James Philip Bible Reading

1) Psalm 51
2) Psalm 51
3) Psalm 51
4) Psalm 51
5) Psalm 51
6) Psalm 52
7) Psalm 52
8) Psalm 52
9) Psalm 53
10) Psalm 54
11) Psalm 54
12) Psalm 54
13) Psalm 55
14) Psalm 55
15) Psalm 55
16) Psalm 56
17) Psalm 56
18) Psalm 56
19) Psalm 57
20) Psalm 57
21) Psalm 57
22) Psalm 58
23) Psalm 58
24) Psalm 58
25) Psalm 59
26) Psalm 59
27) Psalm 59
28) Psalm 60
29) Psalm 60
30) Psalm 60
31) Psalm 61
32) Psalm 61
33) Psalm 61
34) Psalm 62
35) Psalm 62
36) Psalm 62
37) Psalm 63
38) Psalm 63
39) Psalm 63
40) Psalm 64
41) Psalm 64
42) Psalm 64
43) Psalm 65
44) Psalm 65
45) Psalm 65
46) Psalm 66
47) Psalm 66
48) Psalm 66
49) Psalm 67
50) Psalm 67
51) Psalm 67
52) Psalm 68
53) Psalm 68
54) Psalm 68
55) Psalm 69
56) Psalm 69
57) Psalm 69
58) Psalm 69
59) Psalm 70
60) Psalm 70
61) Psalm 71
62) Psalm 71
63) Psalm 71
64) Psalm 72
65) Psalm 72
66) Psalm 72
67) Psalm 73
68) Psalm 73
69) Psalm 73
70) Psalm 74
71) Psalm 74
72) Psalm 74
73) Psalm 75
74) Psalm 75
75) Psalm 75
76) Psalm 76
77) Psalm 76
78) Psalm 76
79) Psalm 77
80) Psalm 77
81) Psalm 77
82) Psalm 78
83) Psalm 78
84) Psalm 78
85) Psalm 78
86) Psalm 79
87) Psalm 79
88) Psalm 79
89) Psalm 79
90) Psalm 80
91) Psalm 80
92) Psalm 80
93) Psalm 81
94) Psalm 81
95) Psalm 81
96) Psalm 82
97) Psalm 82
98) Psalm 82
99) Psalm 83
100) Psalm 83
101) Psalm 83
102) Psalm 84
103) Psalm 84
104) Psalm 84
105) Psalm 85
106) Psalm 85
107) Psalm 85
108) Psalm 86
109) Psalm 86
110) Psalm 86
111) Psalm 87
112) Psalm 87
113) Psalm 87
114) Psalm 88
115) Psalm 88
116) Psalm 88
117) Psalm 88
118) Psalm 89
119) Psalm 89
120) Psalm 89
121) Psalm 89
122) Psalm 89
123) Psalm 90
124) Psalm 90
125) Psalm 90
126) Psalm 90
127) Psalm 91
128) Psalm 91
129) Psalm 91
130) Psalm 92
131) Psalm 92
132) Psalm 92
133) Psalm 93
134) Psalm 93
135) Psalm 93
136) Psalm 94
137) Psalm 94
138) Psalm 94
139) Psalm 95
140) Psalm 95
141) Psalm 95
142) Psalm 96
143) Psalm 96
144) Psalm 96
145) Psalm 97
146) Psalm 97
147) Psalm 97
148) Psalm 98
149) Psalm 98
150) Psalm 98
151) Psalm 99
152) Psalm 99
153) Psalm 99
154) Psalm 100
155) Psalm 100
156) Psalm 100

1) *Psalm 51*

This is indeed a tremendous utterance, elemental in its message and significance, and its superlative importance for us is that it indicates so clearly the spiritual pilgrimage that leads a sinning man back to God and into fellowship with Him. By way of introduction, this needs to be said: all forgiveness is in and through Christ; and we are not to suppose that the Psalm teaches a different way of forgiveness, in which Christ does not figure. This would be to misunderstand it, for the Psalmist's appeal is to the covenant mercy of God, and that covenant mercy, which is sealed to us in Christ, had many 'shadows' that spoke of Him in the Old Testament era - sacrifices and types - as Paul makes plain in His epistles. We assume therefore, when dealing with this Psalm's teaching that the forgiveness of which it speaks is sealed to us in the death and rising again of Jesus, and possible only through Him. This being understood, we can certainly take the Psalm in a Christian sense as unfolding to us the steps by which we as sinners can find our way back to the Father. It will be good, therefore, to pause in our comment, and read the whole Psalm through in this light.

2) *Psalm 51*

The Psalm has been traditionally associated with David's great sin with Bathsheba, although this is strongly contested and disputed by many scholars. But this is immaterial to our study of it. If it was not this sin, it illustrates the Psalm sufficiently well for a true understanding of it. In any case, the arguments against this identification are not in our view convincing. If, then, this was the circumstance, and the sin referred to, it is important to realise that this confession did not take place for a whole year after the incident - a whole year living with an uneasy conscience, before the shaft of the Spirit's conviction struck into him, exposing to him the enormity of his sin. For all its intense, agonised feeling the Psalm displays an orderly sequence - this is some indication of the Holy Spirit's inspiration - and may be divided as follows: 1-3, Invocation; 4-6, Confession; 7-9, Prayer for forgiveness; 10-13, Prayer for renewal; 14-17, Praise and thanksgiving; 18, 19, Conclusion.

3) *Psalm 51*

The note that is struck at the outset indicates the real awareness in the Psalmist's heart of the situation. This is not a piteous cry for help (1, 2): he is not suffering from a sense of misfortune. It is a cry for mercy, for he knows he has done wrong, and it is the consciousness of guilt that is so distressing him. 'God be merciful to me a sinner' is his cry. Three different words for sin are used: the word 'sin' means missing the mark, the idea of a man knowing what is right and failing to do it; the word 'iniquity' carries the idea of deliberate offence, a deliberate turning out of the way, being twisted or bent; the word 'transgression' contains the idea of rebellion, and this is the most personal word: he has rebelled against God. Corresponding to these are three different words used to describe the nature and effect of the Divine mercy: 'blot out' refers to forgiveness as the erasure of a writing or an indictment (cf 'the handwriting against us', Colossians 2:14); 'wash' refers not to simple rinsing but kneading or beating - he is ready to submit to any painful discipline to gain his objective; 'cleanse' underlines the fact that guilt is not only a blotted record or a polluted robe, but a disease like leprosy. It is these ideas that invest the confession which follows (3-6) with such a profound meaning.

4) *Psalm 51*

To 'confess' (3ff) means 'to say the same thing as', that is, it is to call sin what God calls it, and to call it by its proper name. The Psalmist has already been doing so in 1, 2 in the words he has used to describe his sin, and he continues to do so in 3ff. This is a basic first step for all who would be right with God - and a biggish one, for the temptation is to excuse oneself, to blame circumstance, background, heredity or whatever for what we have done - 'I did it, but...'. The seriousness of the Psalmist's sin lay in the fact that it reached God: it was against Bathsheba, yes, and Urriah, against his own soul and body, and family, and kingdom, and the Church of God, but most of all and truest of all it was against God. This is the seriousness of it. It is this solemn fact that precludes any possibility of 'putting things right' by the promise of 'doing better next time'; no ethical or human means can heal this injury: nothing but the Divine mercy can answer it. Further self-disclosure follows in 5, 6, in the realisation that acts of sin spring from a sinful nature. The derived sinful bias in human nature is a fact, and with this comes the realisation: 'it could happen again, David'. This discovery leads to another - that God wants not only correctness of outward demeanour, but heart purity and holiness (6). Hence the radical, and very moving, prayer in 7ff for forgiveness, repeating and underlining - and indeed intensifying - the earlier cry in 1, 2. This is indeed a cry 'out of the depths' (Psalm 130:1). And what follows goes even deeper, and is indeed the crux of the Psalm: if sin is nature as well as act, then not only must the act be pardoned but also the nature must be changed. It is regeneration that is needed. It is so easy to pray for forgiveness outwith the context of spiritual renewal, but there can be no forgiveness except we are made new creatures in Christ.

5) *Psalm 51*

The cry of the Psalmist in 10ff, as was pointed out at the end of the previous note, bears witness to the Psalmist's need of being renewed by the Holy Spirit, and thus delivered from the waywardness that had led him so far away from God. It is the need for a restored relationship of fellowship with God which will permanently link his life with Him. Only thus can he know the continuing power of the Spirit for his sanctification, and the restoration of the joy of God's salvation (12) which he once knew and had so badly lost. The saddest thing about sin in the believer is that it closes his mouth and negates his testimony (13-15). It is this that is restored when things are put right, and the possibility of magnifying God's Name becomes a reality once again. It is when the Lord thus opens our lips that our mouths can show forth His praise, to tell what the Lord has done for our souls. The word about sacrifices with which the Psalm closes (16ff) is very moving: the words in 17 about 'a broken spirit' and 'a heart broken and contrite' mean 'the breaking and crushing of man's sinful nature, the destroying of man's self' (Snaith). Without this, all sacrifices are meaningless and offensive to God. But no one who comes this way, and experiences what the Psalmist did, will ever fail to find acceptance with God.

6) *Psalm 52*

At a first reading it might be thought that this Psalm does not readily yield much of a spiritual message, apart from the lovely words in 8, 9. The first four verses utter the burning plaint of the Psalmist, and this is followed by words which some take as hotly vindictive, and the fruit of bitterness and hatred in his soul. But this would be a superficial understanding of the Psalm and, far from doing justice to it, presents a caricature. One wise commentator says, 'It is easy for those who have never lived under grinding, godless tyranny to reprobate the exultation of the oppressed at the sweeping away of their oppressors; but if the critics had seen their brethren set up as torches to light Nero's gardens, perhaps they would have known some thrill of righteous joy when they heard that he was dead'. What we need to recognise here is that there is such a thing as righteous indignation against evil and wrong and oppression, and that it is possible to say such things as the Psalmist says in 5 without being consumed with bitterness and hatred, and indeed without sin. Furthermore, we should note that the Psalmist is not himself participating in the wicked's downfall: he leaves it to God. This is in line with Paul's teaching in Romans 12:19 (see RSV). This is a significant consideration in the Psalmist's attitude and alters the whole complexion of our thinking about the Psalm.

7) *Psalm 52*

Many commentators maintain that the title given to the Psalm, and the story to which it refers, does not correspond with the material in the Psalm. But the question arises as to why this title should have been given it in the first place if there was no connection. At all events, the story of Doeg gives us the kind of situation in which such a Psalm might well have been penned. For that story unfolds a hideous atrocity, from which even the soldiers recoiled in horror (1 Samuel 21/22). That period of David's life was a dark and terrible time; yet this is the time in which it is twice recorded of David that he spared king Saul's life (1 Samuel 24:4ff; 26:11ff). This requires being set over against any charge of vindictiveness or hatred on the Psalmist's part. The modern renderings of 1 differ markedly from the AV, but the AV follows the Hebrew text in speaking of the 'goodness' or 'loving- kindness' of God. If we follow the AV, the message is this: in time of perplexity, when under pressure, when there are things we cannot understand, we need in a deliberate exercise of faith to set the goodness of God over against all the pressures and hang on grimly to this unchanging truth. The words of the hymn-writer express this thought perfectly:

Here in the maddening maze of things,
When tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed ground my spirit clings:
I know that God is good.

When faith holds on like this, one begins to see in clearer perspective, and the certainty grows that God will intervene to vindicate the right and to punish evil. Thus 5-7: for in some contexts, and in such a situation, the goodness of God expresses itself necessarily as justice.

8) *Psalm 52*

The effect of the Divine justice is to impart fear and reverential awe to the hearts of the righteous (6). And after awe, laughter. This should not disturb us, for if it is possible to speak of judgment without bitterness and hatred, it is also possible to laugh as God laughs. There is no thought of gloating here; but it is right to be glad when evil is destroyed and put down. It is a measure of how confused our moral distinctions have become that we should not be very sure whether this is a right emotion to express. To get the full force of the meaning of 8, 9 we need to go back to 1: 'the mercy of God' in 8b corresponds to 'the goodness of God' in 1, but we should note the transition. In 1 the Psalmist was clinging, in desperate faith and in darkness, to the fact of God's goodness. Here, in 8, he has emerged into calm and peaceful trust in that goodness. What began as blind, desperate clinging ends in serene and quiet confidence. He has now come to an awareness of his position by grace that no amount of pressure or difficulty will ever be able to destroy. Furthermore, 'green' means flourishing or fruitful and David realises that his life has become fruitful in and through the trials and testings; trusting God in the midst of pressures does something to a man - it is the pruning of the husbandman's knife that leads to fruitfulness (John 15:2). Finally, we should note the word in 9 'Thou hast done it': as yet no change has occurred in the Psalmist's circumstances, but faith sees the deliverance as if it had already come. This is the wonderful crown of all God's dealings with the Psalmist. Happy is the man who comes to that assurance in life!

9) *Psalm 53*

This Psalm is virtually a repetition of Psalm 14, apart from a variation of some words, and a change in 5 (see Psalm14:5, 6). For an exposition of the earlier Psalm the Notes for Psalm 14 should be consulted. One of the lessons we may learn from this Psalm occurring twice in the Psalter is to show us how what is expressed in 14:5, 6 becomes a reality in a particular situation. Scholars suggest that the reference in Psalm 53 is to the time when Sennacherib's armies were encamped against Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:6, 7). If so, it is an indication of how the word of God should be used to apply to our own particular burdens and crises. What God did once, He can do again. This is the message of hope and encouragement that the Psalm teaches.

The change in 5 (from the earlier Psalm, 14:5, 6) may be taken as part of the prophetic vision of the Psalmist, representing the reaction of the ungodly at the intervention of the Spirit of God. It describes some sudden, causeless panic among the enemy, with God moving in power against them. The Psalmist can then say to the righteous 'thou hast put them to shame, for God has despised them'. Then, in 6, we have the longing and prayer that what God had given him in vision might become fact and reality. This then is the great message of the Psalm: God does look down to intervene; He has intervened in the past in answer to the cries of His people - 5 tells us what happened in the history of Israel; and God will intervene today. We may look for Him to do so and expect Him to do so.

10) *Psalm 54*

The sentiments expressed in this Psalm are familiar ones: the situation of crisis and emergency, the cry and appeal to God for help, then - without any sign of the circumstances changing as yet - the expression of confidence that the cry had been heard and that help will be forthcoming. The fact that this lesson is repeated so often, in one way or another, is some measure of the importance that it has in the mind of the Spirit for God's people, and how critical it is for us to learn it, and learn it well. The Psalm falls into two parts, the first (1-3) being the prayer, spreading before God the need and its urgency, and the second (4-7) expressing confidence that the prayer has been heard. The order in which the thoughts in 1-3 run has been the subject of comment by the expositors: first the appeal to God by the Psalmist, and the recollection of the power of the Divine Name, then the plea for His prayer to be heard, and only then the recounting of the perils he faced. It is very much more important in spiritual experience to look to God than to look to the pressures surrounding us. In itself, this is an act and attitude of faith, as well as being good spiritual psychology. It is never spiritually healthy to be over-preoccupied with the forces arrayed against us, for the good reason that it never gives a true perspective of the situation. It is open to us, in any situation of crisis or pressure to exercise faith and, in an act of resolute will, at such a time, to turn one's mind and consciousness away from the fear and the alarm to the fact of God, to what He is, and what He means to those who trust in Him. This is what the Psalmist does here.

