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THE BOOK of Psalms

1) Psalm 1

This Psalm is introductory to the whole Psalter, the text, as it were, for which the whole Psalter is the sermon. In its brief compass of a few verses it presents a vivid contrast - two portraits, two men, two ways, two lives. There is no 'in-between' of tolerable happiness. It is an 'either/or', the one world or the other. We cannot belong to both. It is striking that in the description of the blessedness in 1 there is such a negative emphasis. This should teach us to beware of adopting the easy cliché of modern times that Christianity is a positive thing. The idea and desire of course is to present the faith in as bright a light as possible but the danger is that we extract all the challenge from the gospel and present it as the latest tranquilliser. Our Lord's words to the rich young ruler make such an attitude very questionable. The fact is, 'negative' attitudes do not necessarily repel. They excite interest and curiosity as they summon people to think. We certainly should not be afraid of them. We should also note the fateful progression inherent in evil in 1 – 'walketh...standeth...sitteth', and 'ungodly...sinners...scornful'. We should consider what this teaches us about the hardening power of sin, recognising that the significance of 'seat' is that it is the place of instruction, where sin is taught to others. How solemn!

The contrast between the wicked and the godly lies not in terms of behaviour or conduct, but of the fountainhead of the godly's life, which is the law of the Lord. This refers not merely to the commandments or even (for the Psalmist) the Pentateuch but the whole divine revelation. It is the man who has been captured by this who has found the secret of true blessedness. A good illustration of this is found in Joshua 1: at the outset of a life of battle and action we see Joshua with the real secret of sustaining victory. This is where the obedience of faith will lead us.

2) Psalm 2

The message of this Psalm enables us to set the tragic predicament of our age - and of any age - in its proper context, against the background of the government of God. It is significant that it begins with the word 'Why'. This is the question mark that is writ large across the face of civilisation today. It sums up the bewilderment, the anxiety and the fear of man. Why is our world in such a turmoil? Why the constant shadow and threat of war? Why the continual tension, with men's hearts failing them for fear? The sound of its many voices is heard here, from the cry of distracted peoples and nations to the lonely despair of the sorrowing and the bereaved. The Psalm answers these questions, insofar as any answer can be given; but it also requires us to ask 'Why?' in a different tone of voice, with indignation and astonishment, at the senselessness of the turmoil in face of the divine government of the world. This is the standpoint of faith. In a sense, the whole message of the Psalm is summed up in these two aspects of the question.

There are four stanzas in the Psalm, and in each we hear a different voice speaking - the heathen, the Lord, His anointed, and the Psalmist. In the first (1-3) the question is posed, and the reason for the turmoil and the raging of the nations is given: they have rebelled against the Lord and against His anointed, and have openly expressed the determination to throw off the bands of divine restraint. In the second (4-6) the picture changes completely, and we see how futile it is for the nations to rage, for God is on his throne and in control. Here all is peace and calm. Nothing disturbs the atmosphere in the secret place of the Most High. He sits in undisturbed majesty. We are thus bidden to look up, and fix our gaze upon Him. When we do, we are able to share in the divine laughter, for He has already done what His enemies seek to prevent: His Son has been enthroned and evil has forever lost the initiative in the world. More about this in the next Note.

3) Psalm 2

In the third stanza of the Psalm (7-9) the enthronement of the Son is described, with its far-reaching implications. We should certainly think of New Testament teaching in this regard, especially such passages as Philippians 2:9ff, where Paul speaks of Christ being given a name which is above every name. The words in 8, 'Ask of Me...' are very wonderful. Not only is the assurance of the extension of His kingdom throughout the world in view, through the preaching of the gospel, but also the coming of the kingdom in power through the coming of the King. This is the real hope - and the only hope - of a true solution to the world's ills. The Bible teaches - and the church believes - that Christ shall come again the second time, to judge the world in righteousness and put down all his enemies. That is why we must not put our trust, or pin our hopes, on the United Nations, or on any other movement, political or otherwise, least of all on those led by men who themselves have rebelled against God and ignored His holy laws - but alone on the return of the King. We look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

The final stanza (10-12) is an appeal by the Psalmist, in the light of the enthroned King and the coming judgment, that men should be wise and humble themselves before God, before the rod of His anger reaches them. It is a call to repentance, to delay no longer, in face of the situation as it really is, and to turn in obedience and submission to God. This is the biblical message for the turmoil of our world, to nations and to men alike. The Psalm closes with a beautiful assurance: 'Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him'. The word 'trust' here means 'take refuge in', and this is perhaps the best word in view of the turmoil and dreads of our frightening world. God is a refuge for all who will come to Him.

4) Psalm 3

The title given to this Psalm indicates that the circumstances it describes are associated with David's flight to Jerusalem at the time of Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15). This enables us the more fully to appreciate the heart cries it contains. In the first stanza (1, 2) David exclaims about the increase of his enemies, as he feels the overwhelming weight of the adverse circumstances around him. This is a morning Psalm (5), and these are his first thoughts on awakening. This is so true to experience: after the respite that sleep gives, we wake and for a moment or two our minds and hearts are calm, then the sudden inrush of remembered circumstances of distress sweeps upon our consciousness with the fierceness almost of a physical blow. David's distress was all the more acute because he felt the force of what his enemies were saying and could see the probability of its being true. 2 Samuel 11 shows us that the great blot on David's life story, the sin with Bathsheba, was to dog his footsteps to the end of his days and that there was a direct connection between that sin and the rebellion of Absalom. When Shimei cursed David in his flight, the king said to his followers, 'Let him alone, the Lord hath bidden him' (2 Samuel 16:11). There is no desolation quite like this in the human spirit, it is a dark night indeed for a man when such an overwhelming comes upon him. The important thing for us to see here, however, is what David does in such a predicament: he refuses to allow himself to be overwhelmed, and with a definite act and attitude of faith he pushes back the oppressive thoughts over the frontiers of his mind to regain his peace and composure. How he succeeds in doing this is by turning his mind to a contemplation of the Lord and what He is to those who trust in Him. The dark pressures are displaced by something grander and greater. This is the great testimony of this Psalm.

5) Psalm 3

Quiet contemplation of God as He has revealed Himself to us and as we have known Him in our experience - this is ever the way forward, and the way out of dark despair. We should note the significance of the imperfect tenses in 4, which denote repeated action or habit: 'As often as I called He heard me'. There is something important here. David is expressing the habit of his life, he has a relationship with God and in that communion he has proved God; and therefore in the present crisis he has something to fall back on. As someone has put it, 'feet accustomed to the road to God can find it in the dark'. The third stanza (5, 6) expresses a very wonderful experience. Here was David, beset all around by enemies, in great danger and peril of his life, yet he is able to lie down and sleep like a little child, conscious of the presence and sustaining power of the Lord. This is the grace of detachment: God does not promise us freedom from trouble and trial, or deliverance always from affliction but deliverance in trial, freedom in affliction, peace in war. This is the heritage of the people of God. And so, from detachment he passes to boldness and fearless courage (6) - what a contrast to the desperate spirit expressed in 1, 2! This, in turn, leads to a confident faith expressing itself in prayer (7, 8) 'Arise, O Lord', is the war cry of the people of God (cf Numbers 10:35) for his enemies to be scattered. The passage from fear to faith is wonderfully outlined in this little Psalm. O that we might learn to walk it in our own experience!

6) Psalm 4

Psalm 3 is a morning hymn, after a night spent safely in the midst of danger; this is an evening hymn, when the danger, though less imminent, has not yet passed away. The frame of mind gained in the previous Psalm, of confidence, trust and detachment, is maintained and developed here. In 1 we have the Psalmist's prayer, the ground of which is first of all the reality of his covenant God, the 'God of my righteousness' and secondly, the reality of past deliverances. Remembrance of past grace always gives confidence in present need, and the remembrance of the grace given the previous day (3:5), and of the sustaining presence of God gives him confidence for the night that had now come upon him. It is this that explains the confidence expressed in 8. Next, from appealing to God, David turns to remonstrate with his enemies (2-5). This he does from the standpoint of faith, a standpoint reached through prayer (1). Prayer is always the first need, it is thus that we are enabled to see things in their true perspective. Already he is confident that the rebellion is vanity and lies (this is the same sort of thought as in Psalm 2, 'Why do the heathen rage...?'). His enemies might save themselves their trouble for God will set them at naught. Why he is so sure of this is revealed in 3 - God has set apart the godly for Himself, and his care and protection are ever about him. They must therefore realise that in attacking and opposing him they are in open revolt against God Himself. This is the real crux of the matter, and the key to what follows. It is highly dangerous to touch the Lord's anointed and he therefore warns them to have done with their revolt. It is as if he were saying, 'Let this knowledge of what you are doing bring an awe upon your hearts: think upon your position and meditate quietly on its implications. Be ye reconciled to God'.

7) Psalm 4

As indicated in the previous Note, 3-5 constitute a warning to reflect before it is too late but David goes still further, exhorting his enemies to turn to righteousness and put their trust in the Lord. In so doing he wonderfully exemplifies the Saviour when he said 'Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you...'. He meets the hatred of his foes with earnest pleadings that they might turn to God. It is not certain whether 6 applies to David's own followers beginning now to despond, or to his enemies whom he is still trying to win. Either way, the verse contrasts the despairing and even cynical cry of the heart that has no true anchorage and has found no living fountain at which to quench its thirst, with the calm confidence that one who has learned the secret and knows the way into fulness of life (7). It is in this spirit, filled with the fulness of God, that the Psalmist can lie down in perfect peace and sleep, calm in the knowledge that an all-sufficient God holds him in the hollow of His hand. If in fact his own followers were beginning to be despondent as we have suggested, it is not difficult to realise what an impact this sublime expression of faith in the midst of his foes would have upon them. What could have shown them more unmistakably that such a faith really works!

8) Psalm 5

It is striking to see in so many of the Psalms the sense of conflict with enemies. This is the inevitable accompaniment of true spiritual life. To walk in fellowship with God is to be at war with Satan and unrighteousness. This is a salutary corrective to the kind of teaching on the spiritual life which represents it as a long day of sunshine - 'Now I am happy all the day'. Nor was David on a lower level of spiritual experience than the New Testament - Paul's life was like this also: he had conflicts - 'fightings without, fears within', like the Psalmist. The Christian position is not 'Delivered from these we are more than conquerors', but 'In all these things we are more than conquerors'. This Psalm shows us the way to victory. We might well paraphrase its meaning thus: 'What to do when under pressure'. This is the virtue of the Psalter: we extract general principles for living from the particular and concrete situations in which the Psalmist found himself, and apply them to our own needs, in the faith that the grace that met him will meet us also. The Psalm falls into two stanzas, 1-7, dealing with the inward side of the devout life, its access to God, and 8-12, dealing with the outward side, the conduct, the 'way' in which the Psalmist seeks to be led. The one follows the other, naturally and inevitably. Communion with God precedes all walking in His way, and all blessed experience of His protection, with the joy that springs from it. 'What to do under pressure?' First maintain communion with God; second, ask Him to level out the way before you, removing obstacles (is not He the God Who makes the rough places plain?); third, look for an answer to your prayer: 3 is followed by 8, this is the prayer for which he looks to God for an answer; finally, the resultant experience is expressed in 11, 12: joy and peace.

9) Psalm 5

We look now in greater detail at what the Psalm says about communion with God. There are different kinds of prayer, spoken and unspoken, words, meditation (1), and cry (2). Silent thought can be spread out before God without words. Thus, in 3, 'In the morning Thou shalt hear my voice' comes before 'I will order my prayer before Thee'. This means, when the heart is meditating, the ear of God is open, and ready for us when meditation becomes vocal and articulate. The reality of this communion is indicated in the words 'my King, and my God' (2). The thought of 'ordering' his prayer is also significant. The word is used of arranging the materials for the morning sacrifice on the altar of the Lord. To the Psalmist, prayer is worship - beautiful thought - not a question of rushing in blindly or in urgent panic, but ordering his prayer in a spirit of worship. Nothing here of prayer as a last desperate resort, but the natural and instinctive expression of a heart confidence in a real God, that flows from real communion with Him. The prayer itself, in 8, expresses not so much fear of falling into his enemies' hands as fear that, 'if left to himself, he may take some step which will give them occasion for malicious joy in his fall or his calamity' (Maclaren). Many eyes are upon the God-fearing soul, watching for the first mistake, the first fall. 'Plain' in 8 does not mean 'unambiguous' or 'obvious', but 'level', 'free from stumbling-blocks' (cf 'I will make all My mountains a way', Isaiah 49:11). The expectation of an answer to his prayer (this is the force of 'look up' in 3; it means 'keep watch', for he is on the outlook for an answer!) leads inevitably to joy and peace. We should observe the terms used in these verses: 'put their trust' is one of the characteristic words in the Old Testament for faith, and has the force of 'fleeing as to a refuge'; 'love Thy Name' is an eloquent description of the believer; no cerebral or merely intellectual assent to doctrine here, but real heart involvement; only thus can men be truly called 'righteous'. Faith, love, righteousness - these are the only true bases of joy and peace.

10) Psalm 6

This Psalm is commonly known as the first of the Penitential Psalms (the others being Psalms 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143). There are two lines of interpretation, one particular and the other more general. We look at the one today, and the other in the next Note. We take it first in a particular sense, as it has come to be regarded - the cry of a soul under the conviction of the Holy Spirit of God, and the working of true penitence and faith. We draw three lessons in particular, and first of all, the anxious and distracted state of the Psalmist. He is trembling under a deep sense of divine displeasure and anger. The terrors of hell have got hold on him. This is the force of 1: the words 'not in Thine anger' imply, in effect, 'I am conscious of Thy hand heavy upon me, but let it not be the hand of judgment and doom. Chastening for correction I can bear, but let it not be doom'. He fears that it may be just that, and this is what terrifies him so much. His whole being is affected, body as well as soul (2, 3). This is not exaggerated language, but true to experience, as records of past revival movements abundantly show. The loss of such a sense of sin is surely one of the greatest tragedies of our modern age. Felix trembled under Paul's preaching, men were pricked in their hearts by Peter's, and in times of awakening thousands have wept their way to Christ in deepest distress of soul - but today, a lighter vein seems to suffice. A sense of separation from God also fills the Psalmist with distress (3, 4a, 6). When we sin, and thereby lose the presence of God, it is by no means easy to recover it. Bunyan's Holy War makes this point very graphically, in the long waiting experienced by the City of Mansoul for the return of Emmanuel after He had been grieved away. True, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive but who can guarantee confession after we have sinned? We have no assurance that we will want to, or be able to, forsake sin, when we like. Repentance is something that God gives to His children. But the Psalmist did break through to peace (8), but this took place in connection with a severance from the workers of iniquity. It is not tears only, but turning that is the critical issue. There has to be a forsaking of sin. God forgives the past - but it has to be past!

I I) Psalm 6

The Psalm has a more general application also. Here is a soul in distress, compassed about by pressures from foes. We may take this in the most general sense as seeing in it a reflection of our own frequent experience of trouble and trial, with the soul's plaint (1-3), the distress, the fear of divine displeasure, and the wondering whether sin had brought this pressure upon us. There is the threefold cry for deliverance (4, 5): return, deliver, save. Someone has pointed out that the words 'O Lord' occur five times in the first four verses and says 'Is not this a proof that the glorious Name is full of consolation to the tempted saint?' But there is also a distressing sense of the absence of God: in 6, 7 commentators point out that God is excluded in these verses by the very intensity of grief and distress, with the soul inverted and intuned upon its own woes. Brooding upon his misery, all is dark for the Psalmist. 'All sad hearts are tempted to shut out God, and to look only at their griefs. There is a strange pleasure in turning round the knife in the wound and recounting the tokens of misery'. This, however, constitutes a temptation: we must refuse ourselves this luxury of self-pity. It is precisely here, in the darkness that God meets with the Psalmist. One recalls the striking words of Exodus 20:21, 'Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was'. This was the Psalmist's experience: in the midst of the bitter darkness there comes a sudden flash of light, and he realises that God has come and has answered his cry. Circumstances are as yet unchanged, but everything now is different, since God has spoken (8, 9). His loving kindness has broken through the midnight of the soul.

12) Psalm 7

This is one of the Psalms in which the background is important for an appreciation of its message and meaning. The title of the Psalm speaks of 'the words spoken by Cush, the Benjamite', and this may well date the Psalm as belonging to the period of David's life in which he was 'on the run' from Saul, and when evil men were misrepresenting him to the king and speaking lies about him (cf 1 Samuel 24-26, and especially the double experience of saving the king's life when he had it in his power to kill him, 24:9, 26:19. There seems to be a particular reference to these incidents in 4). One prominent lesson here is the one we saw in Psalm 5, the sense of conflict with enemies as being the inevitable accompaniment of true spiritual life and service for God. If we are to engage in the Lord's service we are likely to be 'in the thick of it', and battles and conflicts will be the order of the day. There are three sections in the Psalm: a cry for deliverance (1-5); an appeal for judgment (6-10); a vision of judgment (11-17). The context as we have described it must condition our interpretation and understanding of 1-5. If they stood alone, we might suppose that David is merely being self-righteous in the protestations of innocence he makes in 3-5. He is not however claiming sinlessness, but protesting his innocence of particular charges that have been made against him (so also in 8). An evidence of these false, unjust charges may be seen in 1 Samuel 24:9. We should remember that our Lord warned His disciples that men would revile and persecute them, and say all manner of evil against them falsely for His sake. In view of the fierceness of these charges (2), it is well that we should realise, for our comfort and assurance, that it is for His sake that we suffer them, and that this is the root cause of all the persecution that befalls those who seek to serve Him.

13) Psalm 7

The phrase that best describes the kind of pressures spoken of in the previous Note is 'the offence of the Cross', and this is as true for the man who preaches the Word, and for the witness at home or in the office or workshop. And this is what happens: through the faithful testimony of the servant of God, the Word comes to men. Some respond, and welcome it, and are blessed and transformed; but others are offended at the word (as Jesus said!) and a terrible resistance is set up in their hearts. Nothing maddens a man more, or stirs up all that is ugly in him, than the Word of life when he is bent on resisting it. And the luckless servant of the Word, be he in pulpit, home or office, gets the brunt of it: he becomes the focal point of their ire - they dare not admit, even to themselves, that their quarrel is really with the Almighty (that would be too frightening) and so the arrows are directed at His representatives, and all their venom goes out on them. It is this that explains not only the sneers and derision, but worse still the evil speaking and lies, and misrepresentation from those who have been convicted, rebuked and condemned by the grace that they have encountered in genuine servants of God. It was because David was the Lord's anointed, and destined to be king, that he was maligned by his foes. But there is always a vindication in the offing, and it is this that the remainder of the Psalm speaks of, as we shall see in the next Note.

14) Psalm 7

What we have in 6-10 is an appeal for judgment, and this is followed in 11-17 by a vision of judgment. The first verses represent a longing for vindication in the Psalmist's heart - surely a natural one - in the midst of all the maligning; and those that follow represent God's assurance to His sorely tried servant that that vindication will surely come. This is very graphically illustrated by a word in Isaiah 54:17, 'No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord'. David cries to the Lord to arise and awake for him (6). He obviously knows the Lord, for in the vision that follows the Lord is represented as standing at the ready to deal with those who malign and persecute His servants (12,13), and as turning the mischief they had planned for David against themselves (16). What this says to us is this: 'Child of God, hard-pressed and misrepresented, take heart and courage, for God will vindicate you, and you will yet praise Him' (17).

There are, of course, other kinds of false accusations and misgivings in the believer's experience, and they come from unseen foes, from Satan himself. And these are even more like the ferocity of a roaring lion (2). One thinks of Bunyan's Christian in the Valley of Humiliation, and the fearsome voices and accusations coming in to him so confusingly that he almost began to think he was guilty of them. When we fit this Psalm into such an experience we have a wonderful word of hope, for - there is a refuge (1); and God will vindicate (11). Wait, I say, on the Lord!

15) Psalm 8

This is a notable utterance, and done in the grand manner. It is a Psalm of purest worship and adoration, and full of deep doctrinal teaching. The theme of the Psalm is the marvel of God's choice of man to be the chief revelation of Himself, and His representative on earth. What this statement means will become clear as we study what the Psalm says. It is bounded, at the beginning and end, by a glorious ascription of praise, 'How excellent is Thy Name in all the earth', and within the opening and closing verses the revelation of that Name on earth is opened up. The theme, then, is this: 'There is a twofold revelation of 'the Name of the Lord' - in the heavens, which declare His glory and in the insignificance of man, here represented by 'babes and sucklings'. The Psalmist is intent upon contrasting these two forms of divine manifestation, and the second section of the Psalm (3-8) amplifies and explains why the latter revelation is greater than the former. The glory of the heavens is something which stands in its own right in the Psalter, and is many times referred to and exulted in by Old Testament saints. There is no doubt that a contemplation of the glories of the heavens, with their myriads of galaxies and nebulae, brings home to every thoughtful soul man's relative insignificance and nothingness. In this space age, when the vastnesses of the universe are being accentuated, this feeling is intensified a thousand-fold. The words in 4, 'what is man...?' are meant to convey this. But - and this is what transforms and explains everything - God is mindful of him and has visited him, conferring upon him a dignity and a destiny. This is why the revelation even in babes and sucklings is greater by far. The suns and stars in space, glorious and awe-inspiring as they are, will one day be no more - but there will still be men, sharing the eternal glory of God forever. That is the thrust of the Psalm.

16) Psalm 8

Three things are said about man in this Psalm - that he is a little lower than the angels (a little less than divine), that he is crowned with glory and honour, and that he is lord of the creatures on earth. The implications of these statements are considerable: that he is made in the divine image, that he is thus invested with some reflection of God's glory, and that he is the crown of God's creation, and as such has delegated authority. This is a wonderful statement on the biblical doctrine of man; but it is man as God meant him to be, not man as he is now. It is man's position, nature and destiny in the original purposes of God. And man is very different today, because of the Fall, which brought tragedy and misery into the original grandeur of man's nature. The Psalm is therefore no longer a statement of fact; but it does stand as a prophecy of what God's ultimate purposes for man are through the gospel. This is taken up in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 15, and particularly in Hebrews 2:8: 'We see not yet all things put under him'. This is the gospel hope. The 'not yet' will give way to full realisation when Jesus comes again; for in Christ this Old Testament ideal is realised and fulfilled. Of Him the Psalmist's words are true, and always were true, and because this is so, it will ultimately be true of us. Because He lives, we shall live also. And the presence of the glorified Jesus, the God-man, in heaven is the pledge and guarantee that all who trust in Him will also attain to that blessed ideal portrayed prophetically in the Psalm. We see Jesus (Hebrews 2:9) - this is the all-important reality, for although we see mankind - ourselves included - fallen from God's high destiny through sin, we see also, in Him, that destiny restored and secured. How excellent is that Name, that wonderful Name, in all the earth!

