are weak because of our creaturehood. We can work only so hard, travel only so far, bear only so much trouble and sorrow and pain, and at last we die. Some of us find the burden heavier than we can bear, and are glad to die in the hope of being quit of it. Or again, we all know that it is easier for us to do wrong than it is to do right. We acknowledge this by the way in which we talk about restraining ourselves from doing wrong, and struggling to do what is right. We never have to struggle to do wrong, and it is never a question of restraining ourselves from doing right. We know that there are in us passions and desires, which, like spirited horses, if not curbed and continually held in check, will rush us headlong to disaster. Modern evolutionary theories give promise of future glory, but more clearly they make plain to us the 'beastly' pit out of which we are dug. Wars and hatred and selfishness are the mire that still clings, and no evolutionary doctrine can provide us with the sure promise that the mire shall be cleansed away.

The psalmist knows the solution. If ever we are going to be clean from sin, then it is God Himself who must cleanse us. It is unavailing for us to be on our guard against assaults from the outside world. The

enemy of our souls is not there. He is inside, in our own hearts. And that enemy is Self. As the Apocalypse of Baruch puts it, 'Each of us hath been the Adam of his own soul'. To think beautiful thoughts about beautiful things is not enough, else the Greeks had been the holiest of the holy. We need new hearts, for, as One greater than any psalmist once said, 'Out of the heart cometh forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: these are the things which defile the man'. God alone, of His good pleasure, can create a new heart in us.

The one requisite is a humble and contrite spirit. This means, as John Wesley put it in his sermon on Salvation by Faith, 'a recumbency on Him', 'a closing with Him, and cleaving to Him as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, or, in one word, our salvation'. The modern world needs to realize this. We are like some greater Alexander; we have well-nigh conquered both space and time, and yet are no nearer mastering ourselves. This modern civilization with all its wondrous triumphs blinds our eyes to our essential weakness, for which of the gifts of God have we not misused?

Our growing harnessing of this physical universe invites us to trust more and more in things, and in ourselves as manipulators of them. We grow to think that the difference between God and Man is not so very great after all. We easily invert the dogma that Christ is God Who became Man, and say that He was a man who somehow became God. There is no salvation this way, but only at last bitterness and tears and death. It is all broken cisterns that cannot hold the Water of Life. We must learn again what the psalmist, and many others after him, have learned, that all we have is of God, and that, as the prophet said, 'Thou, O God, hast wrought all our works for us'. Only in humble hearts and in contrite spirits is there room for God to make His dwelling-place.

The result is Joy, the joy which comes from being

right with God. It can come no other way, and it is His gift. He alone can give it, and nothing on earth can take it away. No deeds can win it, nor any efforts of ours deserve it. But it is His free gift to all who humbly look to Him.

No psalm comes nearer to the heart of true religion than does this psalm. Perhaps that is why phrases from it found their way into the synagogal services, and from thence into the liturgies of the Christian Church.

But the joy is not the end of the story. It issues in teaching transgressors the ways of God, and bringing men into fellowship with Him. This is what has happened in the lives of all who have found joy in fellowship with God.

What we have felt and seen,  
With confidence we tell,  
And publish to the sons of men  
The signs infallible.

### Psalm CVII

#### PRAISE

**Praise the Lord, for He is good,  
For His goodness is everlasting.  
So say the Redeemed of the Lord,  
Whom He redeemed from the power of the foe.  
From far lands He gathered them,  
East and West and North and South.**

**They wandered in the desert, a desolate way,  
They found no city to dwell in.  
They hungered and thirsted,  
Till the will to live had almost gone.**

**Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble;  
From their sore straits He saved them.  
He brought them on to the right road  
To go to a city to dwell in.**

Let them praise the Lord for His goodness,  
And His wondrous works for earth-born men.  
For He hath satisfied the longing soul,  
And the hungry soul He hath filled with good.

So say those who dwelt in gloomy darkness,  
Shackled in affliction and iron.

They had rebelled against the words of God,  
Spurned the counsel of the Most High ;  
So He bowed their heart low with toil,  
And they stumbled with none to help.

Then they cried to the Lord in their troubles ;  
From their sore straits He saved them.  
He brought them forth from gloomy darkness,  
And tore their bonds asunder.

Let them praise the Lord for His goodness,  
And His wondrous works for earth-born men.  
For He hath shattered the gates of bronze,  
And hewed down iron bars.

So say sick men, ill from their evil courses,  
Afflicted because of their iniquities.