11) *Psalm 54*

Two points should be noted in particular in the first stanza. In 1 the Psalmist prays 'Save me by Thy Name'. This is an important and significant concept, for the Name of God is His manifested nature and character, the sum of all of Him, which has been made known by His Word and work. It expresses what He is and what He has done. In New Testament terms, therefore, this opens a wonderfully rich concept for us, for in Christ we know what God is like and what He has done for us. To appeal for help, therefore, from the name of God is to lay hold on the immense and incalculable resources that are in the passion and victory of Christ. This is where help lies for us: 'He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' (Romans 8:32). It is very wonderful to think that all the resources of the Godhead, as expressed in the work of Christ, are available to the trusting soul in time of need. The second point lies in the significant association of ideas in 3, the assumption that, in opposing him, these enemies are against God. We should remember who it is who is speaking: David, the Lord's anointed, and he was therefore the target of much godless opposition. This is something that a man, conscious of the Divine hand upon him in his call to service, may also assume when men oppose him in his capacity as servant of God (as distinct from his personal capacity). Because he is a servant of God, then his cause and God's are identified and therefore his enemies are God's enemies.

12) *Psalm 54*

In the second stanza of the Psalm the mood completely changes, and the sense of urgency and concern gives way to calm confidence and assurance. This is, as we have pointed out, something so often evident in the Psalms, and is a perfect illustration of the meaning of Paul's words in Philippians 4:6, 7, 'Be careful for nothing; but in everything...let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God...'. Here is the peace that God gives: the circumstances have not changed, but the man of God rises from his knees a changed man. He has got through to God. There is almost a sense of wonder in 4, 'Behold God is mine helper...', as if to express the sense of awe at having got through to such a place of confidence in Him. This is one of the great things in prayer, and it is one of the great lessons in spiritual life to learn it. In 6, 7 we see David so confident of an answer that he can begin to think of his thank-offering. Maclaren says, 'Faith sees the future as the present. This Psalmist, surrounded by strangers seeking his life, can quietly stretch out a hand of faith, and bring near to himself the tomorrow when he will look back on scattered enemies and present glad sacrifices!'

13) *Psalm 55*

The circumstances reflected in this Psalm are taken by some commentators as having to do with David's distress at the time of his son Absalom's rebellion, and that the reference in 12-14 is to Ahitophel, David's faithless counsellor who betrayed him. Whether or not this suggestion is valid, the general circumstances of that sad episode fit the Psalm very well. And in face of this distress and hurt, David, in 1-8, expresses his fear and anguish, and longs for the wings of a dove to enable him to escape from the intolerable situation. In our own experience we can surely identify with the Psalmist here for we can understand his feelings very well. And the important thing is what we do with such feelings within us, for of course flying away is not really a possibility for us: we know in our hearts that we can do no such thing. It is therefore a reaction to such a situation that is important. This is the supreme value of the Psalm. G. Campbell Morgan entitles the three stanzas of the Psalm - 1-8, 9-15, 16-23 - as Fear, Fury, Faith. These certainly seem to be the dominant characteristics of the stanzas, and if we follow this pattern, we would need to interpret 9-15 almost in terms of the Psalmist 'blowing his top' about the situation. It has been such a distress to him that he cannot keep silent, and unburdens himself very vocally, elaborating his grievance and distress about his betrayer. If it is in the heart, it is better that it should all come out; and 'blowing your top' is often a very good and necessary safety valve: people often feel the better for having done so. And when the steam clears away, we can often see more clearly and in perspective, and faith can rise and lay claim to God's grace the better - which is what happens in 16-23.

14) *Psalm 55*

But there is a little more to the situation than what was indicated at the end of the previous note. For one thing, if the Psalmist is 'blowing his top', he is doing it to God and in prayer. And that is the best place for it. For another thing, we should look at the expressions in 9 and 15 (we have more than once pointed out that there is more in the imprecations in the Psalms than meets the eye, and that we need not necessarily interpret them as expressions of vengeance and hatred). The commentators are surely right in recognising in 9 a reference to the Tower of Babel story, when God brought to naught the impious work of men by confusing their tongues; and in 15 a possible reference to the story of Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16, actors in another rebellion, against Moses the servant of God, who were swallowed up in an earthquake for their folly and arrogance. There is significance in these references, for it means that in his distress the Psalmist had turned to the Scriptures and was finding a word from the Lord there for his own present need. And this is just what we need to do, in our circumstances of pressure, of whatever kind and by whatever caused. Furthermore, he was aligning himself with God and His cause, and recognising and assuming that since he himself was a servant of God, what happened with other servants of God would also happen with him: attacks on him would be regarded as attacks on God's work, and be recognised as such by Him, and dealt with accordingly. This is a principle of wide application. If we are honourably and faithfully seeking to serve God, then the truth is that we fall heir to all the promises of help and succour that God makes to His servants. We may expect Him to help us in the way He has often intervened on behalf of His servants in the past. It is this expectation and confidence that are expressed in 16-23. And it develops through the Word. This is the great lesson here: faith cometh...by the Word of God.

15) *Psalm 55*

The first answer, then, given to prayer is the gift of peace (18), and this is reflected in the change from 2 to 17. Maclaren says, 'Communion with God and prayerful trust in His help do not at once end sadness and sobbing, but do change their character and lighten the blackness of grief'. It is this that makes possible the utterance of the wonderful words, 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord...', words in which the Psalmist is telling himself what to do. This 'word' has come to him through the exercise of faith which in turn has become possible through his study of the Scriptures in his need. We should note that the promise is not so much that God will take away the pressure as that He will hold us up under it.

We are now able to look back over the Psalm as a whole and see the progression unfolded in it. First of all, there is the anguished cry in 6, 'Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away and be at rest'. Then, the Psalmist takes himself to the Word (9, 15), for refuge, light and grace. Then, the 'word' that comes to him in his distress (22): 'Cast thy burden on the Lord'. Finally, the affirmative of faith in 23: 'I will trust in Thee'. Happy the man who walks this road in time of trouble and distress!

16) *Psalm 56*

There is a sense in which the message of this Psalm is similar to that of Psalm 55, in its outline of the pilgrimage from fear to faith. One difference is that whereas in the previous one the Psalmist had turned to the Scriptures and found a timely word in them for his need, here the grace 'comes' to him in the context of his prayer and meditation. As to the structure of the Psalm, there is a kind of refrain occurring twice (4 and 10, 11), which divides the Psalm into two sections and a conclusion. Both sections, 1-3 and 5-9, deal with much the same situation with the second section elaborating it in more detail. The Psalmist opens with a call for mercy (1) rather than for help. This is good theology, for it is the recognition that we have no call on God as of right to help us. It is not merely that David may have been conscious of wrongdoing, as he probably was at this point (for the superscription of the Psalm speaks of his being in Gath, and this is where he used dissimulation to save his life, and feigned madness before Achish, king of Gath - sometimes it is really our own fault that we get into trouble!), but aside from that, in a far deeper sense, we need always to ask for mercy. It is only in mercy that a holy God can have dealings with us. So David is on sure ground here when he casts himself on the Divine mercy; the situation, which makes him cry thus is described in 1b, 2. There is a certain drama in the way this is expressed: on the one hand, there are the enemies, the antagonists, and the fighting; on the other hand, there is God. But we should notice how the Psalmist puts it: the fighting, the oppressors, the enemy, are hedged in on either side by God, sandwiched by Him, so to speak: 'O God (1)...O Thou most high (2)' - and in between, the enemies. This is comfort and assurance indeed.

17) *Psalm 56*

What was said at the end of the previous note is one of the valuable things about prayer - it sets our enemies, and the pressures we experience, in their proper perspective and in their proper setting. This is what enables the Psalmist to come to the position expressed in 3, 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee'. The rival claims have laid hold upon his heart - the fear and distress because of the enemy, and the reality of God; and God has won the first battle. That is a speedy reply to the cry for mercy in 1. Sometimes, indeed, this is the biggest battle of all, to adjust our minds consciously in an act of will and turn them away from the enemy and the fighting to God, and in so doing find rest and peace. We should note also that in several verses there is reference to the continuous activity of the enemy. They are continually at work against him, it is a daily occurrence and a daily pressure. Is not this the wearing part of the battle that it goes on so relentlessly without intermission! But the Psalmist meets this with a continuing attitude of faith. This is the only way. It is a mistake, and misleading, to suppose that the exercise of faith necessarily gives the victory. It is not so. Often we have to hold on for a very long time - as long as the pressure goes on. Often it seems no more than a holding action, but that action must be maintained at all costs. We should note also a significant change between 1, 2 and 4. In the earlier verses the order is: God - the enemies - the Psalmist, as if to suggest that the enemies stood between the Psalmist and God, making it difficult for him to get through. But in 4 the order is changed. Now it is: God - the Psalmist - the enemies. Now there is nothing between, now prayer has drawn the beleaguered Psalmist close to God. Is not this what prayer tends to do?

18) *Psalm 56*

The second stanza, 5-9, repeats the pattern, but it is not empty repetition. You often get more from God, the second time round! 'There is delight, and there is strengthening for the temper of faith, in repeating the contemplation of the earthly facts which make it necessary and the super-sensuous facts which make it blessed' (Maclaren). And one of the sweetest and most blessed experiences of strengthening and encouragement is found in 8. In the intimacy of fellowship mentioned in 4, the Psalmist becomes convinced of the loving and tender care of God: 'Thou tellest my wanderings...'. What a wonderful assurance. Here was David, hunted and on the run, a fugitive from the wrath of the mad king, desolate and afflicted, and this is what comes home to him. It was all known to God, and His watchful eye was upon him all the time. As the old hymn puts it,

Jesus knows all about our troubles,
He will guide till the day is done.

And what an act and attitude of faith there is in the words 'Put my tears into Thy bottle'. This appears to mean that we are to give our tears and sorrows back to God, for Him to sanctify and use in refreshment, to be given back one day to those who shed them, converted into spiritual grace by Him Who once turned the water into wine! In 9, the faith that struggled with fear in the first stanza (1-3) is now consolidated into confidence that God is on his side (9b). But there may be more here: 'God for us' is the heart of the biblical gospel (cf Romans 8:31ff). This is where our fears must ultimately cast anchor for it is the best and only final ground of peace and assurance. For if souls are delivered from death (13a) feet will be kept from falling (13b). The final two verses express the confidence we have seen so often in the Psalms, confidence of divine deliverance before it is accomplished, rejoicing in it as if it were. This is the ultimate reward of faith.

19) *Psalm 57*

The theme of the past two Psalms continues in this one. David is still 'up against it', and the trials and pressures are still upon him. The cave referred to in the title of the Psalm is very probably to be identified with the story in 1 Samuel 24, and if this be so, we are given in that passage a dramatic backcloth for its message. The dangers were still very real and very urgent: how near David was to capture in the cave! He could probably hear the breathing of Saul as he slept, only yards from him. How graphically 4 reads when we remember and realise this. The first lesson we are taught here has to do both with the background of the Psalm and with a comparison with the two that precede it. We can hardly doubt that there is a providential ordering of the way in which these Psalms follow one another in the Psalter. The cry in the opening verse is the same as that in Psalm 56, but here there is a new emphasis and a new reason for it: there, it was a cry born of the consciousness of need; here it is a cry borne of the vision of God. The whole Psalm is on a high and exalted plane, as we may see from 5, 9-11. But there are contrasts too with the previous Psalms: in 55:6 the Psalmist longs for the wings of a dove, but here in 1 it is the shadow of the Divine wings of which he speaks. Also, the contrast is very marked between 55:4, 'My heart is sore pained' and the words in 7, 'My heart is fixed'. It is the transition from fear to faith, and the lesson is: Faith does not free us from trial, but it does enable us to triumph in it.

20) ***Psalm 57***

The next lesson we are to learn from the Psalm comes from a consideration of the two stanzas into which it clearly falls, 1-5 and 6-11, each of which ends with the same refrain. The difference between the two stanzas is that whereas the first ends (apart from the words of the refrain in 5) with the description of the enemies surrounding the Psalmist, the second is mainly occupied with an outburst of song, as David now sees the enemies 'cut down to size', and as having the seeds of self-destruction within themselves. From which we may learn that the assertion of confidence in the living God (1, 2, and particularly 3) is something that works. The deliberate act of will that turns the mind Godwards really does something for us.

The literal translation in 1 reads more graphically than the AV: 'In Thee has my soul taken refuge'. The idea seems to be that the remembrance of past days when he trusted in God, and found help and succour, gives him encouragement to trust now in the new crisis. What God has done once He can do again. The picture in 3 is a very lovely one. Maclaren suggests 'The two bright angels – loving-kindness (Mercy) and faithfulness (Truth) their names - will be despatched from heaven for the rescue of the man who has trusted. That is certain, because of what God is and has done. It is no less certain because of what the Psalmist is and has done; for a soul that gazes on God as its sole helper, and has pressed, in its feebleness, close beneath these mighty pinions, cannot but bring down angel helpers, the executants of God's love'.

21) *Psalm 57*

The reference in 6 to the enemies is of a triumphant sort, borne of a consciousness and realisation that the coming of the 'angels', Mercy and Truth (3,10) into the situation will have a confounding effect on the enemies of righteousness. One thinks in this connection of the effect of the pillar of cloud and fire in Exodus, which comforted the Israelites and discomfited the Egyptians. Of 7, 'My heart is fixed', Maclaren says, 'What power can steady that fluttering, wayward, agitated thing, a human heart? The way to keep light articles fixed on deck, amidst rolling seas and howling winds, is to lash them to something fixed; and the way to steady a heart is to bind it to God'. This is very impressive: David is perhaps still in the cave; leastaways he is still on the run and in danger from his enemies. But his heart is fixed and he can praise. This is the great thing. Finally, we should think of the illustration all this gives of the words of Psalm23, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'. What a feast of good things there was for David in that cave, right in the midst of his enemies, with Saul lying asleep only a few yards away. It is something - nay, everything - to realise that mercy and truth come to us also in the reading of this Psalm.