17) Psalm 9

In the last Psalm, it was the biblical doctrine of man created in the image of God and destined to share His glory that was the source and inspiration of the Psalmist's worship. Here, it is the knowledge of God and His great Name - the divine character - that leads to the thanksgiving that runs through the whole Psalm, and is the key to an understanding of it. We might well call it 'An exercise in praise and prayer'. It divides into two sections, 1-12 and 13-20, with a similar pattern unfolding in each: Praise and prayer (1-4 and 13, 14); accomplished judgment (5, 6 and 15, 16); future judgment (7-10 and 17, 18); and finally, praise and prayer (11, 12 and 19, 20). The development of thought from the first section to the second is this: In the first, the Psalmist is thinking solely in terms of a recent deliverance, and on the basis of that assures himself. In the second, however, he has become conscious again that although one great victory has been won, there are other enemies to fight, and that 'the time for praise mingled with petition has not yet come for him, as it never comes for any in this life'. But this is the point - his prayer takes note of the dangers still threatening, but it only glances at these, and then once more turns to look at the accomplished deliverance, and the thought of how he had once been brought from the very gates of death heartens him to pray for all further help needed. In other words, the confidence of the prayer is strengthened and conditioned by the reality of the praise that has emerged from the experience of God's grace. This is very practical. There are times when we are carried away in praise for God's grace and mercy to us, as He has led us into victory and deliverance, and we feel as if there is not a cloud left in the sky. And this is true. But then there is tomorrow and there are fresh problems and challenges to face. There is no victory in life which will end the possibility of having more battles to fight. But our experience of God's victory once will give confidence to our prayer.

18) Psalm 9

There are three main lessons, then, in the Psalm for us. The first is that the experience of past deliverance leads to confidence for future deliverance (note the change of tenses between 1-6 and 7-12), and for this reason: He is the unchangeable God, the same yesterday, today and forever (cf Hebrews 1:11, 12, 'Thou remainest...Thou art the same'). This is a lesson echoed in many Psalms. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:4, 'Experience worketh hope'. One recalls Robert Bruce's advice to doubters, clouded over and in darkness: 'Cast your mind back to a time when you were surer of His love, when He did come to you with messages of grace. Has He changed? Will He repent? Is He a man that He should repent? No. He loved you since, He'll love you aye'. The second lesson takes us from the specific to the general. The Psalmist speaks of God judging right in his particular concern. But he goes on to express his future confidence in God's deliverance in the general terms of God's principles of judgment, and in so doing gives us a deeply important thought. Not merely do we have confidence for the future because we can look back at past deliverances, we have confidence because both past and future deliverance depend on a basic principle, which is this: God has prepared His throne for judgment, and He will judge the world in righteousness. God is a righteous God, and He must vindicate His righteousness on earth. And, as a corollary of this, if He is in control of the whole universe, it will hardly stretch Him to control our little personal world! The third lesson relates to the paradox in the nature of God. He is the God of judgment, to be sure, but He is also a God Who is a refuge for the oppressed (8, 9), and One to be utterly trusted (10). Strength and gentleness go hand in hand in Him; it is the terrible God of judgment Who is so gentle and kind. No other kind of God is worth trusting!

19) Psalm 10

This Psalm is a companion-piece to the previous one, the difference being that in Psalm 9 the theme is the sovereignty of God decisively vindicated in the world by the defeat of Israel's enemies, whereas here the Psalmist's plaint is that within the nation of Israel wrong seemed to be triumphant. So he prays for a similar manifestation of the divine sovereignty within the nation itself. The Psalm falls into two parts, after two introductory verses of petition and remonstrance: in 3-11 we are given a grim picture of the enemy of the poor, and in 12-18 the cry for deliverance and judgment, which receives its assurance of answer in the knowledge of the sovereignty of God. David first describes the character (3-6), then the conduct (7-11) of the wicked. His plaint is against their practical atheism (4), and their contemptuous attitude towards the idea of there being a God at all and the bland assurance that, if there is a God, He will not see their wickedness (6). Then his conduct (7-11), springing from this practical atheism, is described as the prowling of a lion after its prey, showing no mercy. It is a grim picture indeed, but wonderfully offset by the prayer and assurance that the verses that follow unfold.

20) Psalm 10

In the second part of the Psalm (11-18), the prayer of the Psalmist is for God to manifest Himself, and vindicate His Name in the breaking of the power of the enemy. He glows with indignation at the blasphemies which seem for the moment to be triumphant, and cries to God to prove that He does see and will requite. First there is the cry to 'arise' (12) and the complaint at God's seeming apathy (13). Next, prayer fastens on the facts of faith (14): 'Thou hast seen...Thou beholdest'. Faith argues from these facts into a blessed assurance. God sees it (to requite it with Thy hand, i.e. 'to take it in hand'). In 15, 16, faith in the sovereignty of God is expressed in the cry for His hand to break the power of evil, and to set it at naught. Finally, there is the assurance (17, 18) that prayer has been heard, and the entrance into peace.

The Psalm may be applied in a number of ways, as for example to national situations and times of pressure. How relevant this would have been in the days of the Covenanters, when men were persecuted for the Faith. How often the question 'Why does He not do something?' must have been asked in those days! Application can also be made to the inward pressures of the devil in our spiritual lives. One readily thinks of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8, 9, 'pressed out of measure, despairing even of life, the sentence of death upon him' - the seemingly never-ending run of pressure on the spirit. The same may be said of the work of the gospel, and the seeming silence of God when it seems so needful for Him to vindicate and honour the testimony of His Word, when men scoff, and criticise and oppose. We shall say something further about God's silences in the next Note.

21) Psalm 10

When the heavens are as brass, and there is no answer to our agonised prayers, what can be said in answer to the plaint, 'Why doesn't God do something?' It may help us to think of Joseph's experience in the book of Genesis - captivity in Egypt, thrown from Potiphar's household into prison, the forgetfulness of Pharaoh's butler that left him languishing in prison for another two years. How often he must have asked this very question. But later, what he said was 'God meant it unto good'. This is one explanation of the silence of God: it is the trial of our faith, which is much more precious than gold that perisheth. The fire will not burn too hotly. It is the hand of God that stokes the fire and controls its fierceness. Remember the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, who were untouched by the flames. It was a trial, not a destruction! A wise theologian once wrote: 'God is strong enough to resist pity until grief has done its gracious work...'. What a word! Perhaps even now, distressed believer, God is doing something, although you cannot see. Do not forget that while the Israelites in Egypt were thinking and doubtless saying that God had forgotten them, God's deliverance was already an accomplished fact, for a baby had been born into a Levite family, called Moses, who was destined to become Israel's deliverer.

Thrice blessed is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible.
He hides Himself so wondrously
As though there were no God....

With such a God at work, it is hardly surprising that the gamble of the wicked, who said 'God will never see...I shall not be moved' was bound to fail. To gamble thus with issues of life and death and eternity is always fateful and foolish in the extreme. God sees all right, and will act in His own time. That is the comfort - or the terror - of men.

22) Psalm 11

This brief Psalm has a great deal to teach us, reflecting as it does in a variety of ways some fairly common experiences of the faithful in the spiritual life. David is in a situation of real peril, it may be in danger of his life. All the possible circumstances around him are adverse and threatening, and there does not seem any way out, on the human level. When we thus describe his situation, we have already found common ground with our own experience. Our lives may seldom be in actual peril in the way David's was, but there are numerous circumstances which at times hedge us in and press us beyond measure. This is a Psalm about such an experience. It divides into two, following the line of advice given to him by his 'counsellors' and the reply given from the standpoint of faith. David's circumstances may have been the eve of Absalom's rebellion, or the days of persecution under Saul. Either would fit the atmosphere of the Psalm. First of all, David expresses his trust in God. The word 'trust' here has the idea of fleeing to a stronghold, and this is the force of the question 'How say ye to my soul, Flee...', for he had already fled for refuge to God and found shelter in Him. What need was there to flee elsewhere? From 1b-3 we have the suggestions and advice of the timid and fearful counsellors, who urge him to flee as a bird to the mountain, justifying their suggestion by pointing to the treacherous intentions of remorseless enemies. Their appeal is reinforced by the consideration of the impotence of efforts to check the general anarchy (3), as if to say, 'Why wage a hopeless conflict any longer at the peril of life? All is lost: the wise thing to do is to run'.

It is striking to note how earthbound these counsellors were. There is no mention of God in these verses. Granted, the situation was serious, granted it was a time of crisis, and that things had never looked so black and threatening. But for them God seemed to be a forgotten factor, He was left out of their calculations, as a possible answer to the situation. That is the great fault in such counsel, in any circumstance. And it is this that calls the whole of it in question. There are some important implications in this, and we shall consider them in the next Note.

23) Psalm 11

It need not be doubted that the advice given by these counsellors was absolutely sincere. They felt what they were saying, felt the urgency and extremity of the situation and spoke out of a great sense of burden. They loved David. But - and this is the important point - their love was a human love, and no more. 'Is that not enough?', someone will ask. No, it is not enough. Those who love us best on a merely human level may often be our greatest enemies and biggest hindrances in the spiritual life. Their desire is to shield us, protect us, shelter us from the unpleasantness and hazard that standing firm in faith will undoubtedly cause us. Dictated by a warm, sincere concern and love it may be, but if only human, dangerous and even deadly to spiritual life. Alexander Maclaren finely comments: 'Better infinitely to toil on, even when toil seems vain, than cowardly to keep a whole skin at the cost of a wounded conscience, or despairingly to fling up work, because the ground is hard and the growth of the seed imperceptible'. Prudent advice, when the prudence is not inspired by faith but by sense, is never God's way. That is enough to think about, is it not, for one day.

24) Psalm 11

Here is another thought: It does not say who these counsellors were, and it has been suggested that the Psalm may well represent 'a good man's dialogue with himself', and that the advice may well be the voice of his own fears, the whispers of sense and sloth that bid us cut our losses and run. This opens up for us a very significant line of interpretation, for in circumstances such as these, part of us, as we put it, wants to 'get away from it all' (cf Psalm 55, 'O that I had wings like a dove: then would I fly away and be at rest'). And at such times, there is a dialogue that goes on in our hearts, sometimes a furious argument, and a battle for supremacy. One supreme factor in the life of victory for the believer lies just here, in his ability to deal with these 'voices' from the underworld of his heart, and speak to them instead of allowing them to dictate to him.

Much of the trouble in our lives arises when we allow our self to talk to us instead of our talking to our self. In the initial period of the Psalm, when all these thoughts were coming to David's mind and heart, his self was talking to him, reminding him of, and pointing out to him all the adverse circumstances, telling him to run away. Then, he begins to allow the 'other man' in him, the spiritual, to respond and say, 'Now, just listen to me for a moment'. And from that point, the victory was assured. Once this principle is grasped, it will be seen to be of very wide application, for it will answer so many problems. And it is equally true both of the 'other man' within us, the voice of prudence and self-preservation, and of the voice of the devil. And the treatment is the same in both cases. You assert yourself against the other, and tell them where to get off! And David did! 'Look at the opened heaven', he said, 'You say the eyes of the wicked are upon me, but other eyes are also upon me, and upon them too. You say that their bow is drawn, ready to shoot at me; but another bow is also bent and at the ready, which shall shoot off before theirs'. What is happening is that David is reminding himself again of the facts of his faith, as in the previous Psalm, and they are given paramount place in his thinking. And the defeatest counsel is set at naught.

25) Psalm 12

C.H. Spurgeon once said: 'No one knows, but he who has endured it, the solitude of a soul that has outstripped its fellows in zeal for the Lord of hosts; it dares not reveal itself, lest men count it mad; it cannot conceal itself, for a fire burns within its bones; only before the Lord does it find rest'. This is what this Psalm is about - the solitude, the awful sense of isolation that comes upon the servant of God who is intent upon walking close with Him. One commentator begins his exposition of the Psalm with the striking words: 'One penalty of living near God is keen pain from low lives'. A visitor once said to us that it was sensitive people rather than the more jovial extrovert people who were being used of God in their witness today to bless others. This, then, is the theme of the Psalm. It is not exactly spiritual depression, but rather a sense of the agony of the true spiritual life, its costliness and desolation. The setting is uncertain, and several similar times in David's experience have been quoted as probably giving rise to it, as, for example, 1 Samuel 23:11, the citizens of Keilah plotting his betrayal; 1 Samuel 23:19, the Ziphites deliberately meditating treachery; 1 Samuel 26:19, unscrupulous enemies poisoning Saul's mind against him. Any, or all, of these incidents may be fairly reflected in the words of the Psalm - the vanity each speaks with his neighbour, flattering lips and double hearts, and above all, the desolating sense that he stood alone. Surely there is common ground for us here - we may not have David's experience, but the pattern is often there. And is it not true, as it must have been true with David that it is not so much that this sort of experience comes, but that it continues unabated and without relief. It is this that breaks the spirit. We speak of the last straw that breaks the camel's back. This is how it was with him. Well might the commentators quote Elijah there, 'I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life'.

26) Psalm 12

There are two elements in such a situation, one which remains as a constant and the other which is removed by the intervention of God. The constant is the fact of solitude, and the loneliness which belongs to the life of faith. All God's great ones are lonely men - Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist knew this solitude and 'apart-ness' that is of the very essence of the work of God. The other element is the kind of despair or depression that God graciously intervenes to remove, and it is this that the rest of the Psalm is concerned with. This, then, is the paradox of the Christian life: we are committed to a life of solitude if we go on with God, and yet God ever intervenes to deal with the oppression of evil men against us. Such is the understanding of the cry at the beginning of the Psalm for help amid prevailing faithlessness.

We should note the problem that David was facing - flattering lips and double hearts, the sin of one thing being said and another being thought in the heart. This is the curse and condemnation of flattery, which requires to be distinguished from true praise. It is the motive in each that is important. Flattery has an ulterior motive, and this is what exposes it as the shabby thing it is, a form of dishonesty which is inexcusable. Jesus said, 'Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay', that is, become known as a man whose word is of complete integrity. We must mean what we say and say what we mean. Far rather be silent than commit oneself to saying something we do not mean. Discerning people are well able to see through the insincerity and duplicity of double-talk and double-think.

27) Psalm 12

At 5 we have the answer of God to the cry of the oppressed, in words of wonderful assurance, which can be applied both as a general principle of the gospel of grace and as a particular instance of God's gracious intervention on behalf of His people. Indeed, the one depends on the other, for it is because God is a God Who intervenes and arises for the salvation of His people that He can and does intervene on their behalf in all lesser crises. As the Apostle says, 'He that spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' The whole history of the Old Testament bears out this glorious theme, from the promise of deliverance given in Genesis 3:15, through the Exodus story, the many deliverances expressed in David's own turbulent history, Jehoshaphat's and Hezekiah's, to that of the return from Babylon after the Exile. And it is significant how the Psalmist here speaks of the assurance of such deliverance: in 6 he says, 'The words of the Lord are pure words' - not only in contrast to the specious and flattering words of insincere men, as mentioned in 2, but supremely in that the Lord's words are wholly to be relied upon. Hath He said, and will He not do it? It is this that brings assurances to the heart and changes the whole aspect of things, although the situation may as yet - and for long enough - remain unchanged. The phrase 'as silver tried in a furnace' stresses the degree of purity, and there is at least a hint, in the analogy of the furnace, of the sufferings of God Himself: His Word is trustworthy because it is the Word made flesh and also made sin, in the crucible of suffering. He Who so suffered for us may surely be trusted to do what He has promised to do!

28) Psalm 13

This Psalm opens with a desolate and anguished cry. There is an intensity and agony. The Psalmist is 'up against it', and there seems no relief in his situation, no light in the darkness. There are three stanzas, each of two verses. First of all, there is his complaint (1, 2). Two notes in especial ring out, one the length of the anguish - it has gone on for so long - and the other its sheer meaninglessness. What does one do to find relief in such a situation? The Scripture teaches much about this, and this is where the message of the previous Psalm about the trustworthiness of God's Word is so reassuring. What, for example, must a word like Isaiah 49:14ff mean in such a time of distress, or Hebrews 12:7-13, or Matthew 15:21-28? But these passages help us to 'see the force of our sufferings as 'tests of faith'; and there is something beyond this, namely the meaninglessness of long continued testing. There is the feeling and assumption in our hearts that when we have learned enough from the trial the suffering will cease, because it will have fulfilled its function. And the moment at which we think it must stop because we have learned enough is precisely the moment when it does not cease, but goes on senselessly. As has been said, there is a degree of suffering at which one ceases to mature, and then the pain loses all meaning through its severity. This is where the Psalmist appears to be in this utterance. When you still can see the force of the trial, you have not yet touched the ultimate mystery of things. It is when the darkness is complete that faith is summoned to 'believe in the dark'; and it is in this context that we see the greatness of the faith that overcomes.

29) Psalm 13

The anguish and agony in the Psalmist's heart are still very evident in the prayer in 3, 4, but there is a significant emphasis which makes it evident that faith is laying hold. His prayer is to the 'Lord my God'. One needs a personal faith in a trouble like this – second-hand religion will not see us through. Often, people do not have this, and in trouble they learn with dismay that they have nothing to hang on to. And sometimes, thankfully, in their extremity, they come to a personal faith. And this may be the point of the exercise, so far as the Lord is concerned: He sometimes has to teach us the hard way to put our trust in Him. It is important for us to see the assertion of faith in 3, 4, as against the complaint in 1, 2; for complaint to the Lord is not quite the same as prayer to Him. Are we able to distinguish between the two?

Thanksgiving is the outcome of true faith, as we see in 5, 6. But this is a battle that has to be won in the darkness, before deliverance comes. The Bible calls it 'the peace of faith'. Indeed, there is no evidence that the Psalmist's situation has changed - that has yet to come - but he has changed, and it is because God has, in effect, said to him, 'Be still and know that I am God'. Often, the answer of God is not given to the mind's questioning, but to the heart's need. God did not answer any of Job's questionings; rather, He answered him - and that is an infinitely greater thing.

30) Psalm 14

A man needs to be extremely clever to make and maintain the assertion that there is no God. Indeed, the man is a fool who thinks he can dismiss the thought of God and dispose of Him with a wave of the hand. He has not even begun to think seriously. What he does not realise is that in denying the existence of God he is ultimately committing himself to the view that everything happens by chance, that the universe is just 'a fortuitous concourse of atoms'. But this is to commit oneself to absurdity. For it means that all man's thinking processes are also fortuitous. And if this be so, then the conclusion that the atheist comes to, that there is no God, is just as likely to be wrong as right. You cannot depend on chance. It makes nonsense of rational thought altogether! Not only so, however: the atheist has to ignore the 'evidences' of God all around him. As Romans 1:19 puts it, 'All that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God Himself has disclosed it to them' (NEB). Moreover, he has to still the voice of conscience within him, which is God's monitor in the soul. Even in our denial of Him, we do not cease to be destined for Him, so that the desire to escape Him and the longing for His peace are always in conflict in us, a conflict that is never wholly absent from the heart of man, even when he most vociferously denies God's existence, as witness the innumerable 'dissociated symptoms' of alienation, meaninglessness and anxiety evident in every form of culture - music, literature and the arts. Above all, the atheist must 'dispose' of and 'explain' Jesus Christ, and His claim to be God. For either He was what He claimed to be, or He was mad or bad. To say there is no God is to commit oneself to saying that He was deluded or a deceiver. As ever, the issue is never an intellectual one, but always moral and spiritual, and the question that it always comes down to is: 'What think ye of Christ?'

31) Psalm 14

We should note the significance of the phrase 'in his heart' in 1 - the atheism is not actually voiced, but to all intents and purposes it is lived. To live as if there were no God is practical atheism. The word 'fool' here refers not so much to intellectual blindness as to moral obstinacy. As we say, there are none so blind as those who will not see. Over against this atheism the Bible sets a living God, Who sees and watches, and looks down. Indeed, the Bible confronts us with such a God. There is said to be a reference in this to the wickedness of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah, and the days of practical atheism, when God 'came down to see...' (Genesis 11:5, 7; 18:21). The great question of the Bible is not whether there is a God - and it is never concerned to prove this, but rather it assumes it - nor even 'Where can I find God?', for to the Bible He is only too present; the question is, 'How can I get right with the God from Whom there is no escape?' The real answer to the practical atheism of our day lies, as the Psalm indicates in 7, in the intervention of God. When God is in the generation of the righteous, the result is always a sense of awe and fear. In times of spiritual awakening, there has been such an overwhelming sense of a divine presence that any question of whether there be a God becomes quite superfluous and irrelevant. As Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, 'When He is come, He will convict the world of sin, and unrighteousness, and of judgment'. This is what solves the problem of communication - a living God in the midst of the Church. Well might the Psalmist pray for such a manifestation (7)! The one unassailable answer is - life. This must be our prayer also.

32) Psalm 15

It would be very easy to misunderstand the meaning of this Psalm, and assume that it is proclaiming a doctrine of salvation by works. For it could be, and has been, interpreted to say that the way into God's presence and acceptance with Him is by living a good life, and that one becomes a member of the city of Zion and of the kingdom of God on the basis of personal integrity. But not only does it not mean this, it cannot mean this, for if it did it would contradict the rest of Scripture which unequivocally teaches salvation by grace through faith, apart from the works of the law. In any case, there is no one good enough, on this estimate (as Psalm 14:3 has pointed out). This is not, of course, to say that such moral earnestness is either wrong or in vain; it is rather that the real subject matter in the Psalm is sanctification, not justification. All that is said here is said within the covenant, and this in a twofold way. In the first place, although salvation is by faith alone, faith without works is dead. Saving faith never stands alone, its fruit is always the very qualities mentioned here. Justification by faith implies and involves the new life, and where that new life is absent, we may query the reality of the conversion experience that is claimed. As Jesus said, 'By their fruits - not, their works - shall ye know them'. This, in fact, is where evangelical understanding sometimes falls down. 'Works do not matter', people say, 'it is faith that is all-important'. But works do matter, and matter supremely, not indeed as a means of salvation, but as the fruit of it. As the Apostle says, we are to 'be careful to maintain good works'.