They turned against every kind of food ;  
They drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble ;  
From their sore straits He saved them.  
He sent forth His healing word,  
And delivered them from the brink of the grave.

Let them praise the Lord for His goodness,  
And His wondrous works for earth-born men.  
Let them sacrifice sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
And recount His deeds with glad shouts.

So say those that go down to the sea in ships,  
That do business on the high seas,  
Who have seen the works of the Lord,  
And His wonders in the Deep.

He spake and raised the storm-wind,  
And it lifted high the ocean billows.  
They rose sky high ; they went down to the  
depths.

Their courage failed them in their distress,  
They reeled and staggered like drunken men.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble ;  
From their sore straits He brought them out.  
He hushed the storm to silence,  
And stilled its mighty waves.  
They rejoiced because they were quiet,  
And He brought them to their desired haven.

Let them praise the Lord for His goodness,  
And His wondrous works for earth-born men.  
Let them exalt Him in the congregation of the  
people,  
And praise Him in the assembly of the elders.

He turns rivers into desert,  
And water springs into parched ground,  
The fertile land into a salt waste,  
Because of the wickedness of those that dwell  
therein.

He turns desert into water-pools,  
And parched land into water-springs.  
There He settles the hungry,  
And they found a city to dwell in.  
They sow fields, plant vineyards,  
Which yield the fruits of harvest.  
He blesses them that they multiply greatly,  
And He suffers not their cattle to decrease.

They are reduced and brought low  
By oppression, and trouble, and sorrow.  
(This is what Job meant) 'He pours contempt  
upon princes',  
'And makes them wander in the trackless waste'.  
But the poor He lifts high from affliction,  
And increases their families like a flock.

**Let the upright see and rejoice,  
For every wrong-doer is silenced.  
Whoso is wise, let him take note of these  
things,  
And take to heart the goodness of the Lord.**

There is an ancient Jewish tradition that the psalms were sung in three sections. At the close of each section the priests blew thrice upon their trumpets, and all the people fell down and worshipped. There are traces of this in the Psalter, and some psalms were evidently written in three stanzas, for example, Psalms 42 and 43 (which were originally one psalm), 99, and especially this psalm, 107. The first two sections are each sub-divided into two, each with a double refrain. Each sub-section gives one reason why men should praise God. The concluding section sums up the whole story of God's mighty deeds of salvation, and associates all praise with the worship of the whole community.

The psalm opens with a couplet found frequently in the Psalter and in the writings of the Chronicler. It was the ritual call to praise God in the Temple during the time of the Chronicler. It is very probable that this couplet was chanted immediately before every psalm during, say, the third and fourth centuries B.C. But this psalm is itself a series of variations with the couplet as the theme. It gives four reasons why men should praise God. First, men who have been lost in the desert must praise Him, for they were lost and doomed to die, until God found them and led them to safety. Second, those who were prisoners must praise Him. They were shackled without hope of liberty, until God shattered their prison bars and set them free. Third, those who have been sick to death must praise Him, for He rescued them from the very brink of the grave. Fourth, those who have been in peril on the high seas must praise Him, for the proud waves had destroyed them unless God had brought them safe home to port.

These four pictures are from the experience of

individual men, but they are more. They are the story of God and His people Israel. This is chiefly why the conclusion of the psalm refers to praise in the congregation of the people and in the assembly of the elders. Their fathers were desert wanderers, like to perish, both Jacob, their Aramaean ancestor, and those whom Moses led out of Egypt. God found them in the waste howling wilderness, bare them as on eagles' wings, and gave them the fruits of Canaan (Deuteronomy xxxii. 10-14; Hosea ix. 10; xiii. 5). They were in bondage in Egypt and again exiled in Babylon, but God struck off their chains, gave them freedom, and brought them back to His Holy Land. They were sick to death, and had well-nigh perished as a nation, but God can bring even dry bones to life. They were scattered among the heathen, until God gathered them home. No one who is familiar with the Book of Jonah can read 'sacrificing sacrifices of joy' without expecting in the following verses references to peril in a great storm at sea. Compare, not only that allegory of Israel's exile and subsequent mission, but also the frequent equation of 'great waters' and 'the heathen', Psalms lxxv. 7; cxliv. 7; Isaiah xvii. 12f. All these wondrous acts of salvation are reasons why Israel, as a community met together in one place and of one accord, should praise the God of their salvation.