22) *Psalm 58*

It would be very easy to misunderstand this Psalm. The vehemence of some of the utterances seems to many to be utterly alien to the spirit of love that breathes in the New Testament, and it is not surprising that many are prompted to consign so much of the Psalter to the realm of the sub-Christian, and even anti-Christian. But this is altogether too facile a judgment to pass upon it, and one which owes more to the liberalism of the 19th century and the radicalism of the 20th than to the spirit of the New Testament itself. Furthermore, it does not really look at what the Psalm is saying. The theme is the certainty of the judgment of God against wickedness. There seems to be three divisions, 1-5, 6-9, 10, 11. In the first, the iniquity rampant in the world is described, and in the remainder, vengeance is called for with the last two verses expressing the joy and relief of the righteous, in the realisation that the universe lies under the government of a truly righteous God. What we need to see is the call for vengeance is not because of personal wrong, and the plaint is against the rulers of the people. The AV words in 1 'O congregation' are rendered in the modern versions 'O ye gods', and the reference is to those who hold divine power, i.e. power given them by God (cf Romans 13:1 'the powers that be are ordained of God'). The question in 1 is hurled out against the rulers for their failure to administer justice. Rampant injustice is certainly in view here, and the striking metaphor in 4, 5 indicates that it is injustice so hardened and impervious to better influence that there is nothing left except the intervention of Divine judgment. This is the scenario with which the Psalm deals, and which explains the fierce and terrible notes in 6-9.

23) *Psalm 58*

What has been said about 4, 5 about injustice being so hardened and impervious to change that there is nothing left except judgment, paints a picture very different to the one we are often asked to believe about the Psalms, and their hot-blooded and vehement cries for vengeance. It is only when it is clear that there is no likelihood of change of heart that judgment becomes inevitable. This is worth remembering. It is easy to be critical of the Psalmist's vehement desire for God to judge, when you have not been in the Psalmist's position; easy too, to forget that what we have here is no mere petulant hurling of judgment upon enemies by a bloodthirsty David, but rather the expression of something that in the nature of the case has become inevitable. The God of the Old Testament is represented as a long-suffering God, not a vengeful deity, and we must not forget it. It is perhaps ironic - and this is the second lesson - that the Psalms have come in for so much criticism on account of their bloodthirsty cries for vengeance from a generation that not only condones bloodthirstiness, but advocates it - and is determined to legitimise it - in its desire to rid the world of injustice. It needs to be realised that even in his greatest moments of vehemence, the Psalmist still appeals to God to judge wicked and lawless judgment. He does not presume to take the law into his own hands in an attempt to overthrow the government himself. It is God's prerogative so to do, not man's. There is absolutely no support for any revolutionary theory here or anywhere else in the Psalms, but on the contrary an absolute recognition of the sanctity of law and order. Two wrongs do not make a right, and the true attitude of the people of God is to appeal to Him to redress the wickedness of the earth. If He chooses to delay action, and hold back from doing justice, for whatever reason, can it be right for man to intervene and take matters into his own hands. What modern man needs to learn is that you cannot turn the parts of society you do not like upside down, without the danger of turning all society upside down. Revolution wipes out some injustices and inequalities, but produces a whole crop of new ones, often worse. Authoritarianism of the right can be replaced by authoritarianism of the left. To forment the revolutionary spirit is to tamper with the very structure of the universe. It cannot be done with impunity.

24) *Psalm 58*

The final lesson of the Psalm relates to the stern spirit of joy over the destruction of the wicked which it expresses. Alexander Maclaren's comment on this is helpful: 'There is an ignoble and there is a noble and Christian satisfaction in even the destructive providences of God. It is not only permissible but imperative on those who would live in sympathy with His righteous dealings and with Himself, that they should see in these the manifestation of eternal justice, and should consider that they roll away burdens from earth and bring hope and rest to the victims of oppression. It is no unworthy shout of personal vengeance, nor of unfeeling triumph that is lifted up from a relieved world when Babylon falls. If it is right in God to destroy it, it cannot be wrong in His servants to rejoice that He does'. It is this that is so often considered 'unchristian' and unethical. But see the alternative, and where it has led today, in the sympathy with evil and with evildoers. Could it not just be that the values of our modern society have become distorted?

25) *Psalm 59*

The theme of this Psalm is a familiar one, already echoed several times in this section of the Psalter. In the first stanza (1-9), the danger threatening the Psalmist is described. Without any reason, and with the most relentless determination his enemies are intent on encompassing his destruction. This picture in itself is an up-to-date one, which must surely echo the thoughts and the plaint of many today, who on the individual level are not aware of causing, and cannot well be held personally responsible for, the turmoil and convulsion taking place in society today. There is, of course, such a thing as corporate responsibility in the solidarity of mankind - and that is inescapable - but there is a true personal sense in which we do not feel ourselves responsible or at fault. This in itself would argue a helplessness on the part of the Psalmist. But not so: two things follow, (i) he announces his intention to wait on God, his strength and his high tower; and (ii) he prays - and this is the message of the second stanza - that God will deal with these foes. Here, then, is a twofold emphasis from which we may extract the essence of the Psalm's message for us. Waiting upon God - this is what to do in time of stress and pressure, amid the convulsions of society and of the nations. We should notice what happens when the Psalmist does so. The idea of a tower of refuge is first of all a suggestion of escape, as we saw in Psalm 55 from the intolerable situation, into oblivion. But Psalm 55 and Psalm 58 have shown us that there are two ways of escaping: flying away and being at rest, and sheltering under the shadow of God's wings. It is the latter, not the former, that is the healthy and constructive escape. We shall say more of this in the next note.

26) *Psalm 59*

'Getting away from it all', opting out of society, joining the 'stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off' brigade, is not the answer. It is not possible to opt out of living. But to dwell under the shadow of God's wings is the answer. Turning to God and waiting upon Him was for the Psalmist the antidote to despair. Without a God to wait upon, where would any of us be? But with God, certain things follow and happen. For one thing, new discoveries are made about God. This is how it was with the Psalmist. Look at the names of God that David invokes in 5, and indeed discovers anew! Thou - Jehovah - Lord of hosts - God of Israel - each name suggests something in God, which encourages hope and, when appealed to by a trusting soul, encourages Him to act. 'Jehovah' is the covenant name; 'God of hosts' is the name that stresses the Divine power and might, as 'Lord of battles'; and 'God of Israel' recalls to us David's wonderful words to Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:45, 'I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel'. This is what strengthens and renews the heart, and leads to rest, peace and equilibrium. And a direct consequence of this is the realisation to which David gives expression in 8, 'Thou O Lord shall laugh at them...'. This is not an expression of heartlessness in God, but of His sovereignty. And this is what you come through to when you make God your refuge. This is the ultimate answer to all prayer, the assurance that He is in control. This point is made very graphically in Psalm 2, in the question 'Why do the heathen rage?' It is the sheer ludicrousness of the nations even thinking of rebelling against God that is in view and indeed the futility of it, for He is sovereignly and utterly in control.

27) *Psalm 59*

The implication of what was said at the end of the previous note about coming through to a conviction about the sovereign control of God is very considerable. The Psalmist prays here for the overthrow of evil and of evil men. We need to get to the heart of this, and not be preoccupied with the problems about the 'vengeance cries'. The heart of the matter is this: David recognised that the Lord of hosts is the Lord of history and Lord of nations, and he prayed to Him as such. Here is a message terrific in its challenge: the Psalm teaches us the need for prayer, and for belief in prayer, as a force in history. What emerges here is the vision of a Church at prayer to the Lord of history, crying to God to move His hand upon the great, retractable problems of society - the trouble in Ulster, the violence in our streets, the lawlessness that abounds, the tragedy of unemployment - crying to God to move His hand on these situations, the Church being the Church, exercising its true priestly function of going to God for the world. Do we believe in prayer like this, this kind of prayer? Please God the reading of this Psalm will bring some conviction of our failure to be a praying force in the world, our failure to come to Him of Whom it is said, 'By terrible things in righteousness wilt Thou answer us, O God of our salvation' (Psalm 65:5).

28) *Psalm 60*

The situation represented in this Psalm is in some respects a familiar one, and similar to those which precede it, in the sense that it speaks of the enemies of the people of God oppressing them, and the cries of the people for help. The one real difference is that the disaster which has befallen God's people here is come upon them as an evidence of Divine wrath - that is to say, it has been due to the sin of the people. Sin has brought Divine displeasure upon them. This is what the Psalm is about. Originally, of course, it applied to Israel as a people: and its primary lesson was therefore for the nation, the community, rather than the individual. But the principle which it demonstrates has just as clear application to the individual, and we must take the lesson it teaches in this direction also. The Psalm divides into three parts, 1-4, 5-8, 9-12. In the first part (1-4) a statement of the situation is made. Israel is up against it: a defeat has been sustained (perhaps unexpectedly), and it has been a shattering experience. The earth seems to be trembling beneath them - a clear evidence of the overwhelming nature of the blow; and we would say, 'the bottom had fallen out of their world'. The same kind of thought is expressed in different metaphor in 3, in the words 'the wine of astonishment'. An example of the kind of situation the Psalm envisages naturally comes to mind in the story of Israel's defeat at Ai in Joshua 7: clearly that was a quite unforeseen and unexpected reverse, and just as clearly it had the same kind of effect on Israel as is described in the Psalm here, and for the same reasons: there was sin in the camp, and it brought the Divine displeasure upon the people in a very marked way. And, this being so, there is only one way of putting things right: by repentance, forsaking of sin, and reconsecration.

29) ***Psalm 60***

Paradoxically, the very recognition that it is sin that brings the judgment of God is some sign that hope is not lost. To be cast off and abandoned by God is a terrible calamity, for nation or individual, but not to be aware of having been cast off is an even worse predicament. And alas, one of the frightening things about sin is the bemusing and blinding power it exercises on its victims, blunting their perception and robbing them of any kind of spiritual discernment as to what is going on (cf Hosea 7:9; Judges 16:20). The second stanza (5-8) begins with a cry and a prayer that arises clearly from the realisation in 1-4 about the Divine judgment, and it is made in the spirit of faith and hope. The language may seem effusive, but in fact the Psalmist is simply pleading the covenant: God did regard Israel as His peculiar people, and not all their sins ever changed this so far as He was concerned. And the plea to the covenant-keeping God, made from a position of penitence, shame and sorrow for sin is one that cannot but be answered. And the answer comes in 6-8. There is an important lesson here even in the context of one's awareness of sin and the reason for the Divine judgment; it is still possible to be so overcome by it that despair sets in, and to despair of the grace and mercy of God is one of the darkest experiences known to men. This Psalm stands as a constant testimony that God's love reaches deeper than the depths of self-despair. The answer to prayer in 6-8 is itself interesting. Perhaps the best way to take these verses is that David, through prayer, comes to a new confidence in God, and that he has promised his people certain things and that on the basis of the promises he recognises that through God he will yet subdue all his enemies. That is some way to pray, is it not?

30) ***Psalm 60***

The final part of the Psalm (9-12) has been interpreted variously. Some think it represents a lapse back into despondency, but this is surely to misunderstand what is being said. We should rather say something like this: in face of the assurance of God's unfailing promises, David nevertheless looks hard at the long haul before him, and asks, in effect, 'Can God really help me here? Is He able and willing to do even this for me?' And this is the final assurance that comes: that God is able to do even this for His repentant people, that He can return to them the years that the locusts have eaten, that He will lift them up and be their strength even in face of the 'long haul' back to victory and triumph. This is the promise of the Psalm: 'Through God we shall do valiantly'. What a glorious and comforting assurance to a sinning and repentant people, and what a wonderful testimony to the reality of the exhaustless mercy and grace of a covenant God!

31) *Psalm 61*

The circumstances lying behind this Psalm are as follows: David is in exile - it may be in his flight from Absalom during his son's rebellion against him, or on some other occasion - and he is feeling his sense of separation from the sanctuary, and all that means to him in terms of the worship of God. And in this sense of desolation he prays and cries out to Him. It is true that in Old Testament times, men tended to associate God's presence with Mount Zion and Jerusalem, and that to them being away from Jerusalem and the house of God was like being away from God. But it would be misleading to press this too far. David certainly knew the Divine presence with him in his trials in the wilderness, on the run from Saul, and away from Jerusalem. Besides, it is sometimes possible to relate 'distance from God geographically', as the Psalmist was experiencing here, with 'distance from God spiritually'. David realised that it was his own sin that had brought about Absalom's revolt, and this was the cause of his exile. All the same, we can gather a very valuable lesson from all this, in this sense: to be away from the house of God is to be away from fellowship and worship, and that can often be a very real testing and trial. David's circumstances had taken him away from so much that he held dear, and he was feeling it very deeply. We may therefore apply the Psalm's message to the ways in which this experience is applicable to our own situation: laid aside in sickness and weakness, with no possibility of getting to the house of God, and therefore bereft of fellowship and worship; or, in a missionary situation, feeling the desolation of the 'aloneness' of the field; or, the soul walking in darkness, not feeling the heavenly flame; or, the child of God assailed and under attack, with a desolating sense of 'away-from-home-ness' oppressing his spirit and bearing him down. These are the kinds of situation in which the message of this Psalm is so relevant.

32) *Psalm 61*

The analysis of the Psalm is as follows: First, the cry in the opening verse (1); then two sets of verses, in each of which a prayer is uttered, based on something that has been true in the past (2, 3; 4, 5). Then, two verses, in which petitions are made concerning the king who, it seems, is the Psalmist himself. Finally, the concluding verse (8), expressing confidence and praise for prayer heard and answered. The Psalmist's cry in 1, 2 makes it clear that he feels as if he were at the end of the earth, so far away from God is he. But, even if you are at the end of the earth, at the remotest and most desolate, it is still possible to cry to God from there and be heard! And as long as you can pray you will not despair. The picture in 2 is very graphic, like that of a man shipwrecked and struggling in the waves that wash over him. In his extremity he sees towering above him a great cliff, and he feels if only he could get up there, he would be safe from the storm. But he is well distant from it, and cannot reach it. Some hand must reach down to lift him and bring him into safety. But, significantly, the Psalmist is conscious, even in his distress, that there is a Rock, though he cannot seem to reach it; and that is something. Thus he can cry for help. It is surely not difficult to imagine circumstances in our own experience when we have felt like this! But we should note that even in the context of his distress the Psalmist's mind is at work. He is using his head! This is the force of the 'For' in 3. He has confidence in praying the prayer in 2 because of what he recalls and remembers from the past, and he realises, in an attitude of faith that what God has been to him, He will continue to be. This should encourage us, in our times of need and distress, to repeat the words of the hymn, 'He changeth not, and thou art dear'.