33) Psalm 15

What is said in this Psalm is to be understood as being within the covenant in another way also, for it speaks of fellowship with God rather than of acceptance with God. We cannot have fellowship with God when our lives are not right in His sight. 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?', asked the prophet of old. There is ample evidence in Scripture that two levels of spiritual life are, alas, only too possible. The lives of Abraham and Lot bear this out very graphically. There can be no doubt that Lot was a true believer, he is called 'righteous Lot' in the New Testament, but here is no question but that he lived on a very much lower level of spirituality than his uncle Abraham. As we say, 'his eye was always on the main chance', and he opted for having a foot in both camps - with predicable consequences; for he lost his testimony and came to grief when the crisis came. Abraham, by contrast, became the friend of God, and walked in intimate fellowship with Him. The Psalm is said to be associated with the return of the Ark of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). We may recall in this connection David's experience then, and the judgment that came upon Uzzah for his irreverent and casual handling of the Ark. There is surely a parable here with the thought of the Psalm. The flurry and excitement of religious emotionalism, which characterised the story in 2 Samuel 6 is often a substitute for integrity of character, and it does not qualify us for the intimacy of fellowship with God that is open to His children. It is the moral characteristics of faith that bring us now to Him.

34) Psalm 16

The name sometimes given to this beautiful utterance is 'The Golden Psalm', and it is surely well named. It is quoted by both Peter and Paul, in Acts 2:29-31 and 13:35-38, of our Lord Himself. If it is asked in what sense it is applied to Him, we would have to say first that it is perfectly fulfilled in Him, and then that it is through Him that the provisions of the Psalm are assured to men. It is certainly true that the resurrection of Christ casts its light over the whole Psalm and over the description of the true believer contained in it. We could well say that it describes the transformation that the Word of the resurrection effects (Acts 10:36-44) in human life. In 1-4 we are given what may be called the marks of the believer. These are, first of all, trust, the word here signifying making God our refuge; then God-centredness. To speak of God as one's portion bears witness to the fact that we are made for Him, and that we find our true destiny and fulfilment when He is the centre of our lives - the opposite, indeed, of self-centredness. Then the glorious reality of the communion of the saints. There is no people like the people of God, for all their faults! We belong to one another, as well as to the Lord, and we matter to one another, as well as to Him (3)!

35) Psalm 16

In the next part of the Psalm (4-8) we have the present blessings of the believer. These are passing wonderful, on any estimate - satisfied hearts (5, 6), counsel and correction (7) and unassailable impregnable security (8). A life touched with resurrection power is not only better, but different - contentment here, as we shall see more fully in tomorrow's Note, eternal joy and life hereafter. Jehovah is all that we need to satisfy hunger and thirst (5). In 6, the Psalmist is not so much congratulating himself that things have turned out so well for him, as expressing contentment with his lot, and finding joy in it. As the saying has it, 'In acceptance lieth peace'. This, too, lies on the other side of the Cross, on resurrection ground. We die to live in the Christian life, all along the line (cf Philippians 4:11), 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content'. Discontentment with one's lot means that somewhere along the line there is a death we have not died. Well, what does this say to us today?

36) Psalm 16

In 9-11 we have the future prospects of the believer. And first and foremost we must mention the assurance of immortality. It may not be reading too much into the words of 9 - 'my flesh also shall rest in hope' - to say that they at least imply the New Testament doctrine of the resurrection of the body. It is not as disembodied spirits, still less as 'ghostly souls' that we shall live in the hereafter, but as people, men and women, boys and girls, with glorified bodies. That is the wonder of the Christian hope. And it is this that takes the sting out of death, and that will not allow Christians to think of the life to come as mere survival, this also that enables us to face death with confidence and without fear. The Christian Faith teaches us not only how to live, but also how to die. Then there is the ultimate beatitude - fulness of joy in God's presence, and pleasures at His right hand forever more. Not for nothing does the Book of Revelation speak with such wonder and joy when it says, 'We shall see His face'. One recalls in this connection C.S. Lewis's memorable words: 'In the end, that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised'. This is what must make us all ask ourselves, as we read this Psalm, where we are in all this, whether the power of Christ's resurrection has touched our lives, and whether as believers we have learned to die. Everything is on the other side of that death that we so often refuse to die. And nothing that refuses to die can ever rise again!

37) Psalm 17

This is another Psalm in which distress and crisis figure prominently. It is not certain which period of David's experience is represented here, and there have been several different conjectures. Some say the reference is to 1 Samuel 23 and David's hour of extremity in the wilderness of Ziph, when Saul's seemingly certain victory over him was foiled only by the direct intervention of God. There are three sections in the Psalm: in 1-5 David grounds his appeal on his uprightness of heart; in 6-12 his cry for help is based on confidence in God and awareness of his enemies; in 13-15 David soars upwards on the wings of faith, in a rapture of hope. It certainly helps us to appreciate what is said if we are able to 'identify' a probable setting for the Psalm, and whether or not 1 Samuel 23 is the circumstance which gave rise to this cry, it affords a good illustration of the kind of situation in which such a cry can be well understood. There is indeed a lesson for our hearts from the division of the Psalm, for it shows a progression from an appeal for help, through confidence expressed in God, finally to the calm rapture of hope. We have seen this pattern so often in the Psalms, that is, the change of atmosphere in the course of the Psalmist's utterance, in which the distress, the pain and the fear all disappear, when God by His Spirit begins to speak and work in the heart. The first answer to prayer lies therefore in the coming of the peace of God to the soul. And, just as lurid shadows dancing on the wall in firelight are dispelled when the light goes on, and objects that brought fear and distress are seen in their proper perspectives, so also it is when the light of God breaks on the soul. The Psalmist suddenly saw his enemies as they really were, small, petty and pathetic in their earthbound desires and concerns. From this we may see how the life of prayer adds stature and dignity to the life of the believer.

38) Psalm 17

We look now in more detail at the text. David's appeal, in the first section (1-5), on the ground of his uprightness of heart needs to be understood in the same way as Psalm 8:3-5. He is not claiming sinlessness, nor is he being self-righteous. What he is doing is to protest his innocence of particular charges that have been made against him. It is as if he were asking God in 2 to judge him in his behaviour in this particular issue with King Saul. There is also another possibility of interpretation: while by no means claiming total innocence or sinlessness, he may well be asserting that the general direction of his life is right in the sight of God - sincere devotion and honest submission of life to the laws of God, or as Peter says, 'the answer of a good conscience toward God'. A right orientation of life toward the will of God is a great thing to strive after! This orientation is seen in the second and third stanzas of the Psalm. In the second (6-12), we see that a right orientation to the will of God makes the life of prayer possible and effectual. The 'I' in 6 is emphatic - 'I, who thus cleave to Thy ways, call upon Thee'. The content of his prayer is enriched with scriptural imagery, and there is a liberty about it in which petitions become bolder as they develop.

39) Psalm 17

But it is in the final section (13-15) that the orientation to the will of God is seen in its deepest significance, for he is now enabled to see his enemies in their true perspective. They are now painted 'not in their fierceness, but in their transitory attachments and low delights'. On the other hand, he sees himself in his true position, and 'feeds his soul on the vision of God and the satisfaction it will bring'. The situation is still unchanged, the enemy is still at the ready, to take the first opportunity to jump on his prey, but the Psalmist hides in God, and is at rest - and detached. Men of the world indeed (15), and belonging to the transitory order of things - but the Psalmist, well, he belongs to a different order, in which the words in 15 are normative, and distinctive of the highest and best, not only in this life but in that which is to come. 'When I awake' can mean both 'when this dark menace is past' and also 'when God's eternal day shall dawn'. Godliness has promise not only of the life than now is, but also of that which is to come (1 Timothy 4:8).

40) Psalm 18

The great value of this magnificent Psalm for us lies in the illustration it gives of spiritual things, and it is in this sense that it may be most fruitfully studied. David speaks of some hair-breadth escape from his enemies and his subsequent victory over them, and this readily lends itself to spiritualising, as an illustration of what God can do for those who are engaged in spiritual warfare (cf 2 Samuel 22, which is an almost exact replica of the Psalm, identifying the circumstances of it as belonging to the earlier days of David's reign, following the final deliverance from Saul's wicked designs upon him). After a brief introduction (1-3), the Psalm speaks of a wonderful manifestation of God (4-19), then of the grounds of God's protection (20-31), followed by a description of the victory won (32-45) and a fitting conclusion (46-50). From this it will be seen that there are two main sections, 4-19 and 32-45, dealing with the Psalmist's experience of the grace and power of God.

41) Psalm 18

One commentator says that both sections refer to the same experience, being described in two different ways, although there is certainly a difference in emphasis in the two sections, the first speaking of the deliverance God gives to a helpless and hapless victim, and the second showing the Psalmist going forth equipped for battle, and triumphing by the help and grace of God. The contrast presented between the two sections is, however, significant in the spiritual illustration it provides for Christian warfare, and this is clearly brought out in the opening verses (1, 2) in which the first picture is that of a fugitive from enemies and the second is that of a fighter. 'The shield is a defensive weapon, horns are offensive ones, and the combination suggests that in conflict we are safe by the interposition of God's covering power, and are armed by the same power for striking at the foe.... To trust in God is to have His protection cast around and His power infused for conflict and victory'. Two words are used in 2 for 'rock': one means 'crag' or 'cliff', suggesting inaccessibility, the other means a 'rockiness', giving the notion of firmness and solidity. The word 'trust' means 'to take refuge in', and it is the experience of hiding in the Rock of Ages that David speaks of in the first part of the Psalm. As such this gives us a notable illustration of the gospel, underlining in turn the plight of man (4, 5), his despairing cry (6), and the divine intervention on his behalf (7-19).

42) Psalm 18

David's description of the movement of nature in God's deliverance (7ff) affords an excellent illustration of the movement of eternity for our sakes in the coming of Christ, the very disruption of the Godhead which was involved in His coming down, and being made flesh - and made sin - for us. In this connection, the words in 16, 17 are very evocative and very moving. In this sense God is our eternal refuge from the storm of wrath that awaits the impenitent and unbelieving. In Him we are safe when by grace He gathers us to Himself. But this is just as true of any kind of distress through which we may pass in Christian experience; indeed it is more apposite as relating to these than to the initial experience of salvation, because David is speaking here as one of God's people under pressure. And the message is: God hears our despairing and will move heaven and earth to help us and deliver us. It is a wonderful experience to know the power of God at work on our behalf, and see the great and far-reaching movement of events which accomplishes our deliverance. The contrast is tremendous and magnificent - one poor mortal's need, and the mighty theophany for His help! But that is how important our concerns are to the living God. What a God we have!

43) Psalm 18

The Psalm also affords a perfect illustration of one great aspect of spiritual warfare. We pointed out in the past few Notes the first emphasis in the Psalm as being that of hiding in the Rock of Ages in time of pressure; and this is also valid in spiritual experience, for there are times when it is urgently necessary to flee to God and hide in Him till Satan's fury is past. But it is from that position of inaccessibility that something else becomes possible: we stand firm and fast, in terms of Paul's mighty words in Ephesians 6:10ff, and 'having done all, to stand'. And from this position, we are enabled to issue forth, strengthened and equipped for battle (32, 34, 39). Translated into New Testament terms what this means is that in Christ's death and resurrection we are given a new status and are placed in a new position. Christ is made head over all things to the Church, over all principality and power, and might and dominion. We are given this victory in Christ, victory not only over sin, but over Satan also, and it is this that enables us to go forth in aggressive warfare, conquering and to conquer, wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. It is not fanciful to read such New Testament truths into the Psalm, indeed it is necessary for us to do so, for this is the Christian use of the Psalter.

44) Psalm 18

If, in view of what has been said in yesterday's Note, we are tempted to say, 'Nothing like this ever happens to me, and it is not thus in my experience', two things may be offered as an answer to this. The first is this: we need to ask ourselves whether we have a 'second-hand' God and a 'second-hand' experience. God, for the Psalmist, was utterly real and personal, and it was a real God Who intervened on his behalf. Sometimes, the problem is that people are trying to worship and serve a God they do not really know. The second thing is this: we have to recognise the correspondence of God's dealings with character (20-31). He does all He is allowed to do for us and in us. He blesses us, and enriches us, within the limits that we ourselves set Him in our lives. This is the point being made in 24ff. There are lives that have not known His lifting up, and have not known His victory, because He has not really been allowed to lift them up or give them His victory. They have not fled to Him for refuge, and therefore have not known His mighty workings for them; they have not learned of Him, and therefore have not known that equipment unto victory that He can bestow. How much have we allowed, or are we allowing, Him to do for us?

45) Psalm 19

This Psalm naturally divides into two parts, which deal with two different revelations of God, in nature and through the Law. Its implications are very considerable and profound, for fundamental issues are involved that take us back to the beginning of creation and the fall of man. This becomes evident when we ask the question: Why two revelations of God? Was one not sufficient? Or did something happen to obscure the first and make the second necessary? And does not this raise the age-old question 'How can I find God?' One has only to pose these questions to see how fundamental the issues in this Psalm are. In the first part of the Psalm (1-6) we have the assertion that there is a revelation of God in nature. But we need to be clear as to what this means and what it does not mean. The revelation is, to be sure, glorious and universal: as the sun shines everywhere, so does the revelation of God in nature shine forth to man (the modern translations help towards a fuller appreciation and understanding of some of the more difficult phrases in these verses). But the fact that God has revealed Himself in nature, the fact that the fingerprints of God are upon all His works, does not mean that man can see this nor, even if he did see it, would it mean that he would thereby be saved. The Psalmist saw it, and all the Old Testament rejoices in this revelation; but David was within the covenant, saved by grace, and as such his eyes were opened to see it. That is the important thing. Eyes need to be opened to see it, and it is only the spiritually awakened who can see it in any vital way. More on this in the next Note.

46) Psalm 19

There is a further consideration also, and it is this: what can be seen and known of God in nature is not saving knowledge of Him. One can get only so far in a knowledge of God through nature, or through any process of reasoning. One can know, by reasoning, or by looking at nature that there is a God. Atheism, as we saw in Psalm 14, is a very difficult position to hold. One can also deduce, from beholding nature, that God is great and powerful, and one who loves order and beauty. But it is not possible to deduce from nature anything about His character, or what His attitude might be to His creatures, and above all, what His attitude might be to sinners, any more than one can tell, from looking at a watch, whether the craftsman who made it was a good man or bad, although it might be deduced that he was extremely clever and skilful. There is a point beyond which one cannot go. It is this that Paul deals with in Romans 1, where he speaks of 'that which may be known of God', and mentions 'His eternal power and Godhead'. This knowledge does not save, but failure to respond to it incurs responsibility, and makes men without excuse. Now, it is significant that in the Psalm here, the name for God in 1-6 is 'El', the name associated with power, not 'Jehovah', which is the covenant name of God, that name by which He is known in His saving grace. That comes in the second part of the Psalm. The implication is clear. We cannot know God's saving grace through nature. This is the real answer to those who maintain they can be perfectly good Christians without ever coming to church and worshipping God in nature.

47) Psalm 19

It is because of this 'barrier' to a saving knowledge of God that the second revelation, spoken of in 7ff is necessary. To revert to the illustration of the watchmaker, only if he chooses to make himself known to us will we know what he is like; and by the same token only if God chooses to make Himself known to us can we know that He is a God of love, and above all that He loves sinners and is willing to save them. This He has made known in His Word. We therefore pass into a completely different world in 7ff - here is the saving knowledge of God, and the covenant Name of Jehovah, manifesting His saving grace. We need to note the many-sided aspects of the Word and its various attributes, and the effect it has on those who receive it. Its converting power is first stressed. The word has the force of 'restore', and this is what in fact happens; the Word of life brings back the soul to the anchorage in God from which it broke loose through sin. This is why preaching is supremely important, for in preaching the Word we are giving men God, offering Him to men, and in Him pardon, joy and peace. It is in the Word that He makes Himself known savingly to men as their Redeemer. The parallel statement in 7 amplifies this: for the Word bears testimony to the way of salvation, a sure testimony, revealing a way concerning which another Scripture says that 'the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein'. And true wisdom comes to those who trust it simply.

48) Psalm 19

The many-sided attributes of the Word are unfolded in the verses which follow, and it is a measure of how rich it is that so many different 'names' are given to it, statutes, commandment, testimony, judgments. The implications of the phrase 'rejoicing the heart' in 8 are striking - no sense of cramping legalism here but on the contrary a liberating joy. This is the true understanding of the Law, and anything that savours of legalism is a misunderstanding and perversion of it. Its inexpressible sweetness is underlined in 10, and gives some indication of its superlative value - warnings, rewards, and compensations, all alike are here. The Word answers all men's questionings (7-11), and governs all his ways (12-14). The contemplation of the law leads to self-examination (12, 13) - the searchlight of the Word penetrates the darkest regions of our hearts where forbidden things lurk. Nothing teaches us our own hearts the way the Word does, but it does so with a view to purifying and cleansing us and keeping us from sin. Well might the Psalmist end with the petition in 14, 'Let the words of my mouth...'. And well might we exclaim, as David does in Psalm 119:97, 'O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day'.

49) Psalm 20

This Psalm is a battle-song, almost a national anthem, the sort of song sung at great times of crisis. The picture presented is of an army, in all probability drawn up in battle array, ready for the fight, with the enemy facing them across the plain or valley, and on the eve of the battle the army pours out its united prayer for victory, and for the prospering of their leader and king (1-5). In 6, a single voice speaks - either that of the officiating priest or that of the king himself, expressing confidence that the prayer is answered. This is followed in 7ff by a chorus of many voices throbbing with the assurance of victory before a blow is struck, and sending one more long-drawn cry up to God ere battle is joined. It is a fine, moving picture, and few passages could show forth more eloquently the loyalty and love that David's people had for him. One is reminded in this of the touching episode about the water from the well of Bethlehem that his mighty men obtained for him at the risk of their lives (2 Samuel 23:15ff). It is this bond of love that provides the key to the message that the Psalm bears for us, as we shall see as we continue our study of the Psalm. We look first of all, however, at the prayer itself in 1-5, and this will be the subject of the next Note.

50) Psalm 20

There is but one central emphasis throughout the prayer, the Name of Jehovah. In the Bible names are always deeply significant as being the revelation of character, and the communication of the Name of God is a revelation of the divine character. God had revealed Himself to His people, and made Himself known to them by His covenant Name, as a God of grace, power and salvation. Not only so: in revealing Himself to them, He had given Himself to them, and they for their part have a certain right to Him: they have free access to His majesty. All this lies behind the phrase 'The Name of the God of Jacob defend thee'. It is this that explains the glorious confidence begotten in David and his people through such a prayer; it could well be called 'the prayer of faith', which is something specific and definitive, something that the Church does not appear to know a great deal about in our day. There is certainly food for thought in this consideration.

Now, for application of the general picture: here is a king going forth to battle, and he has the prayer and love of his people as he goes. This is a pattern of the prayer and encouragement a fellowship should give to those who go forth in its name to fight the Lord's battles, whether in the pulpits of the land or in the Mission Fields of the world. These faithful and loyal souls of David's did not content themselves with private, secret prayer in their tents. They came together as a fellowship and lifted up their voices to God. They held a prayer meeting! That was the mark and the measure of their loyalty and love. Are our loyalty and love marked and measured in this way?

51) Psalm 20

The picture of corporate prayer given here is one that fits the New Testament missionary situation, as we may see in Acts 13/14. Not only prayer, but the fellowship of prayer, bounded Paul's first missionary journey from beginning to end: he and his colleagues were sent out by a praying fellowship and they were welcomed back by a praying fellowship that had upheld them all through the months of their journeyings, sharing with them in all their travail. What must this have meant for Paul and Barnabas, in all the hazards they experienced, just to know that loving and earnest prayer surrounded them everywhere they went. This is surely the true meaning, purpose and function of a Christian fellowship. And since it is, the message of the Psalm may be applied in a general as well as in the special sense, illustrating the encouragement and help that can be given by loving prayer to those who fight in the battles of life - in the spiritual life, where God's children battle with themselves, with difficult natures, when great forces they cannot understand, let alone control, are like to tear them apart; in the battles of doubt and depression, when the clouds come on and the face of God seems hidden and obscured from view; in the sorrows and sadnesses of life, which are for many the greatest battles of all. To know then, in such circumstances, the strengthening power of a living, loving fellowship, the fellowship of people who care deeply for us in our need, to know that they are praying, 'The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble ...', must surely help troubled hearts round the corner of trouble into rest and deliverance and peace. God grant that ours may be such a fellowship.

52) Psalm 21

This Psalm belongs to the thought of Psalm 20 and needs to be studied along with it. There, it was the picture of the Israelite army ready for battle, pouring out its heart in united prayer for victory and the prospering of their king (see previous Notes). Here, the lessons are complementary, and similar. Thus, the prayer in 20:4 finds its answer in 21:2 and 20:2. There are three obvious and simple, yet important and significant, lessons for us. The first is that God is a prayerhearing God. He is a God Who can be approached with confidence in the name that is above every name and by pleading the covenant and the promises. He is easy to be entreated, and waiting to be gracious to those that call upon Him. This is something that needs to be emphasised today, in a time when God has seemed to be very remote and unreal even in the life and experience of the Church - so much so, indeed, that when men speak of real experience of His power in their lives in answer to prayer, others are embarrassed by their testimony, and tend to think of them as 'earnest' and even 'extremist'. The second lesson relates to the joy of answered prayer. This is one of the most notable and characteristic qualities of biblical religion. Whenever and wherever God is known as a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God, there is a great ringing thrill and exuberance of rejoicing in His mighty works. This is seen not only here, but throughout the Psalms (cf for example, Psalm 126:2, 'Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongues with singing'). And the same thrill of rejoicing is very evident in the New Testament, as we may see from passages such as Acts 4:24ff or Acts 12:12ff. Ah, have we not much in which to rejoice and for which to praise His great and glorious Name!

53) Psalm 21

The third lesson of the Psalm underlines the many blessings won by prayers (3-7). And they are manifold, indeed - the blessings of goodness with which God goes before the praying soul, that is, the heart that goes out in prayer encounters a God Who is already there to help: 'Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear' (Isaiah 65:24). The victor's crown (3) speaks of the coronation of the conqueror (cf 'made us kings and priests unto God', Revelation 1:6); the 'life' and 'length of days' in 4 affords a good example of Paul's words, 'He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think' (Ephesians 3:20); the 'glory, honour and majesty' in 5 speak of the dignity that falls on a man who is drawn into fellowship with the living God, and reminds us of the Psalmist's words in Psalm 90:17, 'Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us' (cf also the New Testament counterpart in Acts 4:33, 'Great grace was upon them all'). In 6, the blessedness referred to, speaks, according to Alexander Maclaren, of both the possession and the communication of God's blessing. The man who is blessed of God becomes a fount of blessing to all around. This, then, is the fruit of prayer, and this is what a praying people can do for a minister, particularly in terms of making and keeping him steadfast (7) amid all the pressures of life.