The phrase, 'God's deeds of salvation' raises two points. First, to the Hebrews God was known by His acts in history. To them He was never a 'God Who Is', so much as a 'God Who Does'. To them God was transcendent in righteousness—as they said, He is Holy—but this never meant that He was apart from His world. There was never any discussion as to the Being of God, nor ever any ultimate doubt of His Doing. Their concern, and sometimes a cause of bewilderment, was *how* He would Do, and *when*. God is always active in His world. Even when the influx of foreign ideas partly destroyed their sense of intimacy with God, they never doubted that He was still active in His world, though

they came to think of His acting by proxy. The error of many moderns is in thinking of the transcendence of God in terms of space. Perhaps this is inevitable because we have necessarily to express our thoughts in words determined by our experience in a space-time world. Even the Jews came to place God afar off in some ultimate heaven, but this was not so in the time of those prophets whom God raised up to His glory and for the salvation of His people Israel.

Second, the Mighty Acts of the Lord, His deeds of Salvation, and His Righteous Acts, are one and the same. The phrases are used interchangeably. There is no separation between His love and His righteousness. Many people put God's love on one side and His righteousness on the other, as though there are two conflicting purposes in the mind of God. They then proceed to say that His love must satisfy the demands of His righteousness, and so they proceed easily to the statement that God must have some sacrifice offered to Him, that He must receive some sort of satisfaction before He can, or will, forgive men. But there is no conflict between the Righteousness of God and His Love. It is unwise to speak of God's 'righteous love', as though His love has to be qualified in order to make it Divine, or to prevent it from being sentimentality. His Love is His righteousness. It does not involve kindness at any price. Because it includes the most stringent demands for righteousness, there is always involved in it the awful Wrath of God against Sin.

All this is involved from the beginning in the Hebrew word which is here translated 'goodness'. This English word has been chosen to stand for the Hebrew word *chesed*, because it can mean both 'kindness' and 'rightness'. The word stands primarily for the attitude which each party to a covenant should maintain towards the other. It is essentially associated with the idea of covenant, and has no meaning apart from that idea. In the Old Testament it is found again and again in company with the word 'truth', or better 'faithfulness'

(e.g. Psalm lxxv. 10; lxxxix. 14; &c.). Both are covenant words, the one expressing the relation of the two parties, the other emphasizing the necessity of continuing to keep faith. The idea of the Covenant is the basis of Hebrew religion. Traditionally from Sinai, established even before that with the patriarchs, renewed again in the time of the good King Josiah, restored in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra, and given newness of life in the stirring times of the Maccabees—in every glorious age of Hebrew-Jewish life, the Covenant is the focus of the revival. The Hebrews were essentially a Covenant-people. This Covenant involved loyalty and faithfulness from both parties. The prophets claimed that the people had never really kept their part of the Covenant. They were not loyal to Jehovah, but had persistently turned aside to worship other gods. With the eighth-century prophets came the insistence that God demanded from the people righteousness, and would be content with nothing less. To say that God would prosper their way because they were His people was not enough; they must also 'do justly, and love *chesed*, and walk humbly' with their God. Here again Israel failed. From his own personal experience, Hosea realized that, whilst God could never be satisfied with anything short of righteousness, yet there were no lengths to which He would not go in order to win their wayward hearts to Him once more. Even though Israel, like Hosea's wife, again and again was false to the Covenant, yet God, like Hosea, persisted, in face of every disappointment, in carrying out His part in the Covenant, faithfulness or no faithfulness, deserving or undeserving, but always the demand for righteousness stands. Here is the historical foundation for the Christian Doctrine of Grace. The word 'grace' does not mean 'kindness' and 'gentleness' independent of 'righteousness'. Those ideas go back, not to the Hebrew word *chesed*, but to another Hebrew word, *chen*, which means 'graciousness' without any ethical content. The Love of God is not that. It is wrath against Sin; all

His good gifts to all; infinite mercy to those who turn to Him; and life everlasting to those who love and trust Him. The middle wall of partition was broken down when Jesus came, and His Covenant is wide, and brings in all our race.

### Psalm XXXIV

#### WITNESS

I will praise the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall boast of the Lord; let the humble hear and rejoice. Magnify the Lord with me; let us extol His Name together.

I sought the Lord, and He answered me. He delivered me from all my terrors. Men have looked to Him, and become radiant; nor were they put to shame. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard; from all his sore straits He saved him. The angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him, and delivers them.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy is the man who seeks refuge in Him. Fear the Lord, ye His saints. There is no lack to those who fear Him. Young lions, with all their vigour, may be in want and famished from hunger, but they that turn to the Lord will have no lack of good fortune.