33) ***Psalm 61***

In 4, 5, we see the same pattern, and the same grounds for confidence in distress as in 2, 3. It is very striking to see, in both sets of verses the words 'I will...I will...', resting on the words 'Thou hast...Thou hast...'. The commentators stress that the tenses in 4 are 'precative', that is, they express prayers and longings. Maclaren adds 'The guests in God's dwelling have guest-rights of provision and protection. Beneath His wings are safety, warmth, and conscious nearness to His heart'. Perhaps there is a reference, in the idea of the 'covert of thy wings' to the cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat in the Tabernacle, and if so, what a wonderful association of ideas this gives us, for the mercy seat represents to us, and foreshadows, Christ and His atoning sacrifice. And to shelter there is to be in a very wonderful place of safety. This is praying ground indeed! In 6, 7 the tenses are in the third person, but it is likely that David is speaking of himself when he refers to the king. The words in 6 about prolonging the king's life have been rendered 'Thou wilt add days to the days of the king'. Is there a suggestion here that the new days would be better than those he is at present passing through - as if to say, 'The sun will shine again, never fear'. How needful to get this kind of perspective on trial and testing and distress! 'Mercy and truth' in 7 remind us of the guardian angels of God in Psalm 57, as they come to protect him. As long as ever these are at hand there is no need, and no ground, for despair, and praise (8) will always be in order!

34) *Psalm 62*

This is a Psalm of great beauty, and its message is just as apposite today as for the Psalmist's day and circumstances. Some scholars identify the circumstances of the Psalm with the revolt of Absalom, as in the previous ones, and if this be so we have a further progression here in the Psalmist's experience. For there is more confidence to begin with than in the previous two: they come to such confidence in the end but here the Psalmist begins with this. There are three stanzas, 1-4, 5-8, 9-12, which progress in thought. The first begins with an expression of confidence, an affirmation made in the presence of enemies, and indeed, in one sense addressed to them, a testimony, made almost in defiance of those who are pressing in upon him. And he tells them how it is with him: he is resting in God. All the alternative renderings of 1 in the modern translations emphasise the 'silence' aspect of the waiting on God. There is a stillness in the Psalmist's spirit, and he is at peace. It is as if he were inside a warm and comfortable room, where there is peace and rest, with the storm howling and raging outside, where it cannot touch him. Furthermore, the Psalmist lays the first emphasis on God and awareness of Him, then he speaks of his enemies. This in itself is an act of faith. In 3, the idea expressed is that of an all-out attack on a wall about to fall, and already crumbling, with seemingly little more needed to bring it crashing down. It is against this startling metaphor that we best understand the words in 2b, 'I shall not be greatly moved' - somewhat, he seems to suggest, but not greatly. The bulging wall will stand the strain.

35) *Psalm 62*

In the second stanza (5-8), David begins by addressing himself - in much the same language as at the beginning of the first, but here it is not a statement of faith, but an exhortation to faith. There is a recognition here of the need to renew faith day by day, hour by hour, and even moment by moment. As Maclaren puts it, 'No emotions, however blessed, deep and real, will last unless perpetually renewed'. Perhaps David felt his faith wavering, perhaps he felt the walls shuddering and tottering with the impact of the enemies' assaults. At all events, he speaks to his soul this exhortation, and summons it to continued trust and faith in God. We should note that 'expectation' in 5b takes the place of 'salvation' in 1b. David is looking up to God in the silence, watching for the answer to his cries and for the help he knows will come. We should note also, and particularly - for this is the fruit and the effect of exhorting his soul to wait upon God and be still - that this time he says, 'I shall not be moved'. The 'greatly' of 2 is dropped: there he was thinking he would not be much shaken, but here he now knows he will not be shaken at all. The exhortation in 5 has worked, and faith has been made stronger and firmer. A new and deeper confidence has grown within his heart. The result of this is twofold: on the one hand, the very consciousness of the enemies recedes, and the Psalmist has now no thought of them. On the other hand, he is able to look out to others, and invite them into the kind of trust he himself has found, as if to say, 'Come in out of the storm, into the calm and peace of this wonderful Presence'.

36) *Psalm 62*

In the third stanza, there is a further consideration. The meaning of 9 is that the strengthening and renewing of faith, spoken of in the previous verses, does something to the spiritual eyesight: eyes are opened to see in true and proper perspective the relative strength and power in the enemies and in God. And men are seen to be vanity over against the living God. 'Vanity' and 'lie' are the words he uses to describe them, fleeting and unworthy of trust (10). The Psalmist masses them all together - all the things men rely on and sets them over against God: and placed in the balance opposite Him they are all together vanity. We should note what is said in 11 particularly: here is the secret of the Psalmist's composure. The Psalmist rests in the knowledge that God has spoken. The 'once' and 'twice' may be a Hebraism and form of speech but it conveys a very powerful lesson. God only needs to speak once - for His word goes on and on, and we hear it again and again. We hear the echo of God's voice again and again in the Scriptures, by the Spirit, and it tells us that He is worthy of all our trust. Power belongeth unto God - power to deal with all enemies, and mercy (12) to deal with His people in delivering them. What a God is ours!

37) *Psalm 63*

This Psalm has a message on two levels, both closely associated with the one as the necessary prerequisite of the other. The circumstances are that the Psalmist is in a dry and thirsty land, excluded from the sanctuary, and pursued by enemies that seek his life (a familiar enough pattern by now, in our studies). A battle is imminent with his foes; but through the confidence he comes to in his God, he is assured that they will fall by the sword, and their defeat will lead to his restoration to his kingdom. Such is the theme, expressed in three stanzas, each of which begins with a reference - an address, almost, to his soul (1, 5, 8). The first stanza gives expression for the Psalmist's longing for God. His sense of physical and geographical desolation and exile makes him feel forsaken by God (a similar experience as that described in Psalm 61). His vision of God has dimmed, and his heart is awakened into longing for that vision to be restored and renewed: he yearns to see God in His power and glory, even as when he has formerly seen Him in the sanctuary. If the exile had been caused by sin, Cowper's words amply express his feeling: 'Where is the blessedness I knew...?' But even to be longing like this is some evidence at least that, however far away he may have been, his soul is on the way back into fellowship with God. Indeed, he is more than a little on the way back, if 3 is any indication, for to think and believe that God's loving-kindness is better than life is to have made a great discovery, and to have got priorities in the proper order. For this speaks of the real passion for God which is ever satisfied by His coming in fulness. ‘Blessed are they’, said Jesus, ‘which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.’

38) *Psalm 63*

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the second stanza (5-7), longing passes into fulfilment. We should pause, however, to reflect that God sometimes allows the dryness and parchedness of spirit in order to awaken hunger and thirst for Him, to bring us back to Him again. Does He not sometimes withdraw privileges from us we may have tended to take for granted, in order to renew our souls and awaken a new love for Him in our hearts? There is nothing like a spot of exile to whet a jaded appetite! Longing, then, passes to fulfilment. If God's loving-kindness is better than life, the soul that is in fellowship with Him can have no unsatisfied cravings, but must be at peace. This is the theme of the second stanza. Even in recollection, during the watches of the night, the Psalmist is able to recall the blessedness of his fellowship with God, and enjoy it all over again. This is one of the ways that confidence in God arises afresh in his soul: memory of God's faithfulness and goodness in the past kindles hope for the future. But - interestingly enough - we require to read the message of the third stanza (9-11) into it to get its full spiritual message. For the third stanza speaks of enemies and, as we have already said, it is the defeat of the enemies that enables the king to return to his kingdom. This has a great message for us in the spiritual realm, for when there has been a time of drought and parchedness in the soul, there is generally a battle of some kind involved in the restoration to fellowship and communion and power. For there are enemies to be fought, and powers to be resisted, and it may well cost us blood and tears before we win through to victory. We must not shrink from this battle, but look through it, to the goal and the reward.

39) *Psalm 63*

The other lesson the Psalm holds relates to the Church, God's people, as distinct from the individual. There are times when the Church finds itself in 'a dry and thirsty land' with a sense of God having withdrawn Himself from His people (Jeremiah 14:8), and the question that arises is whether dryness is sent by God to bring the Church to its senses. It is arguable that the present parlous state of the Church in our own land has this as its root cause. If, then, the signs of an awakening hunger are an evidence of God taking pity on His people, what we said earlier on the individual level will be just as applicable in the life of the Church: there will be battles to be fought, wrestlings to undergo, and agonies to suffer - battles in unseen realms with principalities and powers, great immensities that will have to be overcome before we can see God's power and glory abroad in the land, and battles in the seen realm also, with costly adjustments to be made, things to be put right, and priorities to be straightened out and the continuing discipline of such faithfulness in a faithless world, standing firm for the highest we know, and refusing to 'come down' will be costly indeed. Are we prepared to pay such a price, when the temptation to compromise, and seek an easier way is so real? Will we find that temptation greater than the passion for God, or will that passion overcome every other competitive consideration? That is the issue for the Church today: please God it will rise to the challenge.

40) *Psalm 64*

One's first reaction on reading this Psalm is to be tempted to exclaim, 'Oh dear, more of this 'enemy' business, and the punishment of the wicked by God. What is one to make of all this and what lessons are to be drawn from it?' It cannot be denied that there is a good deal of this in the Psalter, but then, there is also a good deal of this encounter with enemies of one kind or another in spiritual life. In this respect the Psalm strikes a note of realism. Indeed, the fact that this is a familiar pattern is an important lesson in itself, for it unfolds a certain kind of attitude which faith makes possible in spiritual experience, namely that over against the intrigues and attacks of evil men faith sets the certainty and assurance that God will intervene to help and deliver, and that He will take up our cause and make us prevail. As the hymn says, 'God hath made His saints victorious'. And faith exercises itself on this assurance, and brings the trembling soul into peace before the danger is over and before the attack has spent itself. This is something we have often seen in the Psalms we have already studied, and it prompts the reflection that surely God means us to learn this lesson well, until it becomes almost second nature to us, since He underlines it so repeatedly. That is something worth thinking about, is it not?

41) *Psalm 64*

Criticism has often been voiced about what commentators call 'the distasteful spirit of bitterness' reflected in such Psalms as this. But two things should be remembered in this regard: the first is that we should notice that the Psalmist is simply stating what he believes God will do, and not giving expression to something he himself is going to do to his enemies. He does not take the law into his own hands, but recognises the truth of the Pauline quotation in Romans 12:19, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord'. And if this is something that God does, the Psalmist can hardly be faulted for recording it, can he? The second thing to remember is that to speak of such passages as reflecting a primitive and sub-Christian spirit is to ignore the undoubted emphasis in the New Testament itself on the reality of Divine judgment. It is the New Testament that speaks of delivering people to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, and that men may learn not to blaspheme; it is the New Testament that speaks of the apostles' exercising 'binding and loosing' power in the Church. It is beside the point, therefore, for one commentator to condemn the Psalmist's words here 'as a retributive curse, the mere utterance of which was believed to be effective'. How would he interpret Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5:3ff which speak of delivering an offender to Satan for the destruction of the flesh? If this were what the Psalmist's words meant, he would have good apostolic warrant for them. It is better, however, to take the words as expressing assurance about what God would do to His enemies. As such, we have a good New Testament parallel in Paul's famous words in Romans 8:31ff, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' Paul goes on to speak of the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, and that in any kind of adverse circumstance - tribulation, distress, persecution... - in all of them we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. This is the kind of assurance the Psalmist finds here - 'killed all the day long', yet 'more than conquerors'.

42) *Psalm 64*

We should note that although the Psalmist asks to have his life preserved from the fear of the enemy, there is no mention of physical violence or harm coming to him. The language is figurative, as 3 makes plain, and the swords that attack him are his enemies' tongues and their arrows are words. And they are shooting at him in secret, that is, from under cover. His foes are not out in the open, but hidden. It is intrigue, subtle, hidden, undercover intrigue, with vicious scheming behind his back that is in view, and the warfare is one of underhand slander in which his defamers take good care to remain in the background. Commentators suggest that the circumstances referred to had to do with a political/religious situation of strife of the sort that occured intermittently throughout Israel's history. The Psalmist was leader of the orthodox party, the upholder of ancient tradition, and he was opposed by innovators whose attitudes towards the ancestral religion were lax and contemptuous. This is a very topical and relevant issue today, when the tension between those who hold the traditional values of the faith and those who sit light to these values, and are radical in their approach both to the Scriptures and to the theology of the Scriptures, has been a very real one. One readily thinks of Jeremiah's famous words (Jeremiah 6:16, 17) about the old paths and the good way. One thinks also of the opposition and the ridicule that has often been poured upon the evangelical cause, and persisted, in spite of all testimony to its fruitfulness and effectiveness, by the establishment, the radicals, the scholars and the ecumaniacs. Well, we should remember for our comfort that there is a God in heaven who remembers the old paths, and the good way, and Who yearns over this lost land and this lost generation. And we look to Him for ultimate vindication.

43) *Psalm 65*

This is one of the great Psalms, immortalised in its metrical version in the praise of the Scottish Church. It is indeed a Psalm of praise, and coming after a number of Psalms in which the singer has been battling with pressures and enemies; it seems like morning sunshine after the darkness of night. It is, in one sense, a very fitting climax to those earlier Psalms, in the assertion and proclamation that God is the Hearer of prayer. It divides into three stanzas, 1-4, 5-8, 9-13, the first of which having as its subject the question of worship and prayer and communion with God, the second speaking of the manifestation of God's power in history and in nature, and the third, a harvest song which, as it were, sings the revelation of God in His providential dealings with His people, crowning their year with goodness. It is possible to interpret it in two ways - first, in its straightforward specific application to some definite occurrence, some specific act of transgression (3) of which the people had repented, and for which atonement had been made, thus removing the burden of guilt and renewing fellowship with God, with the subsequent songs of praise and thankfulness to Him. But it is also possible, in the second place, to interpret it in more general, spiritual terms, both as a spiritual exercise, by which God's people are restored to fellowship with Him, and also as a companion-piece and climax to the previous Psalms we have studied. As such, it would indicate the Psalmist as getting right out into a large place, with confidence in God, and rejoicing in Him.

44) *Psalm 65*

Whichever way we care to interpret the Psalm, the message of the first stanza is impressive and wonderful, in its emphasis on the answers to prayer given by the covenant-keeping God. The first phrase, 'Praise waiteth...' is translated variously as 'praise is silent for Thee', some thinking that the reference is to the attitude of silence and expectation characterising the attitude of the people of God in the sanctuary as they await the High Priest's coming forth from the holiest after presenting sacrifice on their behalf (Leviticus 16:17); or as 'to Thee silence is praise', with the idea that wordless submission of will constitutes true prayer and praise. In 2 we have the glad consciousness that such prayer is not in vain. God hears, and God answers. Yet His hearing and answering are in the context of sin being faithfully dealt with. We have seen in the earlier Psalms that God did not deliver His servant from distress except in the context of dealing with the things that brought about the distress in the first place (3). Then, in 4, we have the blessedness of restored and renewed fellowship with the imagery of God playing host to His guests, and bestowing His bounty upon them.