Finally (8-13), the victory which has been won (through prayer and its answer) is now taken as a token and earnest of even greater victories in the future. The Psalmist 'takes off', as it were, in a fierce exaltation as he views the ongoing conflict as it becomes clearer and more starkly defined as time goes on. More and more it becomes plain that the 'enemies' are fighting against God Himself, and God would not be God if He allowed their opposition to continue with impunity. This is what explains the fierceness of tone in the final verses of the Psalm. The gospel divides men, and sets them over against one another. Those who do not give their allegiance to God will soon hate those who do (8), and will set themselves against God's work. And, apart from their repentance, there is nothing left but judgment upon their opposition against Him.

54) Psalm 22

This Psalm is the first in a group of three Psalms which are Messianic in character. Someone has very beautifully described them as portraying Christ (i) as the Good Shepherd Who gave His life for the sheep (Psalm 22); (ii) as the Great Shepherd Who leads his people (Psalm 23); and (iii) (Psalm 24) as the Chief Shepherd Who will come in glory. It is impossible not to think of our Lord and His death in reading this Psalm, if for no other reason than that its opening words will forever be associated with the Cross, for our Lord used them to express His dread consciousness of being forsaken by God when He bore away the sin of the world (it is a message all by itself to realise that in such a moment of crisis Jesus turned instinctively to the Scriptures). But, apart from the well-known first verse, there are far too many familiar references throughout the Psalm for us to doubt that it is Messianic in its whole intention and purpose. Those familiar with Handel's *Messiah* will recognize how many of these verses are employed in the great oratorio in depicting our Lord's sufferings and death. Also, the writers of the gospels, Luke and John, clearly had the Psalm in mind: Luke uses the phrase in 7, 'laugh me to scorn' in Luke 23:35: '(they) derided Him'; and John speaks of Christ's thirst (cf 15) as being the fulfilment of Scripture (John 19:28); the physical effects of crucifixion are described in 14, 15, and the dividing of the raiment (18) was fulfilled at Calvary. All this is very mysterious and wonderful indeed. It is an example of what Peter says in his first epistle (1 Peter 1:11), when he speaks of the Spirit testifying beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. It is of course true that the Psalmist here recounts a dark and terrible experience that he himself passed through; but in the providence of God that experience became the vehicle by which an infinitely greater and more costly experience - the atoning sufferings of the Son of God - are portrayed and described for us (in much the same way as, for example, the agonies of the prophet Hosea became the revelation of the broken heart of God to Israel). As one commentator puts it, the Psalmist's experiences and utterances 'were divinely shaped so as to prefigure the sacred sorrows of the Man of sorrows'.

55) Psalm 22

The important interpretation of the Psalm is therefore the light it sheds on the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. As Professor R.A. Finlayson once put it: 'While the gospel records give us the biography of Christ, the Psalms give us His autobiography.' But this does not mean that the experience of the Psalmist has nothing to teach us. Indeed, it is because his experience prefigures the sufferings of Christ that there lies just here a word of great and lasting comfort and encouragement for us, and we must look at this first of all, before turning our attention to the Cross. It is this: The Psalmist was passing through 'the dark night of the soul'. This is a very trying, and sometimes a very terrifying, experience, and the best of God's saints are sometimes called to pass through it. But every dark night of the soul is undergirt by the realisation that Another has taken the sting out of it, Another Who by His own sufferings and darkness has ensured that in the darkest night that could ever come upon us we do not, and will never, stand alone (cf Psalm 23:4, 'yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow...Thou art with me). Not only so: He is there with us, in it, and sharing in it, understanding what we experience.

56) Psalm 22

Following on the thought at the end of the previous Note about God sharing our experience, here are some lines written by George Goodman, the Brethren evangelist, expressing this truth in a most beautiful and moving way:

He led me by the way of pain,
A barren and a starless place;
I did not know His eyes were wet,
He would not let me see His face;

He left me like a frightened child
Unshielded in a night of storm;
How should I dream He was so near?
The rain-swept darkness hid His form;

But when the clouds were driving back,
And dawn was breaking into day,
I knew Whose feet had walked with mine,
I saw His footprints all the way.

That is true, because for Christ it was not true. Even in the darkest night, we are not forsaken; but in this dark night described here, Jesus was forsaken, and God turned away His face from His only-begotten Son, when He was made sin for us. He trod the wine-press alone, and of the people there was none with Him (Isaiah 63:3). When we look at the Psalm in the light of our Lord's sufferings (as the source of our comfort in the darkest night), we see that it divides into two sections, 1-21 and 22-31, the first characterised by the words in 2, 'Thou hearest not', and the second by the words in 21, 'Thou hast heard me'. The one depicts the sufferings of Christ, the other the glory that should follow. We shall look at these two sections in the Notes that follow.

57) Psalm 22

The first section is undoubtedly overshadowed by the awesome words in 1, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' Indeed, the question 'Why?' is a fundamental one. How it is that He, of whom the Father said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', was in such desolation? How is it that He who said 'I know that Thou hearest Me always' (John 11:42) should now say, 'Thou hearest not'? There is a double poignancy in 3-5, for they recall God's faithfulness in prayer in the past, but now - no answer, only black darkness, and the heavens as brass. It has been pointed out that the literal, physical torture of crucifixion is well depicted in 14, 15, and this is true; but it was not the physical torture that so appalled the spirit of Christ. The descriptions in 12, 13, indicate something spiritual. One thinks of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:32 where he speaks of fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus, referring surely to a spiritual conflict with principalities and powers, indicating the ferocity and intensity of the battle. To be hemmed in on all sides by terrible powers of evil - this was our Lord's experience. Above all, it was the separation from God that caused the agony - a disruption in the very Godhead itself - and all else in the Psalm is subsidiary to this, and all else - every expression of pain, suffering and agony - is simply an expression of this terrible dereliction. The picture we have here is one of Christ 'outside the gates of God'. If we ever wanted to know what it would be like to be in hell, this is what would describe it best - this agony, bodily, mental, and above all spiritual, desolation, forsakenness, dereliction, alone.

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
E'er He found His sheep that was lost.

58) Psalm 22

We still have not answered, however, the question 'Why?' Two things must be said, and the first is this: What is it that is able to cut off a soul from God? The answer is: sin. Elsewhere, the Psalmist says, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me'. This is the issue, and end, of sin: it separates from God. But how could this happen to Christ? He was sinless. 'Which of you', He said, 'convinceth Me of sin?' How could this happen to Him? There is but one answer: it was for sins not His own that He suffered so. This is the proof that He died as a Saviour. He could not have been separated from God otherwise, nor could He have died otherwise. He bore our sins in His own body on the tree, being made sin for us, and this is what it involved, and cost Him.

The second thing is this: Why did Jesus ask why God had forsaken Him? Did He not know? Had He not voluntarily and willingly gone to the Cross, knowing it would involve separation from God? Ah, yes. But this belongs to the very essence of the experience of becoming sin for our sakes. To do so was to cut Himself off from God, and in that dereliction His consciousness of what was happening was clouded. That is the real heart of the agony. To have been able to go through it all, and still know that all was well, would not have plumbed the ultimate depths of the mystery of iniquity. He must forgo even that knowledge. It is this that made it a hell for Him. He descended into hell, the place of hopelessness, darkness and despair. It was there, at that point, where the Son of God lost the last, final consciousness of the Father's love - there, that atonement was made and pardon bought and won for men. Ah, does it not bring tears to our eyes, tears of love and gratitude and adoration? What a Saviour!

59) Psalm 22

The second part of the Psalm (22-31) deals with 'the glory that should follow'. The RV renders 22 more graphically than the AV - 'Save me from the mouth of the lion, and from the horns of the wild oxen - Thou hast answered me'. There is a wonderful paradox there in these two parts of the Psalm. It is because God did not answer Him in the first sense that He was answered in the second. It was because, as P.T. Forsyth beautifully puts it, God was strong enough to resist pity until grief had done its gracious work in His Son, that Christ's prayer in John 17 was answered and salvation was won for the children of men. The name of God as Saviour is made known through the sufferings of the Son (22-26). The sufferings of Christ has won for Him a kingdom (28). As Paul puts it in Philippians 2:5ff, it is because He was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross, that God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. Such is the nature of His kingdom, and in it rich and poor alike are blessed (29), for great and small, lofty and low alike must take the lowly place and receive the food of their souls as the gift of His grace. The words in 30, 'a seed shall serve Him...' are rendered in the modern renderings as 'Posterity shall serve Him'; but it is perhaps better construed as that one generation of worshippers will proclaim the message of grace to the next, and they in turn will pass on that message to their children, as yet unborn. But tell what? That He hath done this. The original simply has 'He hath done' and this echoes a mighty New Testament cry, 'Telelestai', the Greek word translated in the gospels as 'It is finished'. Each generation will tell out the finished work of Christ to the children of men.

60) Palm 23

This is a Psalm whose words have formed the creed and the comfort of countless numbers of God's people down the ages, yet very familiarity with it is apt to conceal from many its real message and import and make them miss the teaching of the Psalm as a whole. Like many Psalms, it presents a series of pictures - some think three, the Shepherd, the Guide, the Host, and some only two, the Shepherd and the Host. On any interpretation, however, the first and second are linked anyway, although the ideas are distinct - first rest, peace and satisfaction, then through righteousness into the valley of the shadow, then the feasting in the presence of the enemy. First of all, we should bear in mind that this is the second of three Psalms which belong together, and we need to notice that this wonderful utterance, depicting the blessedness and fulness of the life of trust, follows the picture of the Cross. It is on the other side of the experience of the Cross that the sweetness and satisfaction of the green pasture can be known. The awesome words that open Psalm 22, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' are the true basis of those in Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. It is because of the one that the other can become real and true in our experience. In this regard we need to see that the very first verses of the Psalm contain by implication a wonderful evangelistic appeal, and that in two ways: on the one hand, they proclaim that the heart of true religion lies in a personal relationship with the Lord. It is no second-hand knowledge that is spoken of here, but a personal relationship that has been entered into. Furthermore, it is with the Shepherd of souls, and this can only mean that it is through the death He died on the Cross. It is only when the message of the death He died touches our lives and we become related to it and conquered by it that we can enter that relationship with Him. On the other hand, the Psalm proclaims the good news of the gospel in the sense that it tells out the blessings that await those who come to a personal knowledge of Christ. And nothing could show forth the winsome attractiveness of the gospel and the Christian life more tellingly than this lovely Psalm, for in almost every phrase in these first verses it tells out the answer of peace to the deep cravings and anxious restlessness of our modern, distracted age.

61) Psalm 23

The 'green pastures' and 'still waters' indicate the two sides of the believer's life, the contemplative and the active. The pastures are His Word, by which we are built up and made strong; the still waters are spoken of in relation to His leading in daily life. The movement of our souls is onwards, on the path to perfection. And the quiet contemplation is followed by the activity, and is meant to equip us for it. Repose and refreshment are meant to prepare us for tasks and marches. And this thought leads on naturally to the next section (3b, 4), in verses which give the corrective to the erroneous idea that the Christian life is all green pastures and still waters, in the sense of being free from the trials and distresses common to all human experience. 'Strait paths', or paths of righteousness, are His appointment for His people, and this often means the discipline of dark experiences. To anticipate the message of 5, 6, the true Christian life means a battle with enemies, it is a warfare, nothing less, and it is significant that even in this most pastoral and gentle of sermons it cannot be left out. The way of righteousness is in fact the way of the cross: danger and sorrow are both alike the lot of the believer, but the great reality is that in them, we do not stand alone. It is this that transforms the situation. There are several points to note: one thing, it is He who leads us into the shadow, and no one is exempt from this inscrutable providence. The 'valley of the shadow' does not primarily refer to death, but rather to any or all dark experience. And, for our comfort, we should remember that where there is a shadow there must be light somewhere. Let us rejoice then that there is a light beyond!

62) Psalm 23

The picture changes again (5, 6), for the Christian life is a many-sided one. Spurgeon says of 5, 'the warrior feasted, the priest anointed, the guest satisfied'. It is almost like a kaleidoscope, the way in which the image switches from one pattern to another, but this is an evidence of the different insights the Psalm gives into the nature of Christian life. It is possible to discern a progression in the Psalm: the ultimate aim of God's dealings with us in grace is that the sinner is turned into the saint, and the saint disciplined in order to become a soldier. But in the warfare that ensues there is always bountiful provision, even in the thickest of the battle and in the presence of the enemy. The greater the pressures and disciplines on the believer's life, the greater and richer the divine provision, as the anointing with oil and the overflowing cup indicate: plenty in a world of need (1), peace in the midst of shadows (4), victory in the face of the enemy (5). Finally, the 'goodness and mercy'. The RV translates 'Only good and mercy shall follow me' as implying that faith has transfigured all the evil in the believer's experience into good (cf Romans 8:28, 'all things work together for good...'). This is an invincible position for the child of God, when evil itself is pressed into service for Him and made a blessing (cf Genesis 50:20 and Philippians 1:12). Well might Paul cry in exaltation, 'We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us'.

63) Psalm 24

Two widely differing suggestions have been made as to the setting of this Psalm. Many scholars hold that it was written to be sung when the Ark of the Covenant was taken up from the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:6-19) after the capture of the ancient Jebusite stronghold by David. Others, however, maintain that it was sung at the great Feast of Tabernacles, and that the procession is to the Temple in that most spectacular of feasts. From the point of view of the spiritual lessons it contains for us, it does not much matter which of these suggestions is right, although the direction of these lessons might be different in either case. What is common to both, however, is that the Psalm is a Processional, depicting the people of God on their way to the gates of the city or the Temple (as also, for example, in Psalm 15 and Psalm 122). For what it is worth, our own view is that the reference is to the return of the Ark to Jerusalem (the question in 3, 'Who shall ascend...?' may well be prompted by the fate that overtook Uzzah, 2 Samuel 6:6, 7). Here, then, we have

- (a) vv 1-2 The worship of God as the Creator, the true and living God.
- (b) vv 3-6 The description of the true people of God, in answer to the question 'Who shall ascend...?'
- (c) vv 7-10 The description of the true King of glory, who is worthy to enter through the gates into the city.

64) Psalm 24

Three points may be made in the interpretation and application of the Psalm. The first relates to the Ascension of Christ. What is meant by that is this: the opening two verses proclaim the name of the Lord as worthy of the worship of all He has created. He has made us that we might worship Him and glorify His Name. It is in this connection that the question naturally arises in 3, 'Who shall ascend...?' God is holy and only those who are holy may approach Him. But whose hands are clean, or whose heart is pure? Were David's? Are ours? This, plainly, sets an impossible standard, for all, without exception, fall short of it. Does this, then, mean that God must dwell alone in His heavenly hill? This is where the second part of the Psalm comes into its own. As Spurgeon says, its latter verses 'reveal to us the great representative Man, who answered to the full character laid down, and therefore by his own right ascended the holy hill of Zion'. Now, the genius of the Psalm is that it presents the scene of a victor returning to the city, having won the spoils of battle, and earned the right by conquest to enter into the city. It is, in fact, the picture of our Lord's ascension, entering into heaven for us, 'Now to appear in the presence of God for us', as Hebrews 9:24 puts it.

Look, ye saints! the sight is glorious;
See the Man of Sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious,
Every knee to Him shall bow.

This, indeed, is the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of glory.

65) Psalm 24

The whole point of the second part of the Psalm - this is our second lesson - is that it is a chorus. There is a great host in this procession leading to the gates of the city. The King of glory is not alone, His people are with Him. And they enter in with Him and in Him, when the gates swing open to welcome Him. The old hymn pictures a great ransomed host with Christ 'sweeping through the gates of the new Jerusalem, washed in the blood of the Lamb'. That is the picture we have here. And this is the significance and importance of the doctrine of the Ascension of Christ. He entered in for us, as our Representative and our Forerunner. And we enter in Him. The representative character of His identification with us stretches from the Incarnation right through to the Ascension. He ascended for us, not for Himself. It was as the glorified God-man, as Man victorious and triumphant, that He stood outside the gates and bade them open to Him, and it was for us that He opened them. They that are Christ's, washed in His blood and saved by His risen life, go in with Him and ascend to the hill of God, clothed in righteousness divine (cf Ephesians 2:5, 6). This is the only way up, and the only way in. One thinks of Paul's metaphor in 2 Corinthians 2:14 in this connection. Paul's picture is of the Roman triumphal march and procession, with the victorious general leading his captives chained to his chariot wheels. Christ is the mighty Victor who leads Paul as his glad and willing captive, and gives him a share in His victory. And so it is in the Psalm. This King of glory is not ascending the hill to the gates of the city alone, He is leading His captives with Him, and they go in with Him, and up with Him to the throne of God.

66) Psalm 24

What was said in the previous note leads naturally to the third lesson of the Psalm, namely the coming of the King to his people. God must first have the victory over us. And so we can change the picture slightly and think of the gates and doors as the entrance into our hearts and lives. For it is just as true that the risen and ascended Lord comes to us and knocks for admittance. Just as, in the story of David, the glory had departed from Israel because of her sin and was now returning through the victory he had won over the Jebusites, so also had the glory of the creation of God departed from mankind through sin, and was restored only through the victory of Christ, the second Adam. This is what asks for an open door in our lives, and when the door is opened it is the beginning of the restoration of the image of God in us. Dr James Denney has a fine and moving comment on Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 2:14: 'When God wins a victory over man, and leads him captive in triumph, the captive too has an interest in what happens: it is the beginning of all triumphs, in any true sense, for him....(The Damascus Road) was the beginning of God's triumph over him; for that hour God led him in triumph in Christ. But it was the beginning also of all that made the Apostle's life itself a triumph, not a career of hopeless internal strifes, such as it had been, but of unbroken Christian victory.... Furthermore, the true meaning of the word, and the true connection of ideas just explained, remind us that the only triumphs we can ever have, deserving the name, must begin with God's triumph over us.' Well might the Psalmist cry 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in'!

67) Psalm 25

The message of this Psalm is not one that can well be summed up in a simple concise sentence. The fact is, it contains many lessons, and it is these together that constitute its message to us. The Psalmist is in deep affliction of soul, as in many of the Psalms, and yet just as often he is in communion and fellowship with God. He is conscious of his enemies, yet he is even more conscious of his God. It is here, in this realm, in 'the teaching on the persistence of communion with God in face of continued troubles' that the prominent lessons lie. It is impossible to read through these verses without becoming very conscious of the fact that the Psalmist was beset all around with enemies. This in itself is a lesson for us, for it reminds us that the true spiritual life is ever one in which pressures assail the soul. 'In the world', said our Lord, 'ye have tribulation'. To walk in fellowship with Him is to be at odds with the world and the prince of this world. 'Fightings without, fears within' - this is the characteristic key-note in both Old Testament and New Testament religion, and it is misleading to paint the Christian life in any colours that do not clearly indicate the battlefield. We may as well know, therefore, what we are in for, when we commit ourselves to the Christian life. When Jesus said, 'Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life' the word He used was 'tethlimmene' which means 'afflicted'. It is a way of tribulation. As Paul puts it in Acts 14:22, 'We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God'. This, then, is the setting of the Psalm.

68) Psalm 25

It would not be difficult to find a number of situations in David's experience which would match the frequent mention of his enemies throughout the Psalm. But, from the significant remark in 7 about the sins of youth, we may gather that he is speaking from maturity, and guess that the circumstances may well be those surrounding the revolt of Absalom. If this is so, a great deal of light is shed on the situation, and we are able to understand more fully David's distress. For that sad and sorry episode of his experience can in fact be traced to the sins and faults of his youth (cf 1 Samuel 27:1ff), where his lapse of faith led him to the land of the Philistines, and it was there that he married Maacah, the mother of Absalom. Well might David seek forgiveness for the sins of earlier days! This is a word of warning, perhaps especially to young people about alliances contracted when out of the divine will, when things may be said or done that a lifetime will not suffice to allay the regret and remorse of them, even though they are abundantly forgiven. So it was with David: and the opposition and pressures that come from simply being a believer are complicated by the pressures brought about by his own foolishness. But we need to see something else there. Behind both, there lies the grim reality of the devil himself; behind the enemies there is the Enemy, who co-ordinates all the attacks and all the pressures against us. Nor should we forget that Satan comes as the accuser of the brethren, to disturb and distress. It is one thing for David to realise the source of his distress in his early sins, but it is quite another for him to be afflicted and convicted by the devil, who rakes up the old sins that were forgiven long ago. The accusations of the devil about sins long past are among the most acutely agonising of all experiences, if one does not know how to deal with them. That will be the theme of the next Note.

69) Psalm 25

The Psalm, it will be noted, divides into three sections, 1-7, 8-14 and 15-22. The first and third sections are impassioned petitions, while the second is filled with confidence, in communion with God. The fact that, even in this central section, there comes the sudden, piercing, arrow-like consciousness of that conviction (11) proves that it is of the devil. So often in our experience it is in the most sacred intimacy of personal communion with God that the devil's darts of accusation and bludgeoning come to distress us and appal our spirits. Well might Paul speak of 'the fiery darts of the wicked'. The questions, then, that arise are: how to discern his working, and how to deal with him? As to the first of these, this may be said: when God convicts, the effect is to draw us to Him for cleansing and renewal and restoration of fellowship. When Satan convicts, however, it has the effect of driving us in on ourselves more and more, and into despair, as if nothing could be done now. When dejection and darkness grip the soul making us want to give up, we may be sure that the devil is at work. The way to deal with this and with him is to refuse his accusations, and in the name of Christ dispute his right to torment us, taking a stand on the victory of the Saviour and claiming it as our own, saying 'It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?' This is the significance of the central section of the Psalm: David is in touch with the unseen world of grace, and it is that unseen world of grace that we must take with us into the world of conflict. And the steadfast fixing of our spiritual eyes on the reality of that unseen world with its promises and assurances is what will finally bear us through to God's victory and His peace.

70) Psalm 26

Criticism has sometimes been levelled against this Psalm and others like it that it expresses a spirit of self-righteousness bordering on the Pharisaic, and falls far short of the New Testament teaching exemplified for example in Paul's words 'In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing' or 'I am less than the least of all saints'. But this is to misunderstand the Psalmist and his words completely, and such an attitude is itself the fruit of a certain attitude to the Scriptures which can only be termed heterodox and unbelieving, and which fails to grasp the meaning of biblical inspiration. It just will not do to dismiss large sections of the Old Testament as being sub-Christian - this is usually done by people who do not know the real meaning of the word Christian. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and may not be shrugged away by superficial judgment. We must therefore look in other directions for the explanation of the Psalmist's words here. Two things may be said in this connection. First of all, the assertion of integrity (1) must be understood in the light of what is said in 3: the Psalmist's walking in the truth is made possible only through the divine love, in the same way as Paul was able to make the claims he does in his epistles. Would we accuse the apostle of self-righteousness when in 1 Thessalonians 2:10 he says, 'Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you...'? In the second place we have seen, in two previous Psalms at least (Psalm 7 and Psalm 17), that the Psalmist claims not sinlessness, but innocence in relation to particular charges and accusations brought against him by his enemies. This does much to clarify passages such as these which otherwise are hopelessly misinterpreted. Something else may be said on this subject, but is best left to the next Note.

71) Psalm 26

There is another interpretation of the Psalmist's claim to integrity and one which has very real bearing on what may be the central import of this Psalm's message. It is this: while by no means claiming innocence or sinlessness he may well be asserting that the general direction of his life is right in the sight of God - sincere devotion and honest submission of life to God's laws - what Peter calls in his epistle 'the answer of a good conscience towards God', a life right in its basic essentials in relation to God and His sovereign purposes. When Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 4:4, 'I know nothing against myself; yet am I not thereby justified' he is not claiming sinlessness or thinking that he is justified before God by the integrity of his life but simply testifying to a right orientation of life to the will of God. Not only is this not wrong or reprehensible, it is highly to be desired in the life of God's people. Indeed, it is something for which there is a clamant and urgent need today. There is nothing more desolating than to hear someone who names the Name of Christ say in a self-deprecating way 'We can't all be men of prayer', or 'We can't all rise to such heights', when one suspects that what he really means is 'We have no intention of rising to such spiritual heights, we are quite content lower down'. We must learn from this Psalm that the work of God's grace and loving kindness in the soul is something we are meant to take seriously. What is the use of paying lip service to a doctrine if we do not believe in what it is supposed to do in us. A gospel that cannot bring a man to the place where he can hold his head up calmly and serenely before men is not much of a gospel. A man whose heart God has touched will gladly run the risk of being labelled puritanical or Victorian (there are worse things!) or even - dare we use the word - fundamentalist, for standing out against what he considers to be vulgar and unworthy and immoral.

72) Psalm 26

Two further points must be made about this Psalm. The first is that it teaches quite clearly a doctrine of separation. This must not be misconstrued to mean separatism, and become a selfish withdrawal from a world that needs good men's presence all the more, the worse it is. The true biblical doctrine forbids, not association, but complicity, with the world. As one commentator puts it, 'Association with such men is necessary, else we must needs go out of the world, and leaven must be in contact with dough in order to do its transforming work; but it is impossible for a man whose heart is truly in touch with God not to feel ill at ease when brought into contact with those who have no share in his deepest convictions and emotions'. The second point relates to the setting and circumstances of the Psalm. One commentator suggests that it is one of many which refer to religious strife among the Jews, the controversy and conflict between the orthodox upholders of the traditional faith and the innovators who endangered its purity. As a champion of a right case, the Psalmist calls on Jehovah to vindicate him in the face of his enemies. This makes the Psalm very relevant for us today, when men have become almost afraid of being known as being loyal to the old paths (cf Jeremiah 6:16-20), lest the stigma of contempt and derision be attached to them. Well, the costly innovations which are substituted for the old paths today are bringing anything but rest to the souls of men, and anything but quickening and vitality to the life of the church today. We do well, therefore, to follow the Psalmist's example here and cry to the Lord to vindicate our cause. In this, we are on sure ground (12).

73) Psalm 27

No one can read this well-known Psalm without being struck by the great contrast between its first half and its second. It is so marked that some commentators think that what we have here are two Psalms, composed in widely differing circumstances. But this suggestion is only an easy way out, by giving explanation to the contrast, it misses the very real spiritual lessons that the contrast is meant to teach. The first of these is that there is nothing essentially contradictory for spiritual experience in this contrast. One thing is common to both sections of the Psalm, namely the reality of the Psalmist's faith. The faith that is so buoyant in 1-6 reasserts itself again in 13, 14. It is important, however, to realise that here is not a faith that is 'fair-weather' only, but one that stands the shocks and pressures of life and comes out the stronger for this. Nor is it any sign of a failure of faith that a believer should be 'up against it'. It is not that he is 'up against it', but what he does when 'up against it' that is significant. We are never encouraged to suppose that the Christian life will always be smooth or free from pressure. Sometimes we sing the hymn 'Like a river glorious', and sometimes 'Much in sorrow, oft in woe', but it would be misleading to suppose that either the one or the other represents the constant experience of the believer. Bunyan is in this, as in so many other things, a wise and faithful guide: Delectable Mountains, Valley of Humiliation, Slough of Despond, By-path Meadow, Beulah - all are, together, part and parcel of the Christian experience, and it is possible in all these things, through faith, to be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

74) Psalm 27

The second lesson of the Psalm is this: the Psalmist takes the radiance of the first experience (1-6) into the clouds and darkness of the second, and it acts as a light to him (cf 13 - the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not put it out!). The background of the Psalm would be especially useful here but we are not sure of the period in David's life to which it belongs. The LXX entitles the Psalm 'A Psalm of David before he was anointed', and this may indicate the period when David was beset by the frenzied jealousy of king Saul who was so determined to kill him. It was, then, in some such situation that the Lord gave His servant a season of refreshing, drawing specially near to him and enlarging his heart by His grace. This is the explanation of the radiant bouyancy in 1-6: the heavens have been opened and David is rejoicing in the blessing of the living God, seeing the situation from the divine point of view and in its proper perspective. It is the same kind of experience that came to the apostle John on the isle of Patmos, when he had the vision of the Lord in glory and majesty. The vision glorious was therefore given to brace David for the battle, to sustain and strengthen him and undergird his faith so that it would not falter. Another Psalm (36:9) says 'In Thy light shall we see light'. This is a simple truth of experience: we see everything with the greatest clarity, and are able to think straight and rationally in time of crisis - a profoundly desirable ability at such a time, and something we are unable to do when we are engrossed and preoccupied with our troubles. Maclaren suggests that David is thinking of his past victory over Goliath, and this enables him, in effect, to say 'What God did once, He can do again'. In such a spirit, the confidence expressed in 3 is readily understandable.

75) Psalm 27

In 4-6 we have a beautiful expression of the soul's outgoing to the Lord. This is the deepest reality in spiritual life, and the heart of everything - not service, but communion with God. Not for nothing does one of our hymns speak of 'the bridegroom of the soul' revealing His love and power to His people. There are two thoughts here: it is certainly true that David speaks in 5 of God as a refuge from his enemies. But this is not the primary thought, and we do despite to the best in spiritual experience if we think so. It is true, of course, that some people do use God as a refuge and protection; but the deep and abiding blessing of spiritual life lies not in escapism, but in the huge pleasure and joy that are to be found in Him. God is not a tranquilliser, and we must not use our religion merely as a means of escaping 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. This all too often means an escape from reality into a world full of soft and comforting unreality (this is what a tranquilliser pill does: it blunts the edge of reality and creates an unreal oasis for the time being; but you come back to earth with a bump, and soon become subject to the law of diminishing returns - you need to take more and more to get the same effect). Here, however, is something different: it is possible to find pleasure in God, pure, exhilarating pleasure and joy. In such an experience, a man finds himself: he does not escape from reality, he conquers it by discovering a deeper and greater reality in which and by which he is able to cope with life in all its pressures. He finds, in fact, something larger than life, and the effect does not wear off. It is when we find this in God that we also find refuge; indeed this is the refuge, this is what protects. A man who finds such a joy and reality in God is into a world where he is really invincible and nothing can ultimately touch him. This is what David took with him into 7-14, and what explains the enormous confidence expressed in the last two verses of the Psalm. He brought the light of what he had learned in 1-6 to bear upon the storms and pressures of his experience - and won through to victory and peace.

76) Psalm 28

We may compare and contrast this Psalm with the previous one, in which the order was: Praise, followed by anxious prayer. Here, the order is reversed: anxious prayer (1-5) is followed by praise (6-9). This is certainly the more usual order in the Psalms we have studied thus far, but the fact is that both orders are common and legitimate expressions of spiritual experience. The subject matter here seems to be the same as that in Psalm 26, and the Psalmist's plaint has to do with the controversy and conflict between the orthodox upholders of the traditional faith and the innovators who were endangering its purity. But there is a pleading, beseeching note, especially in 1, as if he were terribly afraid that the vindication, for which he prayed in Psalm 26, was not forthcoming, and that God was holding His silence unaccountably, when he desperately needed His manifest help. The silence of God can be a very trying experience for the believer, when he is battling and contending for the truth, for in such a situation it sometimes seems overwhelmingly important that God should vindicate him now, and when He does not, it sometimes is more than he seems to be able to bear. But 'earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints' is a protracted and long-term exercise in which there are no quick victories. We need to beware of facile analysis of our contemporary situation which suggests that all that needs to be done is a simple assertion of the Truth, and that a simple teaching of the gospel will bring the promised revival we long to see. Rome was not built in a day, and the great 19th century movement of revival and reawakening came only as the fruit of generations of faithful contending, during which many an agonised and discouraged plea arose from hearts bludgeoned by the rigours of the battle. The cry 'be not silent to me' is a very understandable one.

77) Psalm 28

The deep overtones of anxiety and agitation in 1, 2 arising from the silence of God need to be recognised for what they are. The fact is, sometimes in a situation such as this, no amount of rational application of the truths of the spiritual life - such as those expressed in the hymn 'Workman of God, O lose not heart' - seems to ease the darkness or distress, or bring light and peace to the soul. We know these truths, it may be, but they do not seem to work when we try to apply them to our present need. Why is this? The reason is that in the irrationality in the darkness and dread that will not yield to rational application there is an element of the demonic. Satan gives a maligned twist to the experience exaggerating the sense of desolation and of dread and hopelessness in irrational ways, colouring the whole picture with glaring and even grotesque colours that are just not true in the reality of the situation. The drill therefore is to recognise the devil's devices and resist and refuse them in the name of Christ, and maintain that attitude of resistance against him. It is evident that in the battle of prayer (1-5) this is what the Psalmist did, for in 6-9 an assurance was born in his heart that the Lord had heard him. As yet there was no concrete evidence of the Lord's intervention and no change in his circumstances - this would come afterwards as the necessary fulfilment of the assurance that had been given him. As one commentator puts it, 'This is the blessing which every true suppliant may bear away from the throne, the peace which passeth understanding, the sure pledge of the divine act which answers prayer. It is the first gentle ripple of the incoming tide: high water is sure to come at the due hour'.

78) Psalm 29

The message of this Psalm is a simple one: for the most part it depicts a storm, and in 10 it tells us that the Lord is in control of it. Its purpose is to enable us to see God's relation to all kinds of storms, so that we might have strength and peace. It is one of the Psalms that exult in God as Creator (cf also Psalms 8, 19). There is no doubt that this is one of the outstanding characteristics of Old Testament religious experience, but we must be careful not to misinterpret and misconstrue it. There is no thought of a 'natural theology' being communicated, in contrast to the theology of grace in the New Testament. The heavens declare the glory of God, but it is only through grace that one can hear this declaration: eyes need to be opened to see the glory, and it is important to realise that Old Testament writers who exulted in the creation of God did so within the covenant of grace, which had opened their eyes to see it. It is this that safeguards against any danger of nature worship or culture worship. It is safe to say that the Old Testament saints were at a thousand removes from the notion that it is possible to worship God in nature. The idea that we could be 'nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth' is one that simply would never have occurred to them, and would have prompted them to ask 'What about Adam and Eve?'

79) Psalm 29

The Psalm also underlines the fact that there are different ways of looking at storms. He saw God in this storm, and heard His voice in it. Indeed the sevenfold repetition of the phrase 'the voice of the Lord' is deeply impressive. Science, of course, can explain thunder and lightning to us, but this does not make it any the less the voice of God. Even the Insurance Companies call disasters caused by storm 'an act of God'. Some, however, are simply insensible, and unaware of anything in the storm, they are dull of mind and blind to anything that is happening, whether in literal storms or - more particularly - in the storms of life. Others react in fear and distress and are overwhelmed by them. They crumple under the buffeting of the storms of life and lose heart and hope. This is always inevitable when there is no real faith to sustain them. But it is possible, as here, to look at the storms from a heavenly point of view. As a plane can climb above the storm clouds and look down on them from the standpoint of calm, so also can faith rise to view the storm from a heavenly perspective. The Psalmist depicts this possibility and says that the heavenly host exults in it and cries 'Glory!' (9). They applaud the God of the storm and see, as we often do not, how right He is, and how right it is. It is as if God were saying to the Psalmist, 'My child, look what I can do in the physical realm. Yet it is all in My control. Do you not see that your storm is also in My control? I am the Lord of the storms. They come, and they go, at My behest'. One thinks of the old lady who, when asked if she were afraid during an earthquake, replied, 'No, it rather thrills me to think I have a God Who can shake the world'. This is where both the strength and the peace spoken of in 11 comes from, for if that God is our God, we need never be afraid.

80) Psalm 30

Scholars think that the title of this Psalm is a later addition, that is, the Psalm was adapted for a later occasion in which it was used at the dedication or reconsecration of the Temple, but was originally a song of joyful thanksgiving uttered by the Psalmist because of a great deliverance wrought on his behalf by God. It is easy to see how this very personal theme should have become applicable to the dedication of the Temple, and we can surely see the kind of application it could have in our own day, for it is a song the Church could sing when God has visited it with seasons of refreshing, and restored her lost glory, removing her reproach in the eyes of her enemies. But it is primarily with the personal aspect of the Psalm that we are concerned, always allowing the Spirit, however, to apply its message and insights to the larger theme of the Church in general.

The first thing to notice is the extremely personal note ringing throughout the Psalm. It is the experience of a God Who really does things for His people, a God Who is really known as a living God. It is this that stands in such contrast with what generally obtains today. We have lived in an age in which, if a man stood up and spoke like this in company, he would be regarded with acute embarrassment as having committed an unpardonable breach of etiquette. He could speak and converse about the church, about mission or stewardship or ecumenicity - and be socially acceptable. But let him speak about the work of God in his life, let him speak of God as if he knew Him, and he has made the one fatal mistake. From which circumstance - and who shall say that this is not a true picture of a great deal of the religion of our day - one can only come to the conclusion that it is possible to be interested in the church, in mission, in stewardship, in the ecumenical movement, without having any real, vital or personal experience of God at all. To such people, their religion is an institution, not an inspiration, part of an established system of the social order. Living religion they dread, and simply do not know what to make of it.

81) Psalm 30

There is a necessary corollary to the idea of a living God Who sends deliverance (mentioned in the previous note): it is that He also, on occasion, can send punishment and chastisement upon His people, in anger against them when they sin. It is this that stands at the heart of the Psalm (5, 7), and that caused the predicament (1, 2) from which he was delivered. The 'healing' mentioned in 2 is probably best taken metaphorically rather than literally: as Calvin points out, 'sackcloth' (11) is not a sick man's garb. But the important point is that the Psalmist grasped what God was teaching him, viz. that his extremity had come upon him because of his sin. The central message of the Psalm is for those who take their privileges and blessings for granted: in 1-5 we have the Psalmist's glad rejoicing, in which he tells us what the Lord had done for him, bringing him out of the dark experience of distress, to the glad morning of joy which follows the night of weeping. Then, in 6-12, he tells us, in retrospect, what it has all been about. This is the point made in his confession in 6 - 'As for me, I said in my prosperity...'. This is the lesson he learned in the distress, that he had become complacent and taken for granted the great blessings and joys of his spiritual life, and had assumed that they would as a matter of course continue uninterrupted, as his right. The fact is, when we become complacent in the enjoyment of God's blessings, we tend to become careless spiritually, and this in turn leads to the lowering of our defences and the imperceptible infiltration of the enemy's wiles. Sometimes, in such a situation, only a salutary jolt from God will bring us to our senses.

82) Psalm 30

The words in 11, 12 correspond to those in 5, and refer to the same experience. They contain some very important lessons. One underlines the delighted wonder and joy that God should lift His hand for us at all - it is far more than we deserve - and this adds an amazed gratitude to our praise which in itself is a wonderful experience. It is like a condemned man getting a reprieve. Another lesson lies in the fact that the experience of distress adds a deeper dimension to life and spirit. There are lessons to be learned in the clouds and darkness that can never be learned in the sunshine of life (cf James 1:12 - enduring trial brings a crown of life, here and now, as well as hereafter, upon our experience). A third lesson is found in the contrast presented in 5: God's 'anger' is but for a moment, His favour is for a lifetime. Sorrow, for the believer, is transient; joy is perennial. The word 'endure' in 5 is rendered 'tarry' in the RSV and as 'remain' in NIV. Literally it has the force of 'comes as a guest to stay the night', no more than a transient interruption of the usual domestic scene. It is the same kind of thought as is expressed in 1 Peter 1:6, 'Now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness...'. This is just as true of the humanly irremediable losses and griefs of life, only the 'morning' lies beyond in the life to come. Sorrow is not final, not even the sorrow of death, for those who trust in Christ, for there is the sure prospect of reunion, and - joy cometh in the morning!

83) Psalm 31

What strikes us first of all, and very forcibly, in reading this Psalm are the dramatic changes of feeling throughout it. But it is a superficial estimate of the situation to say that the Psalmist is in a state of 'spiritual ups and downs', in which he is tossed to and fro, with great inroads being made into his spiritual experience. As we have pointed out in other Psalms (cf, for example, Notes on Psalm 27) it is no sign of failure of faith when a believer is 'up against it', for it is what a man does when he is 'up against it' that is all-important. What we must recognise here is that we are given a picture of the fight of faith in the soul of a believer as he battles and wrestles in the name of the Lord until he wins through to victory. And it is in this light that the ding-dong battle, the darkness and the light, must be understood. We could well take as a title for the Psalm Paul's words to Timothy, 'Fight the good fight of faith' (1 Timothy 6:12). Here faith is under pressure, it is being put to the test; here is a man confronted with a difficult, intractable situation, for which there is no easy, obvious solution; and on the merely human level he is tempted to be despondent and discouraged in heart. It is in this light that we need to look at the Psalm, and its application is surely obvious: this may be our position today; it could be ours tomorrow.

84) Psalm 31

The Psalm has been usefully and helpfully analysed as follows:

1- 4	Faith supplicating
5- 8	Faith meditating
9-13	Faith clouded
14-18	Faith resting
19-24	Faith triumphant

The opening stanza (1-4) reveals the Psalmist's situation. Here is affliction, difficulty, pressure. He is up against it. But even more important than the affliction is the firm attitude of faith that he adopts right at the outset: 'In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust'. The emphasis is on the Lord, not on the magnitude of the trouble. This is important. It is possible to be so oppressed by the trouble that it is magnified in our minds to be even greater than the Lord Himself. Here, in these verses, is an act of faith that must be exercised with full will and determination. The word translated 'Put my trust' is but one word in the original, but the AV has captured the sense of a definite action in it. It is no mere intellectual assent. And, lest we think it is an easy act for the Psalmist, we need to realise that it is a word that expresses a more desperate situation than some other words for faith and trust in the Old Testament for it conveys the weakness and helplessness of the man, and the sense that 'this is quite beyond me'. The word means 'to take refuge in God', to fly to Him for refuge. We should note also the words in 2, 3, 'be Thou...for Thou art'. The Psalmist is saying, 'Be to me what I have taken Thee to be, what Thou hast revealed Thyself in Thy word to be. Let me never be ashamed in having trusted Thee like this'. That is prayer to some purpose indeed! Happy the man whose faith supplicates like this.

85) Psalm 31

The second stanza shows us faith meditating. The point about having reached a refuge is that you are able to get your breath back. You are able to think. While running there, you are concentrating on the business of getting there; but once there you have time to collect yourself, so to speak. This is what the Psalmist does now: having committed his spirit into the hands of God (in words used by Jesus on the cross) he looks back over his past experience, and allows the past to encourage his soul. Given time to think, 'experience (worketh) hope' (Romans 5:4). To recollect past blessings and deliverances in similar situations is a great incentive to confidence in God, for is He not the same yesterday, today and forever? But in the next stanza (9-13) there is a different mood, and the Psalmist descends from the high confidence of the previous verses to low distress and near despair: faith is overcast by dark clouds, and the battle seems to be going ill with him. Here is faith on the defensive and battling for its life - faith fighting for faith. But how are we to explain this intensity of distress (see 10)? The Psalmist speaks of 'mine iniquity': conscience is telling him that his own sin underlies his trouble. Now, it is true that the presence of sin in our lives can cloud the face of God from us, and when this is the case the first necessity is to get right with Him. But - and this is the very important matter - the introduction of the sin question may come, not from the spirit of God but from the evil one. It is his malign delight to undermine faith and bring dejection and despair to the spirit through false accusation. Not for nothing is he called 'the accuser of the brethren'. This is always one element in the battle, and when we perceive that there is something of Satan in the pressures we must learn to 'resist the devil, and he will flee' from us.

86) Psalm 31

Resisting the devil is exactly what the Psalmist does, and this is the force of 14-18. Faith exercises itself (14) in the wonderful assertion 'Thou art my God'. His 'times' - the changing scenes, the dark clouds and the brighter days alike are in God's hand, controlled, directed, dictated by Him, and therefore usable in His sovereign purposes. Thus confidence begins to grow (15b-18) - God is able to bring this about, His hand is on all the changes and chances of life, deliverance (15b), the light of God's face (16a), and salvation (16b). And so through to victory, with faith triumphant (19-24). We should note the association of ideas between goodness 'laid up' and goodness 'wrought' in 19. Faith is content to wait, when that goodness is still 'laid up', i.e. in the intention and purpose of God, until it is wrought out in living deliverance. In the waiting time (20) we can afford to be at peace and confident, knowing that we are all the while under His watchful care, hidden in the secret of His presence. What a wonderful phrase this is - His presence secret but mysteriously potent and availing, more than offsetting the sense of being 'cut off' as expressed in 22. It is as if the Psalmist were saying, 'Looking back, how foolish I was to suppose I was alone, when all the while, if faith had but seen it, He was all around me!' This is the force of the great 'nevertheless' in 22. And as long as that 'nevertheless' remains true, as it always will, faith will ever be triumphant.

87) Psalm 32

This Psalm is known as the second of the seven Penitential Psalms (the others are: Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Yet its predominant note is one of praise. The literal translation of 1 is 'O the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven'. It is a rapturous outburst from a heart that has felt the reality of the divine forgiveness. This in itself teaches us a valuable lesson: penitence is not a lugubrious attitude of heart, of continual bewailing of our sins; nor is it ever meant to become an end in itself, but the means by which we are led afresh into the joy of the Lord. Another - introductory - lesson is surely that this is a note that should characterise all our worship - 'the joyful news of sins forgiven, of hell subdued and peace with heaven', as Wesley puts it.

The Psalm consists of two stanzas: 1-5 are autobiographical in note, and 6-11 apply the Psalmist's experience to others. It is as if the Psalmist were saying 'This is how it has been with me, this has been my glad experience; O let it be so also with you'. And he seeks to woo others to the same glad and blessed peace. It is therefore an evangelistic, as well as a penitential, Psalm and needs to be looked at in this light. The rapturous outburst of joy in 1, 2 in the knowledge and experience of pardon and forgiveness is not merely an emotional effusion: something deep and profound has happened to the Psalmist, and it is this that enables him to be an evangelist in 6-11. The deeper and profounder our experience, the more fitted we will be to be the bearers of good news to others. We shall look at the nature of that experience in the next note.

88) Psalm 32

There clearly came a 'moment of truth' for the Psalmist, in which he caught a glimpse of himself and saw the unpalatable truth of himself in the sight of God. He uses three words to describe his sin, which have different shades of meaning: transgression means rebellion against rightful authority; sin means missing the mark; iniquity means crookedness or distortion. And there are three corresponding words for the divine pardon: it is forgiven - a burden is lifted from aching shoulders; it is covered, hid from God's sight so that His action is no longer determined by its existence; it is not imputed - the debt has been cancelled and he has been justified, and the sin is regarded as if it had never been. The Psalmist's experience before this great knowledge broke upon him is described in 3-5. The RSV translates 3 as 'when I declared not my sin' - i.e. he was silent about it before God, bottling it up, denying it to himself. For so long he could not take the sinner's place. Some think the Psalm refers to the dark time in David's experience when, for a whole year after his sin with Bathsheba, he lived with the great burden of his sin on his conscience, unconfessed and uncleansed, gnawing at his vitals, wasting his whole life and giving him no rest. The acknowledgment of sin in 5 is very sudden in its contrast, and one commentator suggests that there came a moment of crisis, in which he realised he could go on like this no longer: out it came, in a great gush of confession and penitence, and the experience of forgiveness was definite, specific and immediate, and communicated to him in such a way that he knew he was forgiven.

89) Psalm 32

The second half of the Psalm (6-11) translates the Psalmist's joy into exhortation to allow his experience to become ours. It is the blessings of forgiveness that are underlined in 6: out of touch with God, all sorts of troubles come, as we see in 3, 4, but when we are right with God there is security, and 'the floods of great waters' shall not harm us. We should note the warning implicit in the words 'When thou mayest be found'. Men must be up and doing while the opportunity is still open to them. The words in 8 are intriguing and significant: it is the voice of God speaking through what the Psalmist is saying. This is a tremendously solemn thought: in the Psalmist's testimony, God is speaking, wooing men to Himself, and telling them what they must do. And He warns against stubbornness and obstinate disregard of His word to the soul (9). The contrast in 10,11 is between those who do submit to God's grace and are led in right ways, and those who stubbornly resist Him and have to be disciplined. Characteristically, the Psalm closes on a note of praise and joy reminding us of the sheer attractiveness of the gospel message and of the fact that judgment is God's 'strange work', as the Reformers put it. The truest word that can be spoken is that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to Him and live. 'O the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven!'

90) Psalm 33

This Psalm stands in marked contrast with many of those that precede it. Here there is no trace of conflict or of battle; it is one long, clear note of gladness unmingled with melancholy. Some commentators have taken this as symbolic and illustrative of the Church triumphant in glory, with all battles behind her forever more. This may well be true, but we must remember that it is a Psalm of David and that he was expressing something he was then experiencing. It must apply therefore to the present life, and surely speaks of the serenity of spirit to which the heart of man can attain through what may be called the religious view of life, and the triumph of living faith. The Psalm has a three-verse preface, in which the righteous are called to praise the Lord; it closes with a three-verse conclusion in which the righteous voice their trust and prayer before God. The large centre section (4-19) explains why the righteous should rejoice and trust in Him. As one commentator puts it, 'It celebrates the creative and providential work of God, in two parts, in which the first extends these divine acts over the world (4-11), and the second concentrates them on Israel (12-19)'. The Word is the great, central preoccupation, and the picture here is of a world overshadowed by the Divine Word, and directed and controlled by it. To see this basic truth - to see that evil has not the final word, but that God has, in the world - is to know that 'the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord' (5). This is true, even when life seems dark and overcast - even this contains His goodness for us. This is the insight the Psalm gives us.

91) Psalm 33

In 6-9 the basic concept of the Word of God is illustrated. The idea is that the God who can create like this is surely worthy of our worship and praise, our love and fear. The reference in 7 is thought to be to the crossing of the Red Sea - if so, it is the easy control of events that God has that is being underlined. In 8-11 the contrast is made between the easy power of God in creation and the counsels of the nations which He can bring to naught: what they plan falls to the ground in spite of their hard work, but what He plans comes to pass, and stands forever. In 12-19 it is the blessedness of those chosen by Him to be His heritage. Again it is the activity of the Divine Word, calling out a people for His Name (cf 2 Corinthians 4:6). 'Inheritance' in 12 is a word of wide implication: we are called to share His eternal glory, and given a part to play in the unfolding of His sovereign purposes in the world. It is this that we need to set over against the abortive and twisted attempts of fallen man to explore God's universe, for this is but a faint indication of the ultimate destiny of man in Christ. The pattern of the Psalm is this: The all-overshadowing Word (4, 6) - the eye of the Lord (13-18) - the earth full of the goodness of the Lord (5). This is the context in which we need to view life; and when we do we cannot but rejoice in God, and sing His praises, trusting in His holy Name, and hoping in Him (21, 22).

92) Psalm 34

This Psalm is associated, in its superscription with the period of David's life in which he was in flight from King Saul, and in exile at the court of Achish, king of Gath. It celebrates an experience of the divine deliverance in time of danger. Its first section (1-3) records a vow of praise in which others are called upon to unite. David's heart wells up in a glad, spontaneous outburst glowing with a consciousness of the goodness of God. The words 'at all times' (1) are significant. They are not a mere extravagance of language: David has suddenly realised in this particular deliverance that the tender mercy of God has been watching over him all the time. It has merely become visible in this particular situation, but it was there even when he was not conscious of it. It is this that prompts the consciousness that he should be thankful to God every moment of the day. This applies even when distresses come, for 'all things work together for good to them that love God'. And when a man is able to rejoice like this, it gladdens the hearts of the humble (2), and encourages them. 'Humble' has been translated 'afflicted', and this illuminates the verse. Those passing through difficult times need this assurance that there is a God Who can break open black disappointment, and pluck jewels out of it for us. The words 'with me' in the exhortation to magnify the Lord bear witness to the deep spiritual truth that the best blessings of God can be known and shared only in fellowship. Christianity is not a solitary religion (of 'with all saints' in Ephesians 3:18). As one commentator puts it, 'taking our inheritance and going off on our own to enjoy it is not sonship but prodigalism'.

93) Psalm 34

The second section (4-10) tells us the reasons for the Psalmist's rejoicing. 4-7 are two pairs of verses, in which the same fact of divine deliverance is first related in reference to David's personal experience, and then generalized for all the servants of the Lord. It is as if David were saying that what had happened to him was, after all, what always happened to those who trusted in Him, and what always would. Thus, 4 and 6 refer to David's experience, and 5 and 7 to the experience applied to all. It is the same kind of expansive idea as in 1-3, where he wants others to join with him in magnifying and exalting the Lord. His personal experience is expressed in beautiful simplicity: 'I sought...He heard...and delivered...This poor man cried...the Lord heard...and saved'. The man who can speak like this is one who has something to praise God about. It is the general experience that is couched in such striking words and ideas. In 5 it is not even a cry, but only a silent look that is answered by the mercy of God. In 7 it is even more striking: the angel of the Lord encamps around the trusting soul. The appeal and exhortation in 8-10 are made on the basis of the experience of 4-7. Maclaren says: 'The depth of a man's religion may be roughly, but on the whole fairly, tested by his irrepressible impulse to bring other men to the fountain from which he has drunk'. In 8 we should note two things: to taste is the same as to trust; and, you taste first, you see afterwards. Faith, in this sense, is something akin to a leap in the dark: you trust yourself to this God and then you prove Him faithful. But the point is that you trust Him on the basis of what we hear of Him in His Word. You believe the testimony concerning Him in the Scriptures and in the experience of others, and on that ground you commit yourself to Him, and find Him so much more than ever you could have hoped. Note also the threefold description of true faith: we taste (8), we fear (9), we seek (10) - and at its heart that fear, liberating, wholesome, character forming, that is the beginning of wisdom.

94) Psalm 34

The third section of the Psalm (11-22) is purely didactic, and flows directly from David's experience in 1-10, a sermon, so to speak, on the text 'O taste and see that the Lord is good'. There are two major lessons: the first is that David 'teaches' the fear of the Lord, i.e. the gospel of salvation and blessedness, on the basis of having himself experienced its power in his own life. He has, in 1-10, spoken true things truly about God. This is the only authentic gospel preaching: men who are sure of God, men with something to say and worth saying, and who can say it plainly and unequivocally. If the outsider does not listen to the Church's message, could the reason be that it is not really gripped by that message itself? It is a new experience of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, a new Pentecost that we need. Our hearts need to be wrought upon afresh, and our lips touched afresh with holy fire to speak of Christ to men so that they will hear. The second lesson is this: The very next passage in 1 Samuel following that referred to in the title of the Psalm is the one referring to the gathering of men at the cave of Adullam (cf 1 Samuel 21:10-15; 22:1, 2). It is surely natural therefore to assume that that nondescript band of men, that motley crew, were the object of David's teaching in this Psalm, and were the 'children' or 'sons' to whom he makes reference. If ever a band of men needed straight discipline and shaping and fashioning into a band of true followers these Adullamites did. But look at 2 Samuel 23:8ff! Here is the end-product of David's influence over them, men who dared life itself out of loyalty and love for their king. The story of the water from the well of Bethlehem (2 Samuel 23:14ff) has this to proclaim to us, that when the fear of the Lord is instilled into men, they can be fashioned anew and built up in character and calibre - to be MEN. This is the real criterion in any work of God. Finally, the message that produces this? Moral integrity, ruthlessness in dealing with evil (13, 14), fellowship with a living God (15:17), warning against supposing that 'the good life' is easy or smooth (18, 19). This is the moral dynamic of the Faith. The fruit of the Spirit is...character!

95) Psalm 35

The historical setting of this Psalm - David is once again in danger of his life - is almost certainly the time of Saul's relentless harrying of David recorded in the later chapters of 1 Samuel, as a comparison of the words in 12 with 1 Samuel 24:17 will show (cf also 1 Samuel 24:15). The comparison of the language there with that of the Psalm makes the conclusion inescapable that this is the circumstance in which the Psalm was composed. This helps us to understand two things: first of all, the sense of desolation and desperation that must have pervaded the Psalmist's mind during these difficult and trying days. A man can stand this kind of unjust, causeless opposition and vilification only for so long. Even the bravest will feel at times as if the waters were engulfing his soul, and he will be tempted to lose heart. It is this that explains the vehemence of the Psalmist's cries. In this connection - this is the second thing - many commentators are quick to point out what they call the 'sub-Christian' sentiments expressed in the more vehement of David's desires against his enemies. But it is easy to be thus critical when you yourself are not facing, and perhaps have never faced, such persecution and distress. Furthermore, we are scarcely justified in accusing David of vindictive passion and fleshly hatred against his enemies. The historical setting reminds us of occasions when David magnanimously spared Saul when it was in his power to slay him as he slept in the cave (1 Samuel 24:6ff). It is not vindictive spleen, but righteous indignation, free of personal animosity that is expressed here. Besides, what David asks God to do here is simply what He elsewhere undertakes to do for those whose cause He vindicates (cf Isaiah 49:25; 54:17). Can it be wrong to pray for what God Himself has said He would do?

96) Psalm 35

The Psalm divides into three parallel sections, 1-10, 11-18, 19-28, each containing a complaint, a prayer, and a promise of praise for the deliverance to come. There is a development of thought in the sections: in the first David alleges innocence (7) and vows praise; in the second he professes goodwill and help that have been answered by hate; in the third he speaks less about the enemy and utters a more prolonged appeal to the Lord for His judgment and vindication. A lesson may be learned from this progression. At first he pours out his complaint to the Lord, then the utter desolation of his situation intensifies, as he thinks of how his kindness has been evil requited; but in the end two things happen: one is that he becomes more absorbed in the Lord than in his enemies, the other that he discovers he is not alone in the battle, even from the human point of view, for there are those 'that favour my righteous cause' (27). This is always the result that believing prayer has - it brings a sense of perspective, and enables a man to fix his thoughts in the proper place. God 'becomes bigger' as we cry to Him, and trouble and enemies begin to reduce in size.

In 1-10 there are three points to note. First, what is said in 5, 6 is simply the obverse of David's wish for his own deliverance, which could be accomplished only by the defeat of his enemies. The one cannot take place without the other. The divine presence and activity is a savour of life to some and death to others. Secondly, we need to take the words 'without cause' in 7 in all seriousness: to be on the Lord's side, to be the Lord's man, is sufficient cause for the enemy to fire his arrows against us. Thirdly, the enemy's fall (9) is the occasion of glad praise, not because David gloats over them. It is his own deliverance, not the other's destruction that makes him rejoice.

97) Psalm 35

In 11-18, the striking point is the contrast between David's treatment of his enemies and their treatment of him. Nor is this a piece of special pleading by David: it is the simple truth, as we see in 1 Samuel 24 and elsewhere. David was a true friend to Saul, and Saul evil-requited him, having drawn all sympathy and friendship from him. David's heart went out to the king in his sickness (i.e. his demonic distemper), was patient with him, ministered to him, and generous sympathy and love characterised all his dealings with the king, and a readiness to forgive. All this simply made Saul worse. Kindness sometimes stirs up the very devil in a man when his heart is out of sorts. Jealousy corroded his spirit against David, and all manner of evil was done and said against him falsely (11), laying to his charge things that he knew not.

In the final section. David's crowning confidence in God is reflected in his concentration on the divine deliverance to come rather than on the oppression of his enemies. That this was no wishful thinking, but that he was in fact snatched from the jaws of the enemy (25) is well exemplified by such passages as 1 Samuel 23:25-29 where, in a situation in which all seemed lost, God intervened, and in a moment all was well. The joy in 27, 28 is very understandable, in the light of such an experience.

98) Psalm 36

There is a marked, even complete, contrast between 1-4 and 5-9 in this Psalm. In the first stanza, the picture is dark and sombre; in the second all is light. And it may be that the best way of taking its message is to think of it as presenting two ways of life, the false and the true. David is writing from the standpoint of the right way, and he is describing the other in the light of his new experience. We are reminded of Paul's words in Colossians 1:13 and Peter's in 1 Peter 2:9 about passing from darkness into light. Modern translations should be consulted for better renderings of 1 and 2 (cf RSV and NIV). 'Transgression' is personified as speaking in the secret heart of the wicked, who regard it as an oracle. In other words, this is how men come to do evil: there is a voice within whispering falsehoods, and that voice takes the place of God, dethroning Him, and making man his willing dupe. This is not a conscious process, however, in the sinner, for he is beguiled. The god of this world has blinded his mind, and his mind is blinded because he has deliberately excluded God from his heart. There comes the point where men say no to God, and from that point they thereby say yes to the devil, and then a chain of consequences is inevitable. The consequences of such practical atheism and identification with evil are then seen in conduct (3, 4): falsehood, insensibility to the things of God, and a silenced conscience which no longer reacts to evil - this is the issue of sin. As James puts it in his epistle, 'sin, when it is finished...bringeth forth death'. It is a dark and sombre picture; and we should not miss the impression these verses give of the dreariness of the broad road that leads to destruction.

99) Psalm 36

But now, the other way. A man who has said no to God and to the gospel can have second thoughts and say yes to Him, for gospel light can shine into the darkness of sin in a man's heart, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). This is what is suggested in 5-9, a stanza full of light. Two points arise here. The first is that it is astonishing, and even frightening, to realise that two people may stand side by side, the one in utter spiritual darkness, seeing nothing, having no living interest in Christ, blind to His beauty and loveliness, and bored to tears with spiritual realities; and the other glorying and exulting in the rich light of grace, with eyes fixed on the things that are unseen and eternal, and heart opened to the unseen world of the Spirit. The second point is that the glory of that spiritual world may conceivably and possibly break through into the darkness of the other - a momentary glimpse, perhaps, a flash of light, startling a man out of his torpor, and creating afresh the opportunity to choose and decide for the right, and for God and Christ and eternal life. 5 and 6 tell of another, far different, voice in the heart of man, the voice of God. Here is a man who has seen God for what He is, and whose eyes have been opened to the powers of the world to come. And, just as 1 and 2 led inevitably to 3 and 4, so here to have eyes opened to the loving kindness of God is to see what a precious thing it is (7ff): the children of men take refuge under the shadow of His wings, and what a glorious and satisfying shadow it is, paradoxically full of light (9). In the light of God, everything else becomes clear, and we see as we ought to see, getting our perspectives right for the first time. The final stanza (10-12) expresses the desire and hope that, having tasted this ineffable joy, nothing will draw him away from it, and closes with the thought that the oppositions of the ungodly are powerless to harm him while he is hiding in the refuge God has provided.

100) Psalm 37

This is one of the better known Psalms, and one which has been a source of blessing, assurance and encouragement to hard-pressed souls down the ages. Despite its length, its theme is remarkably one. There are four sections, each separated from the other by a recurrent theme, which expresses the conviction that the wicked will be cut off (9, 20, 28). This conviction is central to the thought of the Psalm and underlies its main message. The first point to note is the simple and fundamental contrast that the Psalmist makes between the righteous and the wicked. This is one of the disturbing, and uncomfortable, aspects of the biblical revelation: it insists on a sharp and decisive division in matters of religion. The gospel divides men, forcing them to take sides. Furthermore, it calls us the one thing or the other: black or white, but no intermediate shades of grey. In this the Psalmist is at one with our Lord Himself, Who said 'He that is not with Me is against Me'. That is the first lesson of the Psalm, and the second is this: the problem involved for the trusting heart in the continuing prosperity of evil men. And the thesis the Psalmist puts forward is that godless prosperity is short-lived, and will be brought to naught. It is the triumphant realisation that evil does not have the last word in the world, that God is on the throne, and that He will bring evil and evildoers down when it pleases Him. It is this basic assurance that underlies the Psalmist's exhortation to rest and trust in the Lord.

101) Psalm 37

The first section (1-9) expresses a blessed reality of fellowship with God in a four-fold exhortation that is all the more graphic and telling for being set over against the temptation to fret and become agitated by the evil of evildoers: 'trust' (3), 'delight' (4), 'commit' (5), 'rest' (7). All these are linked, and hold together in spiritual experience: we rest on Him, in the sense of leaning our weight on His strength; and when we do, we learn to delight in Him; and when confidence thus develops and increases within us, we are able to commit our way utterly to Him, in the sense of 'rolling it' upon Him (cf Psalm 55:22). Having done so, we come to the place of rest, in fellowship with Him, in the place where the perplexing meanings of life cannot touch or dismay us. Reading the Psalms, we do not doubt that David got to that place, and drew from that hidden fount resources of strength and grace more sufficient for all his needs.

The message of the second stanza (10-22) is that evil has within itself the seeds of its own destruction. This is one of the things that come home to us with great conviction and assurance. The picture given us is a contrasting one of the wicked raging and scheming against the righteous (12, 14) and the grim retribution that turns their weapons into instruments of their own destruction. The theme here is similar to that in Revelation 17:16, 17, which speaks of unity in the camp of evil until God relaxes His hold upon it, when it becomes clear that it has self-disintegrating forces within itself. This is just as true on the national and international fronts as it is in the experience of groups and in the lives of individuals. Man cannot fight against God with impunity: He will always be brought down in the end.

102) Psalm 37

The third stanza (23-29) shows forth the beauty and the order of the good life. In this connection, we should not miss the implicit emphasis on the old ways and the old paths. It is precisely these that are being called in question today, when old-fashioned, honest-to-goodness decencies are ridiculed and traditional values and old landmarks are being set at naught. Well, here is a picture of the possibilities of the good life, and it says to us: 'This is the way, walk ye in it'. We might well take the words of 31 into this section as summing up its message: here is a firm anchorage and a true balance, in strong, stable living. In such a day as ours, there is a great need for men to keep their feet (and their heads!) in this wilderness of confusion and uncertainty (cf Jeremiah 6:16).

In the final section (30-40) the entail of sin is traced to a second generation of evil-doers - the metaphor in 35 of evil spreading like the green bay tree is a very graphic one. Yet it finally disappears, and cannot be found, and the posterity of the wicked (38) is cut off. Here then is a word to faltering faith that sometimes tends to get discouraged and cast down: waiting on the Lord and resting in Him is never a vain thing. The promise of divine help and deliverance is clear and sure, and trust in Him is always vindicated.

103) Psalm 38

This is the third of the six penitential Psalms (the first two being Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). It is a dark and distressing utterance, 'a long-drawn wail, never passing out of the minor key' as McLaren puts it. Its message is a particular one, and contains a particular insight that is true in some situations and circumstances. What we mean is this: There are occasions when trouble and distress come, and when we cry to the Lord He delivers us gloriously, and all is well (cf Psalm 34:6). But there are other experiences in which, when we cry to God, the answer does not come and He does not seem to hear, and faith is tested and shaken to the uttermost. This is the kind of situation to which the Psalm addresses itself, the far more terrible, heart-searching experience when all is dark and remains dark, in spite of prayer and crying to God. This is a necessary emphasis, if only to correct the notion that the spiritual life works on simple, straightforward lines of prayer and answer to prayer, and it should save us from any superficial judgments about such a situation to see how real was the distress the Psalmist was passing through. The Psalm opens with words almost identical to those opening Psalm 6 and echoes much of the thought of that Psalm (see Notes on this Psalm which provide an adequate and sufficient commentary on this Psalm). The main difference between the two Psalms is that here there is nothing so clear and definite as a breakthrough. Yet the pattern of action in such a situation is indicated once again: the invocation of the name of God (1, 9, 15), and each time the burden seems easier to bear, and the darkness less intense. The message therefore is: keep looking to God, when you are incapable of doing anything else. One of the Reformers once said that this was a Psalm for times 'when the mind can take no understanding, nor the heart any joy, of God's promises'. Thus, over against God's silence in face of his enemies the assurance in 15, 'Thou wilt hear' is really an expression of 'faith in the dark', when feeling has been bludgeoned into numbness. And, strangely, he seems consoled; and this testifies to the power of prayer to comfort and sustain, even before an answer or an assurance of answer is given. 'When we in darkness walk, nor feel the heavenly flame...'.

104) Psalm 39

Some commentators think that this Psalm is a kind of sequel to the previous one. There is something to be said for this view (compare 38:13, 14 with 39:2). Certainly, the general circumstances of the two Psalms are those of sorrow and affliction. If, then, there is a connection, we would expect a development of thought from the one to the other. It is as if David had learned from his earlier experience, and was putting what he had learned into practice. And when you do that, light comes in the darkness. This explains why this Psalm is not so dark as Psalm 38. What he says in 1, 2 is significant: in the midst of trial he is conscious of the very real temptation to utter hot, angry recriminations against God for allowing the distress and trial to have come upon him and to continue. And he is determined to resist that temptation. This shows the temper of the Psalm. There is a fighting spirit about it that lends it a certain vigour that is very wholesome. It is the presence of the wicked, his foes (1), that imposes the silence on his lips. This is very telling, for it is precisely when we are under pressure that hasty, ill-advised words sometimes spill out, in the hearing of the ungodly, that are regretted very bitterly afterwards. We did not mean to say them, but we did say them, and they brought shame on the name we bear, and the ungodly were not slow to make capital out of them. It is what we are when under pressure that has a habit of coming out in word and attitude, and can so very often mar our testimony. This is the real testing of our witness, for it is here that those outside watch us so carefully and keenly.

105) Psalm 39

But grief suppressed often means grief increased, and the hidden sorrow burned deep down, gnawing at the roots of his being. This is the force of the words in 3: the more he kept silence, the more the fire within was given fuel and fed. And since one cannot bottle pent-up feelings indefinitely, an outburst is ultimately inevitable: 'then spake I with my tongue' (3). But the question arises, do 4ff represent what burst out when the Psalmist broke silence? This is a pertinent question, and it may be we should rather take these words not as what burst out, but as what he said after he had burst out and that a veil is drawn over the outburst, hot and indignant as it must have been, as it was poured out before the Lord in the secret place. And we may well imagine the gentle but firm dealing God had with His servant, saying, 'Doest thou well to be angry, David?', and pointing out to him that perhaps there were purposes in this discipline which he had not seen, but needed to see, and lessons for him to learn that he needed to learn. And, realising this at last, with the hot flush of distress and agitation abated, he is now ready to see more clearly, and think more truly, as he expresses himself in the worthy and beautiful eulogy which follows (4ff). He is conscious of the mystery of life, especially in relation to his suffering and affliction, and he asks humbly for light on the agonising dilemmas that are upon him. A deep, pervading sense of the insignificance of man's brief life as over against the changeless eternity of God threatens to overcome him, but he finds refuge in the Most High, and meaning and hope, as what is said in the next note will show.

106) Psalm 39

Three strands are discernible in David's soliloquy. First of all there is the brevity and meaninglessness of man's life over against the eternity of God (4-6). But this is only one side of David's thinking. In Psalm 8 he strikes a very different note, setting the vast eternity of God over against the insignificance of man and finding something in this to exult his heart - mystery in light not mystery in darkness. It is only the kind of prayer uttered in 4 that can transport us from the one attitude to the other. Secondly, David's prayer asks God to show him the purpose of life. Life, brief as it is, cannot be in vain if it is linked to the purpose of God. It is possible to serve our day and generation, then fall asleep in the glad consciousness and assurance that life, however brief, has not been in vain. The third strand of thought, in 7-9, underlines hope in God. When a man's hope is in God, for this life or the next, he is related to eternity, and he cannot live in vain. This threefold strand of thought forms the basis and groundwork of David's experience, and it is this that ensures that the touching prayer in 8-13 will be answered. The truth is, when basic fundamentals are sorted out, we have a ground on which to stand, and on which we can cry to God in real confidence. The great thing is to have come to an understanding of life, to know our end, and to realise the divine purpose for us. This is what brings lasting peace to our hearts.

107) Psalm 40

This is one of the high mountain peaks of the Psalter, and the Church has made it its own in its worship, and countless individuals have used it to express their glad experience of the grace of God. There are different ways of interpreting this great song. Spurgeon takes it almost exclusively as prefiguring the experience of Christ - in this he follows many of the old Puritans - and we can scarcely doubt that there are rich insights here when we apply the words to our Lord's experience of suffering and victory (cf Hebrews 10:5-9). All the same, we should not on that account neglect the fact that David spoke these words of his own experience as a spiritual man, and it is in this respect that we should first look at the Psalm, as holding many enriching, encouraging and challenging lessons for us. The two halves of the Psalm (1-10 and 11-17) are very different in tone, the former filled with exultant joy and praise, the latter with a sense of fear and concern as innumerable evils surround the Psalmist (13-17 reappear almost verbatim as a separate Psalm 70). The lesson this great change of mood teaches us is that there is no deliverance we can know in spiritual life so complete that it excludes the possibility of future difficulties and hazards. Furthermore, the resurrection of dead fears is not a thing unknown even at the height of spiritual exhortation. This is simply part and parcel of true Christian experience. But the great lesson is: in time of trouble, the memory of past deliverances such as this will garrison the heart and provide a bulwark that no stormy seas will ever finally shake.

108) Psalm 40

The sequence of thought presented in the first half of the Psalm is impressive. First of all, the blessing of deliverance (1-3a) affords a wonderful picture of redeeming grace. This is the stuff of which true spiritual experience is made: if a man has not known himself to be down there in the pit, and felt the woe and despair of it, if he has not known the lifting power of the gospel, true religion has not yet begun in his life. How wonderful that God hears the cries of the needy as they cry for salvation! Then, there is the praise and the thanksgiving (3b-5), the new song that none but God's redeemed can learn. This is the great characteristic of God's salvation: it sets people singing with a great new joy. And that song will inevitably make an impact on those outside, and lead others to trust in God also. When salvation is a reality in a fellowship, it has a healing and life-giving influence on all who come in contact with it. Nor is the rejoicing merely lightsome, for as 4, 5 indicate it is accompanied by a reverent attitude of worship and holy awe as a sense of the mystery of the divine salvation grips the soul. Next, the consecration of life to the will of God (6-8). As Maclaren says, 'If God's mercies thus baffle enumeration and beggar praise, the question naturally arises, 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits?'' The only adequate expression of gratitude to Him for His grace and goodness is consecration to His good and perfect will, in a total self-giving (cf Romans 12:1, 2). Then, inevitably (9, 10), the proclamation and witness. It is in the context of consecration to the will of God that witness becomes necessary, possible and effectual. This is the ultimate issue of the gospel: God for us, and God in us will inevitably lead to - God through us. But a life dedicated to the will of God will not have it easy (11-17): there will be dangers to face, and innumerable evils will compass it about. Full deliverance is not yet: there are still more battles to be fought. And the evil one's attacks are always related to consecration. But clad in the divine armour we will be led to greater blessings (16, 17). Best of all, poor and needy though we be, the Lord thinks upon us. Blessed be His Name.

109) Psalm 41

This Psalm is the final one in Book 1 of the Psalter, ending with a suitable ascription of praise in 13. Here we see the servant of God suffering from a double distress, sickness on the one hand, and on the other, treacherous friends who have initiated a whispering campaign against him. We may find it remarkable that so many Psalms speak so much about enemies; but the truth is, you cannot make a stand for God without making enemies. The kingdom of God is a divisive force, and when that kingdom really breaks in and confronts men in earnest, it invariably precipitates reaction. Jesus Himself bears witness to this realism in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:10, 11). The striking thing is that the kingdom of God proves even natural friendship to be wanting when it comes to the issues of the gospel (9). One never really sees what a man is at heart until he is stirred in opposition to Christ and the things of the kingdom. Natural friendship, and natural friendliness, are certainly no proof against the malevolence and hate that arise in the human heart when the gospel stirs it and awakens its natural opposition to the things of God.

110) Psalm 41

The Psalm divides into four stanzas: 1-3 give a statement of the blessings that are ensured to those who are compassionate and merciful; 4-6 give an account of the Psalmist's sufferings, and pictures him in his sick chamber; 7-9 continue the picture of 4-6, with the difference that we now see the conspirators in their meeting place, whispering against him and hoping for his ruin; 10-13 are a prayer for deliverance, and he rises to serene confidence in its certain answer. The setting of the Psalm is thought to be the events associated with the revolt of Absalom (2 Samuel 15ff). The hurt expressed in the Psalm matches Ahitophel's treachery well. We should not miss the significance of the fact that although the central section of the Psalm, and its main bulk, constitutes an utterance of great distress and woe, it is nevertheless bounded at beginning and end with expression of calm confidence and serenity that are impressive indeed. This is the main point of its message, for it shows us how, even in very difficult and trying and discouraging times of opposition, the soul can remain serene, detached and confident. The prominent note, therefore, in the Psalm is not distress, but confidence, and it is salutary for us to realise that confidence in God is not something that expresses itself in stoical indifference to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. David suffered: he felt his woes; he was not insensitive to the treachery of his friends, or the hurtfulness of malicious whisperers. He felt it all very keenly, but in the distress and in the sufferings of it he was still confident. The source of this confidence is to be found in 1-3: he is God's man and the basic fact of his calling and anointing by God is the ultimate ground for his assurance. He knows that in spite of his many faults, he is rightly related to the will of God and that the general direction of his life is Godward. It is this that enables him to pray as he does in 10-13: he knows that there is upholding for him!

III) Psalm 42

We come with this Psalm to the second book of the Psalter, which comprises Psalms 42-72. It will not be unprofitable, as we begin this new section of the Psalter, to remind ourselves of some salient points that we have already discovered to be common ground in the Psalms. They are truly wonderful mirrors of spiritual experience, and are of enormous help, benefit and encouragement to God's people in every age. One factor that is almost constant in them is the repeated reference to 'enemies', (as here in 9, 10), enemies of different kinds and differing interpretations. The reason why this should be so is simple and categorical: one cannot take a stand for God without making enemies. The kingdom of God is a divisive force. Another notable lesson is that the Psalms are full-blooded in the range of experience that they portray. The whole gamut of human emotion, from exaltation to despair, is registered for us. There is no stoical indifference to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. David suffered: he felt his woes, he was not insensitive to the hurts and costliness of his faithfulness to God. One of the most impressive things, however, in the Psalms - and we see it again and again - is the way in which the Psalmist emerges out of the struggle and the agony into the peace, assurance and serenity of faith and victory, even when the actual circumstances of the situation remain unchanged. This is something that we see in the Psalms before us, as the following Notes will show.

112) Psalm 42

This Psalm and the next belong in thought together, and some manuscripts combine them as one Psalm. Whether they were originally one or not, it is clear that they share a common theme. There are two stanzas in this Psalm, one of five verses and one of six, while Psalm 43 has one stanza of five verses; and each of the three stanzas ends with the same refrain, 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul...?' If we take the two Psalms as a unit, they record a remarkable outpouring of heart, echoing so much in our own experience - the yearning and longing for God, the distress at the pressures from the enemy, the darkness, the misery, the tendency to self-pity, the struggle and the battle, the light seeming to break, followed by darkness - all before the final peace comes. And, of course, this is its message for us, in the unfolding of the drama of life. We can learn so much from it.

The picture in the opening verses is a very moving one. The scholars tell us that the Psalmist is probably living in exile, and compelled to sojourn far away from Jerusalem and its Temple. And he pines and longs. The important thing for us in this is the parallel it can afford us in our own circumstances. One thinks of the believer who is now permanently hospitalized, or through frailty and advancing years confined to home, who deeply grieves of his inability to get to church, and who can only think about the fellowship of the saints, and be present with them in spirit. Or, one may think of the missionary, far from home and in certain circumstances deeply conscious of the desolation and isolation he experiences, and sometimes well nigh torn apart by the intensity and agony of such loneliness. Such are the spiritual parallels - and there are surely others, not excluding the sense of having lost contact with God and now at a distance from Him, and seemingly unable to get through to Him - in which we are able to apply the message of the Psalm.

113) Psalm 42

In the first stanza (1-5), the mood is one of gloom and distress (a fruitful way of interpreting this is to take the 'enemy' as the enemy of souls himself, on the attack against the believer). The agony of longing is expressed in a wonderfully moving and beautiful picture in 1, and it is made all the more poignant and painful with the enemy whispering all the day, 'Where is thy God?' In this agony the Psalmist remembers the old days, recalling how it once was with him in the fellowship of God's people. This, of course, puts him on the horns of a dilemma, for to remember these things is in one sense a comfort, yet in another, their remembrance, in contrast with his present distress, makes that distress worse. And his soul pours itself out in bitter-sweet desire. But now (5) it is almost as if another voice had broken into his pained soliloquy (as in one sense is the case), for he tries to take himself in hand. He speaks to himself, and gives himself a talking-to. One old puritan writer says, 'David chideth David out of the dumps' (Trapp). Here, then, are two Davids, one the victim of dark and terrible moods, the other the spiritual and rational self, and the one is summoned to give an account of itself to the other. This is always the beginning of victory: it does not come yet, at this point, nor indeed till some time later, but it is the introduction of a principle, a consideration which ultimately makes victory certain and inevitable. We should note, it is not somebody else saying this to us: it has to be ourselves saying it to ourselves. And, when 'we' take 'ourselves' in hand things begin to happen.

114) Psalm 42

The end of the first stanza (5) saw a break in the Psalmist's gloom but at the beginning of the second (6-11) the darkness has once again fallen on his spirit. This does not mean that the momentary gleam of light was unreal, or that no advance was made. It is simply that the procedure of giving oneself a talking-to is a slowish process, and does not work all at once. The old adage, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again' is relevant here. For although the Psalmist begins once more (6) with the assertion that his soul is cast down, it very soon becomes clear that the situation is not quite the same as before. In the first stanza his distress of spirit made him remember the old days; but here, he remembers God. That is indeed an advance, and if a man can do this in his distress the battle is already more than half won. And so he remembers God, and His love and power in times past, as if to say, 'If God did that once, He can do it again and deliver me. His compassions fail not, He is the same yesterday, today and forever'. But 7 and 8 show that the battle is not yet won: wave upon wave beats upon his assailed spirit but the initiative is now with the good, and a) he recognises that the waves and the billows are in God's hands and control, and b) he has the confidence that God's loving kindness will break through the midnight of the soul. In 9, 10 we see that it is a ding-dong battle, but the ascendancy is becoming clearer, and we feel when we come to 11 that there is a ring of confidence in the Psalmist's words, more so than in 5. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:4, 'Experience worketh hope'!

115) Psalm 43

In the first of the three stanzas (42:1-5) it was the 'agony of faith', and in the second (42:6-11) the 'activity of faith'. Now in the third, (43:1-5) it is the 'prayer and peace of faith'. The important change here from the first two stanzas is the fact of prayer. We should note also in 1, 2 the blending of the two elements, the positive faith and the dark despondency, that we have seen in conflict with each other in 42:6-11. At first, indeed, in this mortal combat, the dark side seems still to be prevailing. But the gradual ascendancy becomes more pronounced as the verses proceed. In 2b there is almost a showing of impatience, as the Psalmist asks 'Why...should this go on?' This is the final emancipation. The soul takes its full salvation:

Take, my soul, thy full salvation:
Rise o'er sin and fear and care:

Then, the famous words in 3, 4 'O send out Thy light and Thy truth...', to be messengers to guide him back to the unfailing presence of God. What a picture - of the Christ coming out to fetch us back. And, at the last, the final, triumphant assurance, in which he tells his soul to be at peace. Alexander Maclaren's words provide a fitting comment with which to end our study: 'Each swing of the gymnast lifts him higher, until he is on a level with a firm platform on which he can spring and stand secure'.

116) Psalm 44

The link between this Psalm and the previous two lies in the fact that the Psalmist is once again remembering God and His mighty acts, and that it is this that enables him at the last to cry to God in such intense earnestness. Some consider the Psalm to be marred by an irreverent, almost blasphemous, attitude towards God and by the unseemly tone of the Psalmist's words, increased by his assertion of injured innocence in 17-19. But this is a superficial judgment, which fails to grasp the real point of the Psalm. The problem that it raises is enshrined in 9-16: in contrast to the mighty acts of God in the past on behalf of His people the Psalmist is now bewailing their defeat, and the query about the divine purpose of this suffering, which he does not understand, raises the afflictions of the people into a crisis of faith. This is very much Job's problem: if the affliction had come because of sin, unfaithfulness and disobedience, there would not have been a problem or crisis; the Psalmist would have understood this and accepted it, as Job would have, also. But the answer to the defeat was not so; the people had not on this occasion been unfaithful. And it was God's seeming forsaking of His people when they were faithful to Him that constituted this terrible trial and crisis of faith. A word needs to be said about this protestation of innocence and faithfulness. This is not to be interpreted as self-vindication or self-righteousness. As elsewhere in the Psalter, what it refers to is the general and substantial integrity of their position in the sight of God: the main direction of their lives was Godward and well-pleasing and faithful. There is simply no thought of either arrogance, complacency or self-righteousness here. We are on a deeper level altogether; and we either recognise this or we do not.

117) Psalm 44

The Psalm may be analysed as follows:

- 1 - 3 Remembering God from of old
- 4 - 8 Affirmation that God is the same today
- 9 -16 The 'darkness' of the present
- 17-22 The assertion of faithfulness
- 23-26 The renewed cry to God

We see the Psalmist doing what Psalms 42 and 43 did, remembering God. And here, it is remembering to some purpose indeed, for he thinks back to what he has been told of God's mighty work in days of old. We can well imagine the thrill of holy joy - and desire and yearning - this would bring to his heart as he remembered the days of the right hand of the Most High (cf Psalm 77:10), as he brought His people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. It was the thing that most of all thrilled the people of God in their history, and it was the remembrance of this that awakened the faith and confidence expressed in 4-8. This is something we can, and ought to, do also. In times of spiritual deadness and apathy men tend to forget that God is real and that He acts in history; and it would do us all a power of good to recall former days that our fathers have told us about, when the Spirit of God was abroad in the land in power and glory. The resources of faith that such remembrance can kindle and activate in the hearts of God's people are very considerable; it liberates faith from the shackles of discouragement that have bound it. But it is important that this exercise is undertaken before considering 9-16, and the undoubted problem of the experience of defeat and being forsaken by God, for it enables us to view this in a very different light, as we shall see in the next Note.

118) Psalm 44

In relation to what was said at the end of the previous note, it is quite possible to allow the pain and distress of the prevalence of evil (9-16), and the mystery that it creates for us, not to say the crisis of faith (7-22), full reign, without being utterly overcome, because behind it all there stands the 'vision' of the unchanging God of history and God of revival, Who is still the same today. And, consequently, two things happen. On the one hand, some understanding and explanation of the terrific problem posed by this situation emerges, as we see in 22; on the other hand, our souls are awakened to a new intensity of prayer. As to what is said in 22, 'For Thy sake are we killed all the day long', we recall Paul's use of these words in Romans 8. They mean that, in some mysterious way, the sufferings and agonies of the faithful are a sharing of the sufferings of their Lord for the salvation of men. This is one of the things we see also in the message of Job - his agonies were in some way integrally related to the fulfilment of the divine purposes. And this we may take for our comfort and encouragement also, in our travail and burden for the work of God. In this connection we may recall Daniel 10, and the strange, inexplicable delay in answer to the prophet's prayer for his people: there was a spiritual battle going on, a war to be waged in the unseen, and not without prayer and fasting was the victory to be won. Hence - and this is the second point - the intensity of prayer and intercession, redoubled and renewed in 23-26. To catch a glimpse of these unseen realities must surely act as a spur to ever more earnest supplication. In this, the Psalm has something very important to say to us today.

119) Psalm 45

The nature of this Psalm is completely different from that of the last three. Yet there is much to learn from it about the nature of spiritual experience, and this is a reminder that there are many different facets in spiritual life. Whatever else it is, it is not dull or stereotyped. On a first reading, the Psalm does not seem to have any specifically religious content. It is, as the scholars point out, an Epithalamion, a nuptial song celebrating the marriage of a king to his queen, a common and popular literary and poetic expression that lends itself to a particular kind of treatment. If it were no more than this, however, its inclusion in Holy Writ could hardly be justified. The scholars alternate between trying to identify the king in the Psalm, whether Solomon or a later monarch, and deciding that it sets forth an ideal - a poetic ideal. Maclaren says, 'Much of the Psalm applied to an historical occasion, the marriage of some monarch: but there is much that as obviously goes beyond it'. Either, then, the Psalm is hyperbole, outstripping even poetical licence, or there appear in it characteristics of the ideal Monarch whom the Psalmist knew to be promised to Israel.... The singer sees the Messiah shining, as it were, through the shadowy form of the earthly king, whose limitations and defects, no less than his excellencies and glories, pointed onwards to a greater than Solomon. What is quite certain is that the early Christian Church saw more than Solomon or an ideal king - they saw Christ. This much is clear from the fact that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes from it in reference to Christ and His excellency. In Hebrews 1:8, 9, verses 6 and 7 are specifically quoted as referring to the Son of God. We see therefore the significance of the Psalm, and learn the lessons it has for the spiritual life, when we understand that Christ is the king it portrays.

120) Psalm 45

Three lessons may be gathered from the Psalm, which have relevance for the Christian life. The first is that it teaches something of the true nature of Christian experience. The Christian life consists primarily and supremely in a personal relationship with the Lord Himself. This is no arbitrary exegesis, but borne out by the New Testament. Paul's words in Ephesians 5:25-27 are a nuptial metaphor, and this is what lies behind the words of the hymn,

From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride.

Not only so: it is certainly no accident that our Lord's parables so frequently strike the nuptial note in their emphases - the parable of the Wedding Feast, the wise and foolish virgins, etc. And, of course, in the book of Revelation the consummation of all things is depicted in nuptial terms - 'the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love'. And Paul, in describing what happens when someone comes to Christ, speaks in terms of becoming married to the Lord (Romans 7:4). Nor is this a new conception, for it was used commonly in the Old Testament where the people of God could say that their Maker was their Husband. In all this not only is the personal relationship with the Lord stressed - salvation consists in being brought into a new and right relationship with God, in contrast to the wrong relationship which is the essence of our sinner-hood - but also that relationship is spoken of as friendship with God, walking in fellowship with Him and with His Son Jesus Christ in a bond that is not only close and indissoluble, but also enriching and emancipating. For to be 'married to the Lord' is to be united to One who has risen from the dead, it is to be heir to all that He has done, and won, in His death and resurrection. And to know Him is to love Him. This is the simple truth of the situation. Not for nothing does Paul describe believers as 'them that love God' (Romans 8:28).

121) Psalm 45

The second lesson we can draw from the Psalm relates to the great Bridegroom of the soul as He is portrayed here. We see first of all the grace of His Person (2), then His heroic deeds in battle (3-5), and finally (6, 7) His righteous rule (on the merely human level here is a pretty comprehensive portrait of the kind of man a Christian man should be!). In relation to the grace of His Person, what is being conveyed is the sheer attractiveness of Christ. The Psalmist's ideal is that of a gentle King, but His gentleness is something that draws and challenges and captures the hearts of men. Gentleness is not a weak thing, it is possible only in big people. And paradoxically, the gentle Christ has warrior strength: the Lamb of God is also the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The aim of all His goings forth is the cause of truth, clemency and justice. His sceptre is a sceptre of righteousness. He loves righteousness and hates iniquity. Is not this the vision we need today, to know that on the throne of the universe there sits a righteous God and Lord, and that righteous principles, not meaninglessness or relative values, are built into the structure of the world. This is our Christ.

In the second half of the Psalm (10-17) - this is the third lesson it teaches - attention is turned to the bride. And we learn, in the advice given to her, the true attitude of the believer to the Lord. The actual marriage itself is depicted in 8, 9 and 10ff depict true wifely attitudes and behaviour. The exhortation to 'forget also thine own people, and thy father's house' inevitably find an echo in our Lord's words in Luke 14:26 (which see). Jesus requires a full surrender of our lives to Him. He must be undisputedly first in our hearts. Nothing else will do, for this belongs to the nature of a love relationship. But the promise and reward of such surrender is made very clear in 11a (but when protestations of love do duty for obedience and reverence we must beware, 11b). The bride is all glorious, but it is with a borrowed glory and all bestowed by Him (12, 13). Her dignity and royal demeanour are His gift. What is spoken of in 15 is the ultimate beatitude for all believers - 'they shall enter into the King's palace'. How very wonderful!

122) Psalm 46

It would be true to say that this Psalm vies with the 23rd and 121st for the place of pre-eminence in the thought and experience of the faithful down the ages. It is a great Psalm indeed, and so often when we read it we simply allow its savour to penetrate our deepest souls. And one is not at all sure whether at times this is not the best way to read it. All the same, it will always help to dig down into its specific meaning and message, and new enrichment will always result when we do. This may be said of its teaching at the outset: it is a Psalm which instructs us what to do in time of trouble. This is its message; and what it is we are to do will become clear as we seek to interpret it.

It is usually an advantage, and a source of illumination, to be able to identify the circumstances in which the Psalm was written. Some scholars think it is impossible to gather from the Psalm or in any other way what historical situation it reflects. But Maclaren suggests two possible ones, one or other of which supplies the historical basis of both this Psalm and the next:

- i) 2 Chronicles 20:1-30, Jehoshaphat and the attack by Ammon and Moab;
- ii) 2 Chronicles 32 (and Isaiah 37/38), the defeat of Sennacherib the Assyrian in the days of Hezekiah. In support of the latter Maclaren observes that the Psalm has remarkable parallels with the words of Isaiah the prophet (cf 4 with Isaiah 33:21, and 7, 11 with Isaiah 7:14, 'Immanuel - God with us', the word which Isaiah gave as a pledge of Jerusalem's deliverance). Whether this be the historical basis or not, it is the kind of situation into which the Psalm would fit, and it enables us to grasp more vividly what it is saying to us.

The Psalm consists of three well-defined stanzas, 1-3, 4-7, 8-11. Many scholars think that the refrain found at the end of stanzas 2 and 3, 'The Lord of hosts is with us...' should appear at the end of stanza 1 also, and did originally do so; in which case the structure of the Psalm would be completely symmetrical.

123) Psalm 46

The Psalm begins with an affirmation of faith (1), and this is its first lesson on what to do in time of trouble. We must remind ourselves, however, tremblingly or fearfully, in a conscious act and attitude of faith, of our resources in God. He is a God easy of access when trouble comes; and a thought and a wish can bring us into the 'safe stronghold', whatever storms may occur. That is the first thing; and the second is this: we are to recall and assure ourselves that His is a Victorious Presence. What we mean is this: the language of 2, 3 is apocalyptic and refers to the ultimate convulsions and storms that will wrack this weary world as the herald and birth pangs of the new creation; and what the Psalmist comes to realise is that no ill can be inflicted by such convulsions upon a faith which sees God at work, and in control, of them, making them contribute to His ultimate victory. And if God is Victor there, in the ultimate chaos, all lesser conflicts will surely show forth His victory too. This is what we need to remember, and how we need to think, when we feel at times that all hell is let loose upon us: for all hell is in the divine control also. Here, then, is the message of the first stanza: the assurance of the presence and of the ultimate victory of God, and therefore the practical experience of it in every time of trouble.

In the second stanza (4-7) we are presented with a complete contrast to the convulsions of the first, in the picture of the river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God. One is reminded of the wonderful picture in Revelation 22 of the pure river of water of life, proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. And when one remembers that that vision follows the convulsions recorded in the earlier chapters, one sees the kind of lesson we are meant to learn here, namely, that the convulsions which are the birth pangs of the new creation are over, and that this is what they lead to. After the storm, the calm; and this is true both of the final convulsion and for every lesser one.

124) Psalm 46

There is something else, however, and more immediate, than the calm after the storm, and it is this: when faith recalls the presence and victory of God, it brings one to the secret source of peace and blessing in the storm. The words in 4 could be literally rendered 'Behold a river!' - as if the Psalmist had suddenly been made aware of its existence. This is what faith does, this is what happens when faith begins to work. In terms of the immediate situation of the people of God this was meant to indicate that a constant supply of what was needful was always to hand, so that they could laugh at their enemies (see the second verse of the hymn 'Glorious things of Thee are spoken'). That this is the meaning is seen in what follows in 5: 'God is in the midst of her'. This leads to stability - 'she shall not be moved'. Then comes the promise of timely help (5b). Maclaren thinks there is a reference here to the pillar of cloud and fire, with God looking out of it and troubling the Egyptians (cf Exodus 14:24, 'In the morning watch', which worthily translates 'and that right early' here). The battle is next described - 6b is the origin of Luther's phrase 'A word shall quickly slay him'. This may be taken both as the exercise of faith, reassuring itself by recalling that in the past this is how God has done it, and as the record of something the Psalmist was actually seeing happening at the time.

In the third stanza (8-11) faith, merging into sight, calls us to behold the desolations made by this 'word' from God (cf Isaiah 37:36 - 'When morning cometh' indeed!). This is what it means to pit oneself against the living God. But we should note also that this is the inauguration of the new life of peace: 'He maketh wars to cease...' (9). Finally, the 'voice' of God speaks again (10). 'God desires that His foes would cease their vain strife, before it proves fatal'. 'Desist', He says, 'let your hands drop; let be, and learn how vain is a contest with Him Who is God'. It is a word of warning, in face of the revelation of such a God, to submit to Him, and acknowledge Him as Lord.

125) Psalm 47

The thought of this Psalm follows on from that of Psalm 46, and particularly its closing verses, which speak of God being exalted among the heathen and in the earth. Now we see the implications of that, namely the establishment of the divine sovereignty and the completion of His work and the necessary rejoicing that follows the realisation of this. The message of the Psalm in itself is therefore simple: 'Clap your hands, all ye people' (1), not merely applauding God, but delighting and exulting in Him. There is, in fact, a deeper dimension in the Psalm but we look at it first of all at its face value, and learn some simple lessons. The people have just seen a great vindication by God in the defeat and rout of their enemies, and it is this that explains the note of triumph in 1, 2. This manifestation of His triumph gives them - and us - great assurance of continuing and complete victory: 'God hath made His saints victorious' (3). Furthermore (4), such a God is One to whom we can well and safely entrust the disposal of our earthly lot. We can leave ourselves in His hands. He knows best. Also, we should particularly note the phrase in 7 'Sing ye praises with understanding' - that is, grasping the significance of why we are praising at all will transform our praises. This is what explains the 'spirit' in some congregational singing: when people sing from the heart, feeling what they sing and knowing why they are singing, it charges and invests the praise with a dynamic. God is in it. He inhabits the praises of Israel! This much we can glean from even a cursory reading of the Psalm. But we need to study it more closely, and we shall do in the next Note.

126) Psalm 47

The scholars have a great deal to say about this Psalm, calling it one of the Enthronement Psalms sung at the commencement of the feast of tabernacles, when the kingship of Jehovah was proclaimed. One can certainly see the force of this, for that Feast celebrated the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. And the deliverance from Sennacherib is sufficiently like that to make common ground for the two occasions. The scholars rightly point out that there is a prophetic and eschatological element present in the Psalm and in others like it. They look forward to the final triumph of God at the end of history. The ascension of God to His throne - seen by them in every fresh deliverance He wrought for His people - was to them a foretaste and an anticipation of the great Day of God, spoken of also by the prophets, when His sovereignty would be established visibly and forever more. This is the force and point of the picture in 8ff - God sitting on His holy throne, before which the princes of the people are gathered together. God becomes all in all.

This background is the key to the Christian interpretation and use of the Psalm, for it looks forward to the Christian message, in which the Old Testament prophetic hope is fulfilled and consummated. But, although in the ultimate sense it is fulfilled and consummated in the coming of Christ to reign at the end of the age, the Psalm points also to something else, namely that by which the final consummation is sealed and assured, the ascension and exaltation of Christ, when His mediatorial work was accomplished. This is something of the greatest importance for our thinking: what we must realise is the victory of God in the vindication of His people, the deliverance he wrought for them - this was an historical experience in olden time because it was to become uniquely and decisively historical in the work of Christ. All interventions of God take their validity from the unique, once-for-all intervention in the cross and resurrection of Christ. This is why the words in 5 irresistibly remind us of the ascension of Christ; and they do so because the victory in the Psalmist's experience was a reflection, an adumbration, of His exaltation and victory.

127) Psalm 47

In relation to what was said in the previous note, we should bear in mind what the message of Psalm 46 was: God had gone down to intervene on behalf of His people. Now He has gone up, and returned to His place, having accomplished what He came down to do. And this is precisely what we see and read in the New Testament, of Christ. One thinks, for example, of Philippians 2:5-11, where in 5-8 it is God coming down, in the Person of His Son, and in 9-11 He goes up with a shout (cf also Hebrews 1:1-3, and Ephesians 4:8ff, for the same pattern). The significance of the Ascension of Christ is that in it His redeeming work has reached its end: the 'movement' has returned to its origin, the circle is complete. Not that this means He has withdrawn from us, indeed the opposite. It is because He has gone up on high that His Presence is ever with us, by the Spirit. This is what His last words to the disciples mean: 'All power is given unto Me...and lo, I am with you always...'. The practical use of this doctrinal position is surely obvious: we are called to be ambassadors of an ascended and exalted Lord, and we are invested with royal power and authority as we do our work for Him - a solemn, glorious and reassuring thought!

128) Psalm 48

This Psalm continues the theme of rejoicing in the victory of God. We see once again in 4-7 the jubilant realisation by God's people of the divine intervention - and even if the actual identification of the historical setting as being Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BC may be questioned by some, it is sufficiently illustrative to make clear the kind of situation for which this Psalm has relevance. As ever, our concern must be to underline the Christian use and interpretation of the Psalm, and we must first of all tackle the problem raised here by the emphasis on the literal city of Jerusalem, a problem accentuated by the fact that in the New Testament itself the exaltation of Jerusalem is called in question (cf John 4:20-24; Acts 6:13, 14). Clearly, the spiritual nature of worship as revealed in the New Testament makes the 'place' of worship whether city or temple, irrelevant, and where undue emphasis is placed on the latter, men fall into error. This is not to say, however, that the emphasis on Jerusalem 'beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth', has nothing to say to us today. On the contrary, it is the inner heart of that emphasis that remains a constant, and has abiding relevance for us. And that inner heart is this: 'The one thing that made Zion, Jerusalem, glorious was God's Presence in it...it was because God dwelt there and manifested Himself there that it was 'a joy for all the earth', Jehovah-Shammah, 'the Lord is there'' (Maclaren). It is an easy transition therefore from the city to the church of God, for it is the glory of the church, as it was the glory of Jerusalem/Zion of old, that God dwells in her.

129) Psalm 48

We may therefore sum up the message of the Psalm quite simply under two heads: what God is to the Church, and what the Church is to God. As to the first, three things may be said: God is a refuge, a high tower, to His people (3): He has made Himself known as this. This does not merely mean that His people have discovered this to be so with glad surprise and joy, but - as 4ff seem to imply - that He has made Himself known to the enemies of His people as His people's refuge and deliverer. The emphasis in 5 is on the fact that the enemies saw this, and seeing it were discomfited. This is what God wants to be and do for His people - a living, disturbing Presence within the Church. Secondly, He is a contemporary God (8): 'As we have heard, so have we seen'. One commentator says of this, 'The past, of which the nation had heard from its fathers, lives again in their own history; and that verification of traditional belief by experience is to a devout soul the chief blessing of its deliverances'. The God of history becomes the God of experience, and how wonderful it is that God should want to be our contemporary. It is not His will that He should be as a 'stranger in the land'. Thirdly, God is a Divine Protector to His people. This is the point in 12-14: the beleaguered people are asked to take a good look at the city and to see that all is still well with it. As the hymn says,

Unharmed upon the eternal Rock
The eternal City stands.

130) Psalm 48

What the Church is to God is implied rather than stated, but the implication runs throughout the Psalm. The Church is to God the object of His love, pleasure and delight, indeed it is that love that invests her with glory and beauty, for she has, naturally speaking, none of her own. God starts from scratch with His people. As Augustine puts it, 'He loved her foul, that He might make her fair'. What is it that makes a bride so lovely? It is not natural beauty - although she may be beautiful; it is not even the fact that she loves her bridegroom, although she may do so with all her heart. It is the fact that she is loved - that is what gives her the indescribable glow and radiance. And it is so with the Church, the Bride of Christ. 'Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify it...and present it unto Himself, a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing' (Ephesians 5:25-27). This is the wonderful heart of all - He is a God Who gives Himself to His people, in utter self-giving, because He loves. It is His bestowal of the divine righteousness (10), in loving kindness (9) that makes the redeemed of the Lord beautiful with the beauty of holiness and of heaven. And this God - this self-giving God - is our God forever and ever!

131) Psalm 49

It is one of the remarkable and enriching experiences in reading the Psalms that we encounter so many different subjects within their compass. In this Psalm we find something different in atmosphere, in emphasis, and in message. There are no battles with enemies here, but rather a knotty problem to wrestle with, and a divine illumination given through the Psalmist, throwing light on dark places of human experience. It is a Wisdom Song, designed 'to give an answer to one of the very old, recurring riddles of life'. It has affinity therefore to what we sometimes call the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, books like Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. The problem, or mystery, has arisen from the Psalmist's own personal circumstances: he has wrestled with it, and light has broken through, and for him it has been solved. And now he discloses the thoughts and insights which have enabled him to achieve a balanced state of mind. The problem has to do with an experience of oppression which he has suffered at the hands of the wealthy. They have lorded it over him, and his heart has been filled with fear, bitterness, resentment and envy. And he tells us how he has succeeded in overcoming these things, and getting through to a place of victory. Such is the thesis of the Psalm.

132) Psalm 49

In the introduction to the Psalm the Psalmist calls on all the earth to listen to him. This bears witness to the universality of the problem: the awful tension between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' exists all over the world, and is relevant for nations and individuals alike. He has something to say to both - not that he is claiming superior wisdom for himself, for he indicates in 4 that he has received revelation from God. He has learned first to hear, and this is the only one who can have anything to say to his fellows that is worth listening to. It is clear that his word has come out of much heart searching, and the very travail of his soul has been the crucible in which he has heard God speaking to him. The problem is stated in the first main stanza (5-12), in which the Psalmist contrasts the arrogant security of the prosperous godless with the end that awaits them. There are twin problems mentioned: fear of oppression by wealth, and envy of the wealthy. This is very contemporary. Social inequality is a constant factor in human experience, as witness the tension between management and labour in industry today and the chronic discontentment expressed by the 'have-nots' when they contemplate how much more others have than they. This is a sensitive and spiky subject, to be sure; but though the message of the Psalm seems to be advocating a quiet submission to the situation, in the knowledge that there is an 'afterwards' (cf 14), - a kind of 'pie in the sky when you die' doctrine which radicals have always disputed and resented - it has to be insisted that not only does biblical faith not disagree with the desire for improved conditions for workers but also that this is not really the point the Psalm is making. What it is about is the bitterness and envy that this kind of situation can awaken in men's hearts. And this, alas, can continue, and often does continue, long after the battle for fair conditions is won. The politics of envy can be a soul-destroying and terrible thing. It is this spirit that bedevils our country today. More of this in the next Note.

133) Psalm 49

What is manifestly clear is that in any ultimate sense neither management nor unions - nor government - have the answer to the question of fair conditions in industry (this is not to say, of course, that every honourable effort should not be made to make them as fair as possible). But the Psalmist has an answer, and his message is the message of Christ: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth...but...treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:19, 20). The Psalmist has been taught of God to look at all these things from the standpoint of eternity and immortality. This is where true riches lie. In the second stanza of the Psalm (13-20) he looks at what follows man's earthly end. The metaphor in 14 is a remarkable one: the 'grave' (Sheol) is represented as a great fold into which flocks are driven. 'Death' is the shepherd of that dark and dim realm - and what a contrast to the Good Shepherd and the still waters of righteousness! The 'But God' in 15 underlines the reality of divine grace and the victory of faith. The contrast is complete: there are two kinds of life, life in which death has the final say, and life in which God has the final say. And if a man has the assurance that God will take care of him after his death, then he is rich, with the only wealth that matters. This is what God has said to him and this is the message he is intent on proclaiming to all who will hear.

134) Psalm 50

This Psalm bears very strong affinities with the spiritual emphasis in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, and it would not be difficult to imagine Amos, Micah or Isaiah uttering it, with their slashing and scathing critique of the sacrificial religion of their day. This is the point which must be the application of the Psalm for us. It depicts a judgment scene in which God, the Judge of all the earth, summons His people to render account at His judgment throne (cf 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:13). The Psalm falls into three parts, 1-6 describing the coming of the Judge and the opening of the judgment; 7-15 proclaiming the worthlessness of mere sacrifice as a religious exercise; 16-21 branding hypocrites who observe external obedience without a corresponding observance of the spirit of the law; 22, 23 summarise the double lesson of the Psalm. It will be useful to ponder this outline for a little, reading the Psalm as a whole, and getting its flavour, before looking at its several parts, which we shall do in the next two Notes.

135) Psalm 50

The first stanza, 1-6, unfolds a 'theophany', i.e. a dramatic 'appearance' of God in vindication or judgment of His people. And, if God is a real God, why should it be thought unlikely or strange that he should appear like this, demonstrating His reality? It is a measure of the Sadduceeism of our day that, even in the Church, to speak of God really breaking in is regarded with embarrassment, as if it were a violation of the rules of social etiquette even to speak of such a possibility. The Sadducees were the rationalists of our Lord's day, but they are with us in every age, and nothing would surprise them more than to encounter a real, living God! What is said in 21 seems to confirm the Sadducean idea of a God remote from the affairs of men, but 1-6 provide a grim 'moment of truth' for such an attitude. We should note the present tense in 3: it is an indication that this judgment scene is true both of the final Assize and also of those times when God intervenes to institute a time of reckoning for His people. For there are such times, even in this life, when actions are weighed and accounts rendered (cf 1 Samuel 2, where the house of Eli was 'weighed and found wanting'). The summons in 5 is to God's people to appear before Him to give an account of their stewardship. They had made a covenant with Him by sacrifice, i.e. they had sealed their commitment to Him in this solemn way, and now God was enquiring of them how they had kept that covenant. He had been faithful with them, but how had they dealt with Him. One has only to think of the 'covenant' that Church members make when they 'join the Church' to see how relevant the message of the Psalm is for today. 'What about these vows that you made?' asks God, 'Have they been honoured, or neglected?'

136) Psalm 50

In the next two sections, 7-15 and 16-21, the Psalmist deals with the two paramount tendencies which work for the corruption of true religion. The first of these is the reliance on external worship (interestingly, in this stanza, it is breaches of the first table of the Ten Commandments that are dealt with, while in the next (16-21) it is breaches of the second table. Here, sins against God, there sins against our fellows). God's complaint against His people was that, punctilious in their observance of the sacrifices as they were, they had not understood that they were valueless in themselves when what they signified, namely the giving of themselves to God, was not perceived. It is this that lies behind the great prophetic word, 'I will have mercy, not sacrifice'. They multiplied sacrifices, but their hearts were far from God. This is a perennial danger: outward form can often take the place of, and do duty for, inward reality (as we see from our Lord's strictures on Pharisaism in Matthew 6). The second great corruption of religion (16-21) is hypocrisy, and the first surely leads to the second. Preoccupation with the externals of religion tends to make people eventually take up the attitude that outward appearance is more important than inward reality: it becomes more important to appear holy than to be holy, more important to do right things than to be right. This is the fatal thing, for it leads to a dichotomy between belief and behaviour, doctrine and duty, profession and conduct, and the Name of God becomes blasphemed among the Gentiles (Romans 2:24). Compassion, justice and mercy become obscured in a preoccupation with the outward minutiae of one's own spiritual life, which are often mere externals. This, the Psalmist points out, is equivalent to 'forgetting God' (22). Solemn thought, indeed.