Come, my sons, hear me. Let me teach you what is this 'fear of the Lord'. Who is there that does not want life, and to see many years of prosperity? Then guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from slander. Seek peace; do more than that, pursue it. The eyes of the Lord are on the upright, and His ears are open to hear their cry; but His face is set hard against evil-doers to cut off their very memory from the earth.

'They cried and the Lord heard, and from all their sore straits He delivered them'. The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and He saves those whose spirit is crushed. The evils of the upright may be many, but the Lord can deliver him from them all, keep all his bones whole, so that never a one of them is broken.

Evil brings death to the wicked man, and those that hate the upright must pay the penalty. But the Lord ransoms the life of His servants, and none of those that seek refuge in Him pay the penalty.

The psalmist is declaring to his fellows what God has done for him. He was once in sore distress. He cried to God, and God delivered him. God gave him happiness and prosperity. He gives the testimony of his own experience in order that others also should 'taste and see'. Men say that, when a poor man cries to God in his distress, God saves him. The psalmist says, like the woman of Samaria, that he believes this not because others have told him, but because he has found it so in his own experience.

He speaks again and again in the first part of the psalm about 'fearing God'. He proceeds then to explain what exactly he means by this 'fear of God'. It means doing what is right, being honest and upright in his dealing with his fellows. He maintains that the man who does that is sure to live long and prosper. Like the twenty-seventh psalmist, he is confident that the righteous man will see God's goodness in the land of the living, this side the grave. So far, so good, and the Christian will agree with that. The psalmist, however, interprets this to mean safety from harm during this life, if not, indeed, prosperity. It may be that the upright man will meet with many evils, but God is certain to deliver him from every one of them. Here the psalmist is in line with the psalmists generally. The prosperity of the righteous was one of the cardinal beliefs of the post-Deuteronomic age. See Psalms 112, 84, and especially those two psalms written by two old men, 37 and 71.

Were these psalmists particularly fortunate, or were they insisting upon their beliefs against the obvious facts of experience? Did no good men die in sorrow, and pain, and want in their day? Did every good man prosper, and every bad man come to a bad end? If so, life was very different then from what it is now. We have seen, and every day we read it in our newspapers, innocent men and women and children suffering untold privations and horrors. There are disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons, with their dreadful devastation and loss of life. There are accidents to the workers in dangerous occupations, some of them undoubtedly due to the fact that these occupations are more dangerous than they need be. There are wars and revolutions, due definitely to the greed and selfishness of men, sometimes of one side, and sometimes of both sides. Perhaps these things are intensified in our day, but these psalmists must have seen something of such happenings in their own times. Nevertheless, facts or no facts, the psalmists remain confident that God stands by the righteous, that the wicked meet with a just retribution, or that, if darkness does come to the righteous, it is merely a temporary eclipse.

The psalmists were quite right on the main issue, that righteousness and happiness go hand in hand. Their difficulty was that, having no belief in any real life after death, they had perforce to maintain that everything was to work out rightly on this earth. If a man was ever to see good, then he had to see it this side the grave. For some 'to see good' meant prosperity in earthly things, honour from men, children and posterity, but some psalmists, such as, for instance, the thirty-seventh in verse 16, had begun to realize that the poor man could be happy when he had the root of true religion in his heart. We know, in these days, more surely than they did of old, that riches and poverty have nothing to do with happiness and joy. We know that for every son of man there is a Peace that flows like a river. We know that a man can 'see God' here

and now, and that in the practice of the Presence of God there is Joy. Some of the psalmists knew this, but we have nineteen hundred years of Christian experience behind us. Furthermore, the belief in another life other than this present life that ends in death makes all the difference. There is another way, independent of things that can be seen, in which the faithfulness and the goodness of God can be manifested in human experience. We are not shut up to things as those Hebrews of old were. There is for us the Hope of Heaven and the Promise of Eternity.