The second stanza takes us a further step, and we see God now as the Answerer of prayer. And when He answers there is joy and gladness, exultation and praise. It is wonderful and glorious to see the hand of God at work. But there is something else: there is awe, and fear, and this is the note the Psalmist strikes in 5. We must never forget that the God Who hears prayer is the terrible God of the Scriptures, and to supplicate Him brings an incommensurate power into human situations, and lets loose incalculable forces in the world. This is one of the lessons taught in the book of Revelation, where we learn that it is the prayers of the saints that causes the vials of wrath to be poured out upon the earth. We should be careful when we pray, for we may start up more than we bargain for and the answers may not always be just what we expect. What follows in 6, 7 may be taken both literally, as referring to God's activity in creation, or figuratively as referring to storms and convulsions among the nations. There is good scriptural warrant for taking both meanings, and we should not be slow in applying the words accordingly.

45) *Psalm 65*

The third stanza (9-13) is a lovely harvest song, and again a twofold interpretation is possible. Some have said that the whole Psalm was written for the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles or of harvest. Certainly, this makes good sense, for this stanza completes, as it were, the threefold revelation of God, in spiritual life (1-4), in history and in nature (5-8), and finally in His providential provision for the needs of men. Nor must we ever think little, or in any way complacently, of such a provision. The goodness of God in harvest is a wonderful and glorious reality. But everywhere in Scripture harvest in nature is also an illustration of harvest in the world of the Spirit, and these words gleam with glory when they are spiritualised. What a description they are of the times of refreshing that the Church has seen down its history in days of revival. Let us look back, then, over the Psalm and see the sequence in the three stanzas: the Hearer of prayer (2); the Answerer of prayer (5); the river of God full of water (9). This last is the constant factor: God's river is always full.

Finally, we should consider the general pattern of the last several Psalms: pressure, tension, crying to God, wrestling, the peace, confidence and assurance before the victory is given, the disciplines of faith. And now, this! The Psalmist appears to have come through the agonising and wrestling to this place where he now proves God to be the Hearer of prayer and mighty Answerer, and sees the river of God to be full of water. Is not this an incentive and encouragement to us to soldier on!

46) *Psalm 66*

This is a great Psalm, and a beautiful song of worship, with much to teach us. The first thing to note is that, while consisting of five stanzas - 1-4, 5-7, 8-12, 13-15, 16-19 - and a doxology, 20, it naturally divides into two parts, 1-12 and 13-20, of which the first contains plural pronouns - 'we' and 'our' - while the second changes to the singular - 'I' and 'my'. This is very striking, the more so when one realises the subject-matter of the Psalm as being a celebration of God's mighty acts on behalf of His people. For this fact immediately underlines for us the need and the duty of individual appropriation of general blessings. And if there is any indication in the Psalm of what our worship should be like, it is clear that it should have this twofold emphasis: praise of God for His mighty acts in redemption for the world, and praise of God for His mighty acts in redemption 'for me'. Each individual has to enter into his own personal share in the worldwide blessing of the gospel - not only 'God so loved the world...' (John 3:16), but also 'the Son of God loved me...' (Galatians 2:20).

We are not told what particular victory the Psalmist was celebrating: some think the defeat of Sennacherib in 701 BC in Isaiah's time, others the return from Babylon after the exile. But we do not need to know, for the message is applicable to, and in, any visitation of God. This is the genius of so many of the Psalms, that they can apply to, and reflect, many different kinds of experience.

47) *Psalm 66*

In the first division of the Psalm (1-12), containing three stanzas (1-4, 5-7, 8-12), the Psalmist first of all calls on all the earth to praise God. The implication of these verses (1-4) is that God has simply to be known to be worshipped, and when He discloses Himself in His mighty acts the hearts of men will be won to Him. The Psalmist next (5ff) moves from the general to the more particular summoning the nations to behold God's mighty acts in the history of His own people, Israel, with the crossing of the Red Sea and the passage of Jordan specifically mentioned. A still further development (8-12) refers to the particular saving act of God which has occasioned the Psalm, a present deliverance. The implication is that the acts of God in past history are not merely past history, but reveal a principle by which He acts today. The lessons in all this are various. The first, and most important, is that the God Whom the nations are called upon to worship, and Whose mighty acts they are asked to contemplate, is the living God. Secondly, the Psalmist is conscious that 'Israel's history is meant to teach the world what God is, and how blessed it is to dwell under His wings', and that God's people are to witness to the whole world, and to reveal Him in such a way as to constrain men to worship Him. This is their gospel: 'Come and see...' (5). Thirdly, as we see in 5-7 there is a note of gratitude for past mercies as the Psalmist looks back on their history, and a 'sharing' in these past mercies, since God is not a God of the past only, but the same yesterday, today and forever. And this, finally, is wonderfully illustrated in 8-12, for here it is a present crisis, and a present deliverance, that is celebrated, by which they were brought into 'a wealthy place'. Abundant deliverance indeed.

48) *Psalm 66*

The second section of the Psalm (13-20) emphasises individual involvement and appropriation of God's blessings. Kidner comments, 'If this is a strange climax, to have the nation's thanksgiving capped by a single worshipper's, it is a strangeness not unlike the paradox of God's ways, which leave room for the few and the small, who matter to Him as much as the many, and who find themselves, not lose themselves, in His great congregation.' This personal appropriation of the Divine blessings is the true pattern of the gospel, as is made clear throughout the New Testament: as Paul puts it in Galatians 4, God sent His Son into the world, then sends His Spirit into our hearts. And the bearing witness to the once-for-all acts of God in the gospel is an invitation to the individual to enter in to their bountiful provision and make them His own. It is this that underlies the resolve expressed in 13-15 to make personal offerings and sacrifices, for they are the Psalmist's way of witnessing to what the Lord has done for his soul. Here, then, are two important lessons: firstly, each individual believer must take the general blessing and make it his own - and this means 'the faith that takes the world's Christ as my Christ' (Maclaren). Secondly, there is an obligation laid upon all recipients of God's mercy to tell it forth. And the impulse to do so is an indication of the reality of our having received that mercy. The teaching on prayer in 17, which is the way this believer 'tells it forth' is full of instruction. The song extolling God for the deliverance for which he prayed was, as Maclaren suggests, 'Lying under his tongue, ready to break forth', and he goes on to comment 'that is a strong faith which prepares banners and music for the triumph before the battle is fought'. Finally, in 20, we see that there is something bigger and more wonderful than answer to prayer - the glorious grace behind it, and the mercy of God revealed in Christ. This is the ultimate ground of our rejoicing.

49) *Psalm 67*

There is a measure of connection between the message of this Psalm and the previous one, which spoke of the Psalmist's recognition that the true function of the people of God was to reveal Him to the nations in such a way as to constrain them to worship. This is also the basic theme here, and the dominant thought is the 'aspirations after Israel's blessing, and the consequent diffusion of the knowledge of God's way among all lands' (Maclaren). It will be noted (especially in the RSV translation) that each verse contains two clauses except the middle one (4) which has three, and this seems to be the central verse of the Psalm. Working outwards from 4, we see that it is enclosed and surrounded on each side by the fourfold repetition of a prayer that the peoples of the world might give thanks. This, then, is the heart of the Psalm - the desire that all the earth might praise God, Whose providence blesses all. Again, this central block, 3-5, is enclosed in two sections, each of two verses, 1, 2 and 6, 7, which are also parallel to one another, and which regard God's manifestation of Himself to Israel as His great witness to the world. In both, it is the idea that God's blessing of His people will lead to the blessing of the ends of the earth. The setting of the Psalm seems to be a festival of harvest-home (Kidner). 6a should read with a past tense, 'the earth has yielded its increase', not future, as in AV. The reference is clearly to harvest, whose good yield calls forth praise and thanksgiving to God from the Psalmist on behalf of himself and his people. It may well have been a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles that the psalm was written and sung.

50) ***Psalm 67***

If the interpretation of the Psalm is, as we have suggested, a Harvest Thanksgiving, it seems almost odd that it should begin with a prayer of entreaty (1) instead of a song of praise. But a little thought will make it clear that a sense of the Divine goodness and bounty (in harvest or in anything else) often awakens a sense of unworthiness that leads to a cry for mercy. This is true to spiritual psychology, and is one of the ways in which spiritual renewal takes place. As Paul puts it in Romans 2:4, 'The goodness of God leadeth to repentance'. A sense of God's goodness in Christ (which is grace and favour, unmerited and unaccountable, at work in Him for the salvation of men) should stir His people to cry like this that the fulfilment of God's purpose in that grace might be fully realised and brought to fruition, in making us 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'. This is the point and force of the opening verse of the Psalm: it expresses a desire and a longing on the Psalmist's part to be all that he should be for the sake of a lost and darkened world.

With the consciousness of the need for mercy there also comes the awareness of the need of Divine blessings. Only now does the Psalmist realise how barren his life has been and how much he needs His refreshing. And when the consciousness of this grips him, the prayer changes from being part of a liturgical pattern and becomes a desperate cry for God. The words of the Hymn 'Lord, I hear of showers of blessing…' (in RCH) with their repeated cry 'Pass me not...' express this graphically and beautifully, and provide an apt commentary on this aspect of the Psalm.

51) *Psalm 67*

The words 'cause his face to shine upon us' remind us inevitably of the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24-26. As Maclaren says, 'If a man is 'light in the Lord', he cannot but shine.... A church illuminated with a manifestly Divine light is the best witness for God. Eyes which cannot look on the Sun may gaze at the clouds, which tone down its colourless radiance into purple and gold'. With reference to the blessing of God of which the Psalm speaks, Maclaren goes on to say, 'A happy people are the best witnesses for a good King, and worshippers 'satisfied with favour and full of the blessing of the Lord' proclaim most persuasively, 'taste, and see that God is good'.' In this respect the Psalm breathes a truly missionary spirit, 'in its clear anticipation of the universal spread of the knowledge of God, in its firm grasp of the thought that the Church has its blessings in order to evangelise the world, and in its intensity of longing that from all the ends of the earth a shout of praise may go up to the God who has sent some rays of His light into them all, and committed to His people the task of carrying a brighter illumination to every land.' (Maclaren).

52) *Psalm 68*

Alexander Maclaren introduces his exposition of this Psalm in the following words, 'This superb hymn is unsurpassed, if not unequalled, in grandeur, lyric fire, and sustained rush of triumphant praise. It celebrates a victory; but it is the victory of the God who enters as a conqueror into His sanctuary. To that entrance (15-18) all the preceding part of the psalm leads up; and from it all the subsequent part flows down'. The Psalm opens with a prologue (1-6), which is a song of pure praise. This is followed by the first main section (7-18), in which we are given a review of God's past dealings with His people, from the exodus to the establishing of His Temple in Jerusalem. The second main section (19-35) affirms the present activities of God, and declares confidence in His future succour.

We should bear in mind that ours must be a Christian use of the Psalms, and that their relevance for us lies in the pointer they give to the fulness of the Christian revelation in Christ. This is how the New Testament itself encourages us to read them; and a verse from this Psalm (18) is quoted by Paul in Ephesians 4:8 as referring to Christ. What we have therefore in this Psalm, in figure, is a representation of the victory of Christ and the blessings that flow from it to His people. Two points should be noted in the prologue (1-6): the first is the combined invocation to God to arise and the summons to His people to prepare the way for His coming. The invocation echoes the prayer in Numbers 10:35, uttered when the Ark went forward before God's people. The prayer is a recalling of the great days of the past and a claiming of them for the present. The second point to note is the glorious description given of God, uniting majesty and meekness, might and mercy. It is something - nay, surely everything - to have such a God!

53) *Psalm 68*

The first main section of the Psalm (7-18) is a historical retrospect. This is something the Psalmist delights to do, to go back over the history of God's people, and see His hand upon them in guidance and deliverance. He looks back to the beginning of the wilderness journeys in Exodus and takes us, in a swiftly changing series of images and descriptions, through some of the most notable and outstanding of Israel's experiences. What is underlined is the glorious sovereignty of the God of Israel. As Maclaren says, 'God speaks, and the next sound we hear is the clash of timbrels and the clear notes of the maidens chanting victory....He spake, and it was done'. The climax of the section comes in 15-18, with God arriving victoriously in His Zion, establishing Himself as King there. This completes the movement that began with the Exodus. God's enthronement was the purpose of the conquest of Canaan. The hill of Zion is 'the hill which God desireth to dwell in' (16). This rehearsal of God's mighty acts in history is paralleled by, and foreshadows, the Ascension and Exaltation of Christ, which was the climax of His atoning work. And, just as the second part of the Psalm goes on to show God's people sharing the benefits of His conquest and enthronement, so also the Church receives and shares the benefits of Christ's victory. This is the 'bridge' between the two sections of the Psalm. And we should note particularly how the one follows from the other. The first section (7-18) looks back in history, on what God has done; the second discusses what He does now. This is the point in the gospel also: what God has done, in Christ, is the basis, and the source, of what He can do here and now, in the present, for men.

54) *Psalm 68*

The final section of the Psalm (19-35) deals with the consequences of the Divine enthronement for the Psalmist's generation and for the future. It is an experience of daily blessing and benediction for the people of God (19, 20) with deliverance from enemies (21) and safe passages through stormy waters (22), just as had happened in the previous history of Israel. It is a cavalcade of triumph that is unfolded in 24-27. The people of God triumph in His triumph, and they who have escaped from death go up to rejoice in their Champion and Deliverer in His house - into fellowship with Him! This is the ultimate issue of Christ's victory also - not only forgiveness, not only healing, but also reinstatement in fellowship with Him. In 28-31 the homage of the nations is brought to God. This is in line with the emphasis in the last two Psalms we have studied, Israel's blessing proving to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In the epilogue (32-35) all the nations of the earth, not only Israel, are summoned to sing the praises of God.

The message of the Psalm, then, is simply that the God of ancient history is the living God, and that He Who did these things once does them today. The message of enthronement and of the blessings that flow from it is a deeply significant one; and whenever there is an enthronement of God in the hearts of His people, and a coronation, these blessings flow once again, and there is a significant outreach to the nations. When, at the Reformation, there was an enthronement of the true gospel, this is what happened. And so it is with every time of awakening: God arises, and His enemies are scattered. Well might the prophet Isaiah cry out, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.

55) *Psalm 69*

Sometimes, the experience of believers is wonderfully described in terms of Isaiah's words, 'Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear' (Isaiah 65:24). But at other times - and this is how it was with the Psalmist - they cry to God, and cry, and cry, and cry, until they are exhausted crying, and still the heavens seem as brass, and faith is tested to the uttermost. Here is a situation of pressures and overwhelming, and there is no swift answer, only silence. The writer of the Psalm, whoever he was, was a public figure of some sort, and in the public eye as a leader. A man whose enemies were so numerous as this man's (4) must have occupied a position of some importance. This is a sufficient indication of how applicable the message and theme of the Psalm is to the man of God under pressure. There are two main sections to the Psalm, 1-18, 19-36, each of which contains three stanzas, 1-6, 7-12, 13-18, and 19-21, 22-28, 29-36. One of the first things that impresses us in reading the Psalm is the number of verses, which we recognise as being quoted from it in the New Testament (e.g. 4, 7, 9, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25). It is hardly possible, in view of this, not to think of the Psalm in a Messianic way and not to see in it adumbrations of the sufferings of our Lord (it is true, of course, that in some aspects the Psalm cannot be applied messianically, as e.g. the confession of sin in 5, 10, 11, and also the imprecations of vengeance in 22ff). And one major contrast between the Psalmist and our Lord lies in the fact that while the Psalmist cursed his tormentors, Jesus prayed for His. We should not, however, press this contrast too far and brand the Psalmist as unchristian in his attitude. Rather, it is the expression of a righteous desire for judgment against the central wrong. There is a place for retribution and vengeance in a moral universe. It is simply that the New Testament revelation shows that mercy can triumph over wrath in the grace of the gospel.

56) ***Psalm 69***

In the first stanza (1-6), profound and intense sorrow is the keynote. But significantly, even in the context of feeling overwhelmed and forsaken (3), his prayer is still to God, and his distress is related to Him. But it is indeed 'a sea of troubles' for him, and the key words are in 4, 'without a cause'. It is for righteousness' sake that the Psalmist has been persecuted and oppressed. Nor is this contradicted by the confession of sin in 5; it is true that he is not faultless - and in this time of pressure he freely confesses his faults and sins. But they are not responsible for the opposition that has come upon him. It is his faithfulness to God, not his faults and sins, that lies at the root of the bitter antagonisms. That faithfulness is further amplified in the second stanza (7-12). One commentator suggests that what has occasioned the bitter opposition seems to have been that the Psalmist had forcibly prevented some unseemly proceedings in the Temple ('Thine house', 9), and that this is at any rate how 9 was understood by the early Church (John 2:17 - the reference to Christ's cleansing of the Temple of all the adulterations of His day.) Here, then, was a time of the Temple's neglect, and it was this that had drawn forth the Psalmist's protest and faithfulness in opposing that desecration. His heart was broken at the thought of the Temple's departed glory, and he fasts in sackcloth and ashes (10-12). But this was only the occasion of jeering and contempt from his enemies. What a desolation of spirit this can cause to a faithful man!

57) *Psalm 69*

The next stanza (13-18) echoes the distress of 1-6, but with a significant difference. The Psalmist is still overwhelmed, but now there is a clear view of God's loving-kindness, tender mercy and salvation. Prayer does clear the inward sight, bringing a consciousness of other things than our woe and distress! Light breaks in, and promises and assurances begin to come to the soul. But, in 19-21, he seems to be 'back to square one' again, with the light that began to shine in 13-18 extinguished. But there is something very true to spiritual experience here: as Maclaren says, 'Rooted sorrows are not plucked up by one effort'. What does one do when this happens? Hold fast! Go through the same motions of prayer and faith again, till the light breaks through. It will! It is simply the course of battle that makes this situation what it is.

In 22-28, we have the Psalmist's imprecations, which are undeniably fierce; but, as G. Campbell Morgan comments, 'It is a false view of things which criticises this cry as being unworthy of a man familiar with God. It is really the expression of a righteous desire for judgment against essential wrong. The method which he has described as being used by his adversaries violated the essential and fundamental order of the Divine kingdom. For the sake of that order and the vindication of God there must be a place for retribution and vengeance'. We must distinguish two things that differ here: the merely personal, and the concern for God's honour and justice.

58) *Psalm 69*

In the final stanza (29-36), a prayer (29) merges into praise. We should specially note the future tenses throughout the section. Nothing has changed in the Psalmist's situation and circumstances; but faith has awakened a confidence in God, and this has come through prayer. This is the meaning of the phrase 'praying through'. It is not that the circumstances change, as yet; it is you who change. Prayer changes you, first of all; the circumstances come later. This is in line with what Paul says in Philippians 4:6, 7, 'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God...shall keep your hearts and minds...'. The first answer to prayer is that we are answered and blessed, before our prayer is ever answered. So it is here in the Psalm. And what is true for the individual becomes true also for the whole Church (34-36). (Maclaren suggests that the circumstances contemplated in these last verses are those of a captivity. God's people are in bondage, the cities of Judah are in ruins, the inhabitants scattered far from their homes. If so, it is probable that the life and times of Jeremiah coincide closely with those of the Psalmist. And it is a striking commentary on such a dark period of Israel's history that God should come to His servant with such messages of grace, in spite of the impending doom of the Captivity).

59) *Psalm 70*

The first thing of significance for us to note in this heart cry is that it repeats, almost word for word, Psalm 40:13-17, with but one or two minor variations, and it will be helpful to refer to Psalm 40, in order to point the significant lessons here. In Psalm 40, which is in two parts, 1-10 and 11-17, the contrast between these two parts teaches the lesson that there is no deliverance we can know in spiritual life so complete that it excludes the possibility of future difficulties, dangers and hazards, and furthermore that the resurrection of dead and past fears is not a thing unknown even at the height of spiritual exaltation. And the message today is this: in Psalm 40, the expression of need and the cry of distress are set against the background of God's goodness and mercy, and the Psalmist's experience and remembrance of this; while in Psalm 70 the same expression of need and the same cry of distress, stand alone. And, because they stand alone, the need and the cry seem greater and more plaintive, and more hopeless. The message in all this is: when the pressures come upon us, we tend to get things out of focus and out of perspective, and we tend not to look at them against the proper background. For example, in 5, the Psalmist cries 'I am poor and needy; make haste unto me, O God (hurry up, God)'. In contrast, however, Psalm 40:17 adds, 'Yet the Lord thinketh upon me'. It is open to us, then, in time of trouble and pressure to do one of two things: either to view our situation against the background of all we know of God's sovereign mercy and grace, or to view them in an unrelieved gloom of distress that will lead us to despair. The question is, which of these alternatives shall we choose today?

60) *Psalm 70*

What was said in the previous note was sufficient, in a sense, as a comment on this Psalm, in view of its association with the sentiments expressed in Psalm 40, with its opening affirmation 'I waited patiently for the Lord'. One further consideration may however be added. What if there has been no experience of the mercy and deliverance of God, what if a man cannot say with any reality that he has 'waited patiently for the Lord'? For this is true of many, and when trouble comes, they simply go to pieces, for they have nothing to hold on to. This is surely an incentive to 'remember now thy Creator...while the evil days come not', and an exhortation, when in trouble, to look to God and listen to His Word. 'It may be that you will find Him in a new way that you have never known before', the Psalmist seems to imply. And then Psalm 40:1-10 will become gloriously true. Well, what do you think?

61) *Psalm 71*

One of the commentators entitles this Psalm as 'A Psalm for Old Age', and this is an apt title, as we may see from 9 and 18. But its message is not confined to old people, it is for us all, if for no other reason than that we will all be old one day, if we are spared to live on. Its value will become clear to those who are not old as yet, if we see what the possibilities of a godly old age are. For this is how we should want the evening of our days to be like, with a bright and steadfast faith. It is something, after all, to be able to look back over the long years and rejoice in the consciousness of a faithful and consistent testimony and in the faithfulness of a faithful God, and know that he is still with us, to make the evening of our day bright with the hope of glory (cf 2 Timothy 1:12 and 4:7, 8). We need to remember, however, that old age is not always like this, but sometimes very different (cf Genesis 42:36), and that, since life is a stewardship, we are in a very real sense making our future now. If we trifle with spiritual things when we are younger, we will not suddenly find ourselves with a rock-like serene faith when we are old. We must be 'up and at it' now, exercising ourselves unto godliness, working at it with all diligence and with all our might.

One of the great things about faith in old age is that it is able to call on a rich experience. This is what the Psalmist does here, in his time of trouble. And, just as in the previous Psalm, so also he quotes from an earlier Psalm (31:1-3). In doing so he is recollecting former experience and reminding himself of how it had been with him in earlier years, and making use of this as an encouragement to faith in his present situation. In other words, he is taking up a position - and this is something he has learned to do over the years, having proved by experience that it works.

62) *Psalm 71*

The words 'put my trust' in 1 translate one word in the original, but the AV contrives to capture the idea of a definite action in it. It is no mere intellectual assent, but an act of faith. Nor is it an easy act for the Psalmist, for the word in the Hebrew expresses a more desperate situation than some other words sometimes used in the Old Testament, expressing the weakness and helplessness of the man, the sense that 'this is quite beyond me'. We should note also the significance of the words in 3, 'Be Thou...for Thou art', as if to say, 'Be Thou to me what I have taken Thee to be'. This is the putting of the great indicatives of the Faith into action. In 4-6 there is another echo from an earlier Psalm (Psalm 22:9, 10), underlining how biblically this man thinks, and how he sees his experience mirrored in the words of Scripture. He looks back once again and sees his life as having been sheltered and protected from the outset until now. In 8, the thought that is expressed is that, in spite of present distresses, there is so much to be thankful for. And this is the basis for the prayer which follows in 9-13. It is the cry of an old man for protection in time of distress and pressure, made confident by the backward look to God's faithfulness in the past. He is conscious of diminishing strength as his dangers increase, and of being less and less able to stand up to them. But - God's strength is made perfect in weakness, and this is true even when the attacks in old age are often greater from the evil one, and after a lifetime of faithful service. Ah, God is not unrighteous to forget... (Hebrews 6:10).

63) *Psalm 71*

The second half of the Psalm covers substantially the same ground as the first, but does so with a greater confidence, and a lighter heart. As Maclaren says, 'The singer has thinned away his anxieties by speaking them to God, and has by the same process solidified his faith.' Another commentator, remarking on the number of echoes from other Psalms in these verses - 12a echoes 22:11; 12b-70:1b; 13-35:26; 109:29 adds, 'Such prayer is enriched by its echoes: other pilgrims, we are reminded, have passed through this valley'. We should particularly note, in 14 'I will hope continually'. Here is a man at the end of the road and, far from saying, 'I have nothing to hope for now', he is filled with hope. He has the right world in view, and he has no regrets, looking back on the past, for the best is yet to be. What a way to live, to have come to such a position! Maclaren relates 'numbers' in 15 to this: 'It is something to have fast hold of an inexhaustible subject. It will keep an old man young'. And, as we see in 16, 'there is life in the old dog yet', as his task, and his joy, remains to tell out the word of God (16b, 17); and he prays for strength to complete his task. The note of worship and love in the Psalmist's voice in 19 is very real and moving; while the confidence expressed in 20 is very exhilarating. It is a confidence born of experience: as he looks back over the past, it is the recognition that God will be more and more to him as the days go by! And is it not wonderful to see how he comes out into a large and wealthy place in 22-24, and does this not exhort us: 'If you want to end up like this, get down to it now, be up and doing, and 'work, for the night is coming''.

64) *Psalm 72*

There are two lines of interpretation that can be followed in studying this glorious Psalm: one is to see it as it was originally composed, a royal Psalm which prays for the reigning king, in all probability on his accession to the throne; the other is to see the fulfilment of these exalted strains in the Person and Coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive or incompatible; indeed, they complement one another, with the one leading naturally and inevitably to the other. The analysis of the Psalm, and its main flow of thought, is as follows (following Maclaren): 1-4, prayer for the foundation of the king's reign in righteousness, which will bring peace; 5-7, prayer for the reign to be endless; 8-11, prayer for the reign to be universal; 12-15, the ground of all this is laid in the king's becoming the champion of the oppressed; 16,17, final prayer for the increase of his people and the perpetuity and worldwide glory of his name; 18-20, doxology. The AV gives the tenses of the verbs as future throughout, but the RSV, and modern translations generally, give them as petitionary tenses. The Psalm speaks of a kingdom, 'for which the world still waits', and for this reason its messianic, forward-looking character must be its central message for the Christian. But while the world still awaits that glorious consummation it is certainly true that wherever the rule of Christ is accepted, by individuals or communities, the blessings mentioned in the Psalm are fulfilled in measure among men.

65) *Psalm 72*

The realisation that the rule of righteousness will not be truly established till Christ comes again does not prevent us from seeking and praying for partial and approximate fulfilments in the here and now. Indeed, it is our bounden duty to do so. Thus the Psalm's prayer for the reigning king has a real relevance for us in relation to our own situation: this is what we must do - pray for those set in authority over us, for they are ordained of God, and our prayer must be that the qualities mentioned in the Psalm will be established in the corridors of power - not a prayer that 'our side' will win, but that justice will prevail. It is the too simple identification of 'right' with 'my colour of politics' that we need to guard against. This is why the Church must beware of aligning itself with one political philosophy or another; rather, it must stand above all parties, and bear witness to God and God's standards. It must not be regarded as futile for the Church, and for believers, to pray for this, for this is part of the Church's function to be as salt in the earth. It may be that we need to recapture something of the vision of this calling to pray in this way, and to influence the course of government by our prayers. The Psalmist also prayed that the fear of the Lord would be diffused throughout Israel, and this underlines the Church's function to be light in the world, and this is where prayer for spiritual renewal comes in. Hence the eloquent picture in 6, 7. More of this in the next Note.

66) *Psalm 72*

In 8-11 we have some indication of the immense repercussions that spiritual renewal can have, nationwide and internationally. Maclaren takes 12 to mean that the universality of the dominion spoken of in 8-11 is based on the pitying care and delivering power of the king. This makes good enough sense: there is no doubt that where there is compassion and pity shown by those in authority, that authority will be established and made secure. But the verse may have another meaning: modern translations give the verb a present tense - 'he delivers', 'he has pity' - and the point being made may well be that the prayer made in the earlier verses will surely have an answer. If so, this is an encouragement to us to continue in prayer for those in authority, in the confidence that such prayer will not be in vain. In 16, the fertility of the land and the increase of its people, abundant harvests and true prosperity, all are represented as flowing from righteousness. All this can be, ultimately and fully, only through the coming of the righteous King. But we have the promise that the Kingdom will be established and will come. But, best of all, the King Himself will come. This is the Psalmist's final vision in 17-19, and the glorious cadences of these verses have been a benediction to the people of God down the ages: men have indeed been blessed in Him:

Blessings abound where'er He reigns
The prisoner leaps to lose his chains,
The weary find eternal rest
And all the sons of want are blest.

67) *Psalm 73*

Psalm 73 is an important Psalm, dealing with a very real and agonising problem. The measure of the seriousness of the issue it deals with is seen in 2: 'As for me, my feet had well nigh slipped'. The Psalmist is acknowledging that he came very near to ship-wreck of faith. This is the value of the Psalm for us, for it shows us - in the fact that the Psalmist did not go down, but won through to equilibrium and peace - what to do in such a critical situation. The nature of the problem the Psalmist was grappling with was that of reconciling the moral government of the world with facts which seemed to call it in question. He was face to face with the problem of evil, and why God should allow it to go on unchecked; and it had brought upon him torturing doubts, in which his faith in the goodness - and even in the morality - of God was shaken and undermined (cf 13, 16, 21, 22).

There are two divisions to the Psalm, the first (1-14) in which the Psalmist pours out all his doubts, and the second (15-28) in which he tells of how he got the victory over them. Each section has three stanzas of four verses, with a two-verse introduction in the first and a two-verse epilogue in the second. In the first section, the statement in 1 repre-sents the victory the Psalmist has won: this is the conviction he has got through to, after his fierce battle and travail. As Maclaren finely puts it, he is in effect saying: 'This I have learned by doubts: this I now hold as most sure'. And the value of his statement is that it is a conviction born in the crucible. When you come through to this you have come to something very basic and very wonderful.

68) *Psalm 73*

The main theme of the first section, beginning at 2, is the Psalmist's looking back on the awful darkness that had come upon him, and the consciousness of having almost gone down under and losing faith altogether. It is as if he were now shuddering as he remembers how near to the precipice he had gone. In 3-6 the prosperity of the godless, which had been the Psalmist's stumbling block, is described; in 7-10, their unfeeling insolence, flowing from unbroken prosperity, with evil rampant and unchallenged, and good at a discount - a situation often reflected in human experience; in 11-14 it is their contemptuous expression of indifference in the face of God, and the impact this has in making the Psalmist, and others, doubt the goodness of God. The picture is one of faith being shaken all round, by the intractable problem that really seems to substantiate all the doubts. In 13,14 the Psalmist gives vent to the implications of these doubts: 'being good, following the right, is a vain thing. If this is what being wicked can achieve, there is no sense in the universe at all, and moral values are all topsy-turvy. Goodness is no good'.

But then, in 15, he silences his doubts, keeping them to himself. He recognises the danger of voicing them, the danger to those weaker in the faith than himself. And so he keeps them to himself. Here is strength indeed! To be thus strong, even in torment and agony, argues no ordinary faith. And if this 'no ordinary faith' has itself been shaken, what does this tell us about the strength of the testing and trial! This seems to be the turning point of the Psalm and leads to the second section in which the Psalmist describes how he got the victory over his doubts.

69) *Psalm 73*

What is said in 15 is some indication of the emerging faith, a faith that is not so far gone that it cannot think of others. But it is only the beginning, and the Psalmist is not out of the wood yet, as we see in 16, which shows us that silent brooding on the problem does not help him, for the more he thought, the more baffling it seemed to be. But then - and this is the central and crucial point - he went into the sanctuary of God (17), and the light streamed in on his darkness. But it was not merely 'going to church', but what 'going to church' is meant to signify - into fellowship with God and close communion with Him. This is what solves many problems which thinking can leave unresolved - among other things, for this reason: in the light of God, human vision clears. 'In Thy light shall we see light' (Psalm 36:9). And one of the things one sees is 'the end of the wicked' (17), that is one sees that the prosperity of evil men is transient and passing. This thought is elaborated in 18-20. The image and metaphor in 20 is graphic: the seeming prosperity of the wicked is just as if God were 'slumbering' - then He awakes, and goes into action. The reference here is not to final judgment, but to doom coming in the 'here and now' to the wicked, and their overthrow and fall. In 21, 22 the Psalmist recognises that his doubts had their source 'not in the defect of God's providence, but in his own ignorance and hasty irritation, which took offence without cause'. The 'nevertheless' in 23 is so eloquent and so important in the thought of the Psalm: even though he had been foolish and ignorant, God's hand had ever been upon him. He does not let our foibles and waywardness defeat His unchanging purposes and love for us. Furthermore, even though there is no final answer to the mystery of evil prospering in the world, the overriding consideration that more than offsets everything else is His unchanging love and care. And finally, there is the realisation that in all this agonising experience God was with him, holding his hand on the very edge of the precipice and leading him back into the paths of peace. Well might the Psalmist say, in 28, 'It is good for me to draw near to God'.

70) ***Psalm 74***

The mood of this Psalm is a very dark and sombre one. It describes the desolation of the land, and especially the Temple, and pleads for Divine intervention. Scholars suggest two possible historical identifications of the situation - one the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the other the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC. There is a sense in which the theme is plain and straightforward. The Psalmist is conscious of a great calamity befalling his people, and he has an awful sense of having been cast off by God and of suffering His anger and judgment. There is an attitude almost of remonstrance in 2, as if the Psalmist could hardly believe his own eyes as he saw the desolation that had been wrought. It is this that makes him appeal to God to 'step with giant strides' to the scene of desolation, to look for Himself at the havoc that had been wrought (3). This, he thinks, should be enough to move God to action. The nation's calamities are dishonouring to Him, and therefore worthy of His intervention. The havoc in the sanctuary is described in detail in 4-9. It is a grim and desolating picture indeed. We should note the sense of misery in 9, caused by the fact that God had seemed to withdraw from them - there were no signs, or tokens, of the Divine Presence; there was no prophet to speak an authentic word from God, and none to say, 'How long?' How apposite all this is for today! The plaint is not that there is lack of leadership, but that there is no authentic national voice from God, and no leader of prophetic vision for the need of the hour. That is the dark and desolating factor in the situation.

71) *Psalm 74*

But now there is something else, in 12-17. The Psalmist is not only distressed; he is puzzled. There is no doubt in his mind that God could have saved His people if He had chosen to do so. This is the first consideration and interpretation of these verses. And the Psalmist rehearses the mighty acts of God in the past - the references are to Israel's progress from Egypt, through the Red Sea and over Jordan into the Promised Land. The reference to the God of creation in 16, 17 is eloquent, as if to ask, 'Is there to be no dawning for Israel's night of weeping, and no summer making glad the winter of its discontent?' (Maclaren). The question is, Will God not set back this surging flood that has overwhelmed them? If, then, God could have helped them, but had not, there is one obvious factor implied - that of national sin. One readily thinks of the sin that had led to the captivity of the people of God, and how it had to be wept out of their system by the rivers of Babylon. The answer, therefore, to the cry 'How long?' will be, Not until there is a spirit of repentance and a new spirit in the land. This leads to the second interpretation of 12-17. For, to look back over the mighty acts of God in the past kindles faith, and restores confidence in the living God. Hence the final prayer in 18-23: 'Remember' - it is an appeal to God to vindicate His Name and His honour in face of the overwhelming evil. The facts of the past become the ground of the Psalmist's confidence as he prays to God to arise and plead His own cause.

72) *Psalm 74*

What does all this say to us today? It tells us that there is a price to be paid for the privilege of living quiet and peaceable lives (1 Timothy 2:1, 2), and it is: Godliness and honesty. These are the qualities that are needed for the restoration of true stability and well-being. We can see, then, in part at least, the answer to the questions 'Why?' and 'How long?' A new spirit is needed in society, in industry, in public life, in the homes of the land, and a return to ways that we have forsaken as a people, to standards that have been at a discount, and to old landmarks that have been swept away. In this connection it is worth remembering the words written by the historian J. Anthony Froude: 'The Calvinists attracted to themselves every man in Europe that 'hated a lie'.... They abhorred, as body of men ever more abhorred, all conscious mendacity, all impurity, all moral wrong of every kind so far as they could recognise it. Whatever exists at this moment in England and Scotland of conscientious fear of wrong doing is the remnant of the convictions which were branded by the Calvinists into the people's hearts.'

Let us look back, then, and learn, from the past, that God's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, but that our iniquities have separated between us and our God (Isaiah 59:1, 2); and get rightly related to Him ourselves, then cry to Him to make bare His holy arm. Let faith increase until we can claim His intervention for a new day to dawn on our land.

73) *Psalm 75*

The message of this Psalm follows on from that of the previous one for, given a spirit of penitence and humbling before God, by which we become rightly related to Him, the words of this Psalm can become true and real for us. The Psalm opens with a chorus which is an ascription of praise (1). This is followed by the answer of God (2ff), a majestic utterance proclaiming that His judgment is at hand. The NEB translates 1b, 'Thy name is brought very near to us in the story of Thy wonderful deeds'. This is in line with the AV rendering. Here, then, is thanksgiving for victory not as yet given! Two things may be said about this: one is that the consideration of God's mighty acts in the past has wrought a conviction that He would 'do it again'; the other is that through waiting on God there has come the consciousness and awareness that God was about to do it for them. Here is a people resting on the unchanging truth of God's Word and requiring that truth to be translated into experience, rather like Jacob in his prayer at Peniel, 'Lord, Thou saidst...' (Genesis 32). This is pleading the word of promise, and making it one's own! And can we not do likewise? Has God changed? Is He not the same today? It is impressive to see how the opening sentences of God's response to His people (2ff) serve to answer the agonising cries of the saints in 74:10, 11, 'O God, how long...'. The AV margin in 2, 'when I shall take a set time' corresponding more nearly to the RSV and NEB renderings should be followed here: God has His own set time for working, and it lies within His sovereignty. Until that moment arrives evil is permitted to run its course. As Maclaren points out, 'the purposes of delay are presented in Scripture as twofold: on the one hand, 'that the longsuffering of God may lead to repentance', and on the other that evil may work itself out and show its true character'. To be more aware of this than we sometimes are would save us both from impatience and despondency, in face of the 'silences' of God.

74) Psalm 75

In 3 we have a description of the situation into which God's Word comes at the set time: oppression and corruption have gone so far that the earth and its inhabitants are 'dissolved', i.e. disintegrating. It is well described by the phrase we sometimes use when we say that 'the country is going to wrack and ruin'. Over against this, there is the underlying sovereignty of God. This is God's world, and it is He Who controls its destiny for weal or woe, and intervenes to re-establish the moral order of society, and shore up its tottering pillars. But we need to realise what Divine intervention means. It is hope and blessing indeed, but it is also judgment, of necessity. With Him, there is a lifting up and a putting down. This is the theme of 4ff, and is the warning voice of God against all who act foolishly in their godlessness and wickedness. It is utter folly to magnify oneself against the immovable, immutable Rock of Ages. All this has an application both to the church and to the world situation. As to the church it is the assurance that God's hand is upon His work, and His workers too, as He says to them 'No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper...' (Isaiah 54:17). This is a promise that God's servants need to hold on to and claim. As to the world situation, whether national or international, one thinks of the dissident elements in society, with the declared aim of disruption and destruction; and of the decadents bent on destroying traditional Christian morality; and of the flouting of God and the challenge to His authority. It is the Tower of Babel all over again. And God will say, in His own set and appointed time, 'Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language...' (Genesis 11:7ff).

75) *Psalm 75*

There is a point at which the Divine oracle passes into the Psalmist's own words, some think after 3 and at 4, others at 6 and 7. Where this transition precisely takes place may be uncertain, but it is the fact that it does, rather than where it does, that is important. The significance of this is that the Psalmist becomes a man with a message. A prophetic message falls from his lips, shot through with Divine conviction and therefore with authority. There is a very real sense in which this may be regarded as the message the Church and the people of God should be proclaiming to the nation in its hour of need. That message is, first of all, that it is God's hand that lifts up, and there is no secure or lasting elevation but that which He effects (6). That being so, it should be clear to discerning people that our trust should not be put in princes, or parties, but in God. It is He, not this party or that in power that will bring betterment to the nation, and true and lasting prosperity. Unless there is a basic recognition of this fact in the plans and programme of any government, they will be doomed to failure from the outset. The other note in the message is one of warning (8). God is not mocked, and judgment is a reality, too grim and real to be ignored, for 'right is right, since God is God, and right the day must win'. This is the forthright proclamation with which the Psalmist identifies himself. Would that the Church would so do today, and recover its prophetic calling to tell out fearlessly the Word of the Lord to the nation.

76) *Psalm 76*

One cannot but be impressed with the sense of progression in Psalms 74, 75 and 76. In 74 the theme was 'the silence of God'. Then in Psalm 75 it was 'God in action'. And now, in this Psalm, the promise of Divine intervention at the set time is fulfilled, and He mightily and effortlessly gives the victory. This is the simple and chief emphasis in the Psalm, and it conveys an important lesson at the outset: God's word of promise is to be trusted; what He has said, He will do, and all He has promised He will perform (cf Isaiah 55:11). This is a consideration that we can very legitimately apply to the life and situation of God's people, the Church. How often in Scripture do we see the Church in distress and perplexity, crying to God to make bare His holy arm and, following this, God coming to them with rich promises of grace and help, and finally the fulfilment of this promise and a wonderful manifestation of His Divine power. And does not this reflect our own situation in Scotland today? It is not too much to say that the men of God in our land who are bound together in the bonds of prayer are in fact founded upon this conviction, and have been maintained by it for over quarter of a century, that God is faithful to His promises and that we do not hope in vain. One day - one great glad day - Psalm 76 will be our experience, and we shall say, 'lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him...' (Isaiah 25:9).

The Psalm readily divides into four stanzas, 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12, and we shall look at these in turn in the next readings.

77) *Psalm 76*

In the first stanza we are shown the scene of the Divine act. We should note the fourfold reiteration: in Judaea, in Israel, in Salem, in Zion. Let us think of this. If God is known, it can only be because He has made Himself known. And this is itself an answer to the Psalmist's cry and prayer in Psalm 74:22, 'Arise, O God, plead Thine own cause'. The 'there' in 3 is significant: it is there that He broke the arrows of the bow and got Him the victory because it was there that He chose to dwell. Here is a great lesson for us. If we can woo the living God back to the Church, our problems will be over. And by the same token, if we can bring God back into public life and government, it will be a new day for the country also. But 'there' also refers to the place of worship and of prayer; this is where God makes bare His arm and where enemies are conquered, and how they are set at naught, in the place of prayer, rather than on the battlefield (cf Exodus 17:8ff, where it was Moses on the mount rather than Joshua on the battlefield who won the day; and 2 Kings 19:14ff, where it was Hezekiah in prayer rather than Hezekiah on the battlefield that won the victory).

The second and third stanzas (4-6, 7-9) describe the dread manifestation of God. They are filled with the sense of the Divine presence, awful, dreadful, terrible. It is the paralysing, overwhelming effect that the Divine manifestation has on the situation that is underlined here. One thinks of how it has been historically, in times of revival, when the brooding sense of eternity comes upon men when solemn awe, fear and dread mingle with joy and hope. Would that we knew something of this in our day and generation!

78) ***Psalm 76***

Maclaren helpfully comments on the combination of anger and love in 6-9: 'While no creature can bear the terrible blaze of His face, nor endure the weight of His onset 'in the time of His anger', the most awful manifestations of it have a side of tenderness and an inner purpose of blessing. The core of judgment is mercy. It is worthy of God to smite the oppressors and to save the 'afflicted', who not only suffer, but trust.' The final stanza (10-12) is a summons to praise God, and to pay vows to Him. The important note struck here is in 10, in the conviction the Psalmist has that the wrath of man will be made to praise God. One commentator writes 'Every human wrath can be used for the praise of Jehovah. Here is the supreme conquest; a dangerous passion can be overcome, controlled, and sanctified. The very remnant, the last extreme of man's anger can be used to the glory of God. If Jehovah can bring this about, no wonder that He can cut off the spirit of princes...or that He is terrible to all the kings of the earth'. Here is invincible sovereignty indeed. The worst men can do can be turned by God into good for His glory and for His people. And that which He does not, or will not, use for the good of His Name or of His people, He will restrain, so that it will not be vented upon men.

All this, if only God should come into our midst, to dwell among us! Even so, come, O Lord!

79) *Psalm 77*

This is a Psalm which contains features and emphases which we have seen in other Psalms, and this is in part what constitutes its message for us; for if it underlines certain points, and repeats them, as it does, they must have a particular importance for us. It naturally divides into two parts: in 1-9 we have the description and evidence of an experience of darkness and sorrow that overwhelmed the Psalmist's soul. In 10-20 we have a song of praise, in which sorrow is overcome and indeed forgotten. And the transition from the one to the other comes in 10 when 'the years of the right hand of the Most High' are recalled and remembered. The difference between the two sections is that between a man brooding over trouble and a man seeing high above it the enthroned God. To brood upon sorrow is to be broken and disheartened, while to see God is to sing on the darkest day. In the first section (1-9), the tenses in the opening verses can be taken, as in the AV in the past tense, in which case the meaning would be that the Psalmist had already received the assurance and deliverance he needed, and was looking back and describing the experience through which he had passed (as in Psalm 73:1ff). Alternatively, however, the tenses can be taken as in the RSV as present tenses - 'I cry...I seek...' - in which case the whole Psalm is a present experience for the writer. Either way makes good sense. What is plain is that the experience is a very deep and distressing one. He has cried long and earnestly to God, stretching out his hand (2, RSV) in the night without ceasing, but to no avail, for no answer has come to him. There was no comfort to be found in his distress, and even the thought of God - normally a source of comfort - brought only troubling. Such is the emphasis in the first three verses.

80) *Psalm 77*

In the next verses (4-6) there is a fuller exposition of the Psalmist's plaint, in deeply moving and distressing phrases, as he compares his experience now with what it has been in the past (5). But there is a change in 6b: his musing has determination in it. He is wrestling with the situation, and his spirit is searching diligently, almost in terms of trying to let his feet get a foothold in the flood that is overwhelming him. This leads, in the next stanza (7-9), to vehement questionings. Maclaren comments, 'It is better to be pricked to even such interrogations by afflictions than to be made torpid by it. All depends on the temper in which they are asked. If that is right, answers which will scatter gloom are not far off'. The nature of these questions makes it clear that something very deep was involved in the dark experience. It has been suggested that the Psalmist has been thinking of his people's misfortunes, and that the situation could well be that of the Captivity, and the appalling severity of that Divine judgment which may well have made the people think that God had cast them off and would no more be favourable to them. But the words can surely be applied also to personal and individual issues. For there is such a thing as the dark night of the soul, in which a man can feel deserted and abandoned by God; and there are times when, through sin and wilfulness, we end up in a dark God-forsaken condition, in which, because of the enormity of our sin, we may feel we have passed the point of no return. But here is an important point: the Psalmist's questionings came out into the open, and crystallised into speech. Maclaren comments: 'His doubts are better put into plain speech than lying defused and darkening, like poisonous mists in his heart...formulating vague conceptions is like cutting a channel in a bog for the water to run. One gets it together in manageable shape, and the soil is drained'. Get the questionings out, then! Give them an airing.

81) *Psalm 77*

The second half of the Psalm begins with a statement which has been variously translated. The variations rest on the different meanings given to the words 'infirmity' and 'years'. The word translated 'years' is taken by many to be the verb meaning 'to be changed', and some of the modem versions follow this (as RSV, NEB), with the meaning that the right hand of the Most High has changed. But the same word is translated 'years' in 5, and is more likely to have that meaning in 10; and it is best to follow the general line of the AV rendering, with some such meaning as 'This my affliction is sent from God, and I must bear it with resignation', with an exclamation following, 'The years of the right hand of the Most High!', as if this had come as a sudden flash of insight and revelation. In other words, the truths that have laid hold upon him are, first, that the affliction has come from God, and second, that this God is unchangeably faithful to deliver, as the recollection of what He has been in the past stirs his mind and heart to hope that what He was once He will be again. This is the thought of the rest of the Psalm. What is it that the Psalmist suddenly recalls? Is it not perhaps the same kind of recollection as is mentioned in 5, which brought further distress and gloom to him? But now, that past presses in again on him, as if to say, 'You did not read me aright the first time: do it again. Have another look.' And this time he views the past with new eyes! Was what changed his attitude the submission to and acceptance of the Divine will expressed in 10a? In 13-15 the reference is surely to the Exodus, the echoes are manifold (cf Exodus 15:11, 13, 16). Here is the value of knowing one's Bible in times of crisis! In 16-19 we have a glorious theophany, reminiscent of Psalm 18, although Exodus 15 is probably still in mind, with not only the passage of the Red Sea but also the whole process of guidance begun there and continuing to the Promised Land. This, then, is what 'comes' to the Psalmist in his affliction, to answer his distress and lead him into peace. Wonderful thought!

82) *Psalm 78*

This is a very long Psalm, but its message is so much one that it is difficult to do other than read it right through at the outset, and try to see what it is saying to us as a whole, in the main thrust of its unfolding survey of Old Testament history. Its analysis is as follows: After a preface (1-8), setting forth the Psalmist's object in giving this historical record, 9-41 speak of Israel in the wilderness, 42-52 relate Israel's earlier experience in Egypt, 53-66 give Israel's history in the land up to the time of Samuel, and 67-72 describe the transference of the leadership of Israel from Ephraim to Judah. The lesson that comes through loud and clear in this unfolding record is that God is the God and Lord of history, and that He acts, and is operative and active in history, and that the history of which we have the record in the Old Testament Scriptures is full of lessons for today, lessons that sorely need to be learned. Two points in particular are made in the introductory preface: in 1-4 the Psalmist states his didactic purpose. He is not so much a historian as a teacher. History, he says, is a parable, a 'dark saying', containing principles and lessons that can be drawn out, and need to be, for the good and the instruction of the present; in 5-8 he gives the basis of what he has said as resting on the fact that God has given a testimony in Israel which is of permanent validity, and is to be handed down from father to son, for the promotion of godliness of living, as those that learn the lessons of history.

83) *Psalm 78*

Right at the outset, therefore, we have a lesson of enormous importance: that of the need to instruct children in the ways of godliness - not merely telling the stories of old time from the Scriptures, but interpreting the principles of God's dealings with His people, so that they can learn how to live for Him, and be safeguarded in life and conduct. If young people can learn, from the history of Scripture, that certain attitudes to life - seeking after other gods, worship of mammon, and so on, certainly and inevitably spell trouble for nations and communities and individuals, a great lesson will have been learned. And this is precisely where we need to begin - there is so much to unlearn, and so much in terms of basic principles to lay down in young lives, that we can never begin soon enough. It is perhaps because we have failed in this kind of instruction that a generation has risen up divorced from the principles of godliness that alone can make possible a worthy life.

We need to ask ourselves what the point of setting forth the history of olden time in this way really is. Our study of the main body of the Psalm may enable us to find an answer to this question. In 9, the reference to Ephraim is to be taken, according to the scholars, not so much to an actual retreat from a particular battle as a figurative way of expressing what is put plainly in 10 and 11: Ephraim's revolt from God's covenant was like the conduct of soldiers, well-armed, refusing to charge the foe. The faithlessness of Ephraim, it means, is made the more ugly and inexcusable in face of all their experience of Divine mercy. This is the theme of the Psalm, and the message that comes out in what follows.

84) *Psalm 78*

In 12ff the Psalmist rehearses the history of the Exodus and the wilderness journeyings, and all God's mighty works on their behalf, the passage of the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, water from the rock at Horeb and Kadesh, and in 17-20 Israel's requital of them by their faithlessness. This serves to illustrate the truth of 9-11 with regard to Ephraim. The Lord's reaction to this was inevitable, as 21ff makes clear. The two 'therefore's' in 21 and 33 are very grim and solemnising in this regard: indifference and insensitiveness to Divine provision and generosity inevitably led to judgment. This is a recurrent theme throughout the central verses of the Psalm, and the indication of partial and transient repentance in 34ff make sad reading indeed. In 40ff there is a similar rehearsal of the people's ingratitude and forgetfulness of Divine mercies, with a reference to the plagues of Egypt which were the means of releasing Israel from bondage. All this seems to be brought to a climax in 55ff in the repeated rebellion on the part of the people in face of the Divine grace and compassion. We are made to see the inevitability of the catastrophe of the removal of the Ark from Shiloh, and the pronouncement of the 'Ichabod' and the humiliation by the Philistines (cf 1 Samuel 1-4), which took quarter of a century to remedy. Finally (65-72), there is the record of the Lord 'awakening' and making bare His holy arm. Such is the pattern unfolded. We shall look at what it says to us in the next Note.

85) *Psalm 78*

The pattern is surely plain: the wilderness journeyings, the grace and patience of God, and the intractable murmurings of the people and their faithlessness, a privileged people refusing their calling and their stewardship; judgment and mercy, and God rising up in wrath, or in vindication and mercy - and the choice is ours! Nation-wise, the Psalm speaks to us of the history of God's dealings with us as a people - His grace and mercy towards us on the one hand, and our intractable rebellion against Him and His ways on the other, with the pattern of recurrent wrath and anger against us, but - through all - the unaccountable patience and compassion of God. But sometimes it can go too far, and when it does, there is a price to pay. With Israel, it was the disaster of Shiloh. With us? Well, is not the frown of Divine displeasure upon the land? This is why it is so disquieting that there is so little recognition of the moral and spiritual issues, that as a nation we have 'lost the place', with wanton materialism and lowered moral standards. We do not have to pontificate about which part of the Psalm applies to our present situation. But what we do need to see is the flashes of lightning flickering throughout the Psalm, betokening the presence of Divine displeasure and anger, and recognize the possibilities and learn from them. The choice, as we have said, is ours. And - let us take the hopefulness of the Psalmist's closing verses as a message of opportunity - the Lord rising up out of sleep and doing something to restore His people, to raise up a David, to lead His people in the integrity of his heart. He can do it again, in our time. The choice is ours!

86) *Psalm 79*

The circumstances that lie behind this Psalm are very similar to those we saw in Psalm 74. In the earlier Psalm it is the profaning of the Temple that is prominent, while here it is the spoiling of the city itself. It is quite likely that the same event is in view, and scholars suggest either the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC or the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC as possible historical identifications. There are three stanzas in the Psalm: in 1-4 the Psalmist spreads the miseries of God's people before Him; in 5-8, there is a prayer for deliverance, confession of sin, and a cry for the destruction of the enemy; in 9-12 there is a further prayer for deliverance and confession, and finally the rescue of Israel. An epilogue closes the Psalm in 13. The description of the desolations of Jerusalem is graphic and heart-rending in 1-4. The appalling nature of the tragedy of the Captivity (if this is the historical reference) may be gathered by reading some of the notable passages in the Book of Lamentations. It is difficult, if not impossible, for us today to appreciate the enormity of the disaster that overtook the people of God when Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem to the ground and took the flower of the nation away to Babylon and into captivity. It was something that would never be forgotten.

87) *Psalm 79*

Two points in particular should be noted. One is the repeated emphasis that the disaster involved the name and honour of God. 'Thine inheritance is invaded, Thy holy Temple is defiled by the heathen, the corpses of Thy servants lie unburied, and the flesh of Thy saints is given to the beasts of the earth.' It is the insult to God that is implied, and this being incorporated into the Psalmist's plaint becomes the ground of his pleading. Surely God must do something for His great Name's sake, if not for His people's? The second point to be noted is that in all the Psalmist's agonising experience of desolation and distress, the use of 'Thy' and 'Thine' make it clear that he is in fact holding fast to the reality of God's special relation to His people. In all the affliction he does not lose faith. This is something that stood out in Psalm 74 also (cf 20). When one bears in mind what was said there about the sense of being cast off by God and of God having withdrawn from them, this is all the more impressive. We all know how difficult it is to trust God in the darkness, but here is a man who, in the midst of an appalling sense and experience of disaster, does not waver in his faith. As Maclaren says, 'Such times are the test and triumph of trust. If genuine, it will show brightest against the blackest background'.

88) *Psalm 79*

The second stanza (5-8) begins with a question which figured also in the earlier Psalm: 'How long?' As there, it is not so much an appeal for information as for an ending to be brought to the distress. And the lesson is the same, but even more explicit, than in the earlier Psalm. For the recognition is quite unmistakable here, that the calamity that had befallen them was an expression of the anger of God against them, and the result of their own sin. This is plain in the abject confession that rings out both in this stanza and in the next. As Maclaren puts it, 'Beneath the play of politics and the madness of Antiochus (or Nebuchadnezzar) he discerned God's hand at work'. This is one of the biggest lessons on the national level we can learn, and it is in sore need of being learned today. It is of course true to say that whenever such an emphasis is made today, people tend to think of those that make it as belonging to the lunatic fringe of the Church, to extremist, fanatical groups - so great is the falling away from a really biblical view of history. But this is how an Isaiah or a Jeremiah, or a Paul, would interpret our situation, looking behind and beyond second causes to first causes, to see the hand of God, and the anger of God, upon the national scene. In the last analysis, it makes little difference what colour our political stance is - the parlous state of the nation is likely to continue, because the frown of God is upon us. The primary need, therefore, is repentance. And on the national level there is little sign of any awareness of that need at the present time.

89) *Psalm 79*

The third and final stanza again cries out for Divine help and succour, and it is linked to 5-8 by its emphasis on confession of sin (9). But there is a difference: in 8, it is 'former iniquities', that is the sin of former generations, but in 9 it is 'our sins'. What is being borne witness to is the fatal entail by which the iniquities of the fathers are visited on the children. But the Psalmist is not subscribing to the theory expressed in Ezekiel's time that 'the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Ezekiel 18:2); rather he is conscious that his own generation has run true to type, and had repeated their forebears' transgressions. Such was the root of the problem and the tragedy that had overtaken them. But now, with the religious issues firmly established we see the exercise of faith that takes place. The ground of the Psalmist's plea for claiming deliverance is the glory of God's Name. This echoes the thought of the first stanza, and it is this that lies at the heart of the question in 10, 'Why should the heathen say, Where is their God?' If Israel were destroyed, sinful though she was, it would be a reproach to God, and the heathen would think ill of Him (cf Exodus 32:9-13). It is to miss the point to suggest that the Psalmist would have been better to have been contrite and humble, and not to ask extravagant and bold answers to his prayer; he is leaning entirely on God's Name, it is his only plea, and he is making his appeal, on the ground of the covenant, to His royal power to vindicate and deliver His people. It is a moving plea indeed, and no one ever pleads the