So much for the fate of the righteous, but what of the ultimate fate of the wicked? There is with this psalmist a certainty concerning the doom of all those who do not seek their refuge in God. This same conviction was seen in the first psalm. It is the teaching, not only of the Old Testament generally, but also of the New Testament. Our Lord Himself speaks of the fires of the Valley of Hinnom which were burning continuously the rubbish of the Holy City. He speaks of the outer darkness into which the wicked and the faithless are cast. The Gospel according to John makes very clear the alternatives of Darkness and Light, Death and Life. On every page we read, in one form or another, that the wages of sin is death. It is, therefore, by no means as obvious as some would suggest that everybody must be saved at last. Universalism may be true, but there is a facile Universalism to which men adhere because they have no true conception of the awfulness of Sin. Our Lord Himself does not seem here to make the whole matter clear. On the one hand, He speaks of doom and darkness and death, but on the other, we know very well that there are no limits to the saving grace of God. The answer is God's, not ours. There are some things we cannot know, and cannot solve. One thing is true, that if it were a matter of deserving, then no man would ever be saved. The salvation of any man, whoever he be, is the work of the grace of God. It is a result of the Love of God,

and not of any man's striving or deserving. So that the matter is all in God's hand in any case. Herein is one of the greatest dilemmas of Christian experience. It is true that man must turn to God, yet those who turn are exactly those who say that even their very turning was the work of God's grace. The answer is wrapped up in the mystery of God. This much we certainly know, that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and that it is not we who chose Him, but He that has chosen us.

## QUESTIONS

### PSALM I

1. 'I want to be happy.' The philosopher went further, and called Happiness the Ultimate Good. Was he right?
2. 'Happiness is the result of the automatic functioning of every part of the personality.' Does the psalmist's 'tree transplanted by the water-channels' mean any more than the psychologist's 'integrated personality'?
3. What do we mean by Fellowship? Is fellowship in the Church the same as fellowship with God? Can I be 'in Christ' without being in the Church?
4. What is the difference between the Church and the 'community of the upright'? Must we be upright in order to have fellowship, or is uprightness the sequel?
5. 'Whatever happens, it flourishes.' Does this mean the same as Paul meant in Romans viii. 28? Suppose we don't flourish, what then?
6. Has the first psalmist an adequate idea of sin?

### PSALM XXVII

7. Can I know that I am saved? Ought I to be sure about it? How can I be sure?
8. 'Salvation is the Christian way of being safe.' Is that all? The New Testament speaks rather of being *saved*. Why? (References, please.)
9. Saved from what? and to what end?
10. This psalmist's chief desire is to gaze upon God. Is the vision of God the true reward and aim of the Christian life? Look up Hymn 657, verse 4, and Hymn 73, verse 7; and reconcile them.
11. 'The Lord is my light' (v. 1) . . . 'I am indeed seeking thee' (v. 8). Can both statements be true? Charles Wesley says, 'Seek the Lord, whom ye have found' (Hymn 628). Do you know what he means?

### PSALM LI

12. Do you agree with this psalmist that man is born a sinner? Is there a difference between 'sin' and 'sins'?
13. Must confession always have place in our prayers? Read Hymn 465, verse 4. What is 'the pride that lurks within'?
14. 'The authentic Christian is an energized personality; by his union with Christ he knows the secret of inward replenishment, and his career becomes a miracle of vitality' (W. R. Maltby). Is this 'the joy of thy salvation'? Have you anything to add?
15. A young convert writes: 'At first I thought that Christianity was cramping my style. Well, perhaps it was? What sacrifice *does* God require of us?'
16. 'By His one oblation of Himself once offered.' How do you think of the sacrifice of Jesus?
17. 'To think beautiful thoughts . . . this modern civilization . . . harnessing the physical universe' (p. 16). Are (a) art, (b) the League, (c) physical science all 'broken cisterns'?
18. How should I set about teaching transgressors?

## PSALM CVII

19. In this psalm men cried to God only in their direst extremity. Is this necessary in Christian experience?

20. 'God is full of love, but He is also a God of righteousness.' Is this right?

21. Why should we worship God? In what does worship consist?

22. Why the 'congregation of the people' and 'the assembly of the elders'? Can I not worship God by myself?

23. 'To the Hebrews God was known by His acts in history' (p. 21). Did the coming of Jesus alter all that? Is God still 'working His purpose out'?

24. Matthew vii. 1. Are we too intolerant in regard to non-Christian behaviour, opinions, beliefs? The Church is universal. In what sense is it also exclusive?

## PSALM XXXIV

25. What can *we* do by way of witness?

26. Has prosperity anything to do with right living? Would you say that happiness is the reward of right living?

27. Do you believe verse 16?

28. Does God speak to the world through calamity? Look up Hymn 502, verse 4. What is 'the judgement of this world'? Is it really now?

29. 'He will neither bribe, nor coerce, nor shock us into loving Him' (W. R. Maltby). Do you agree?

30. Did we choose Him, or has He chosen us? (John xv. 16).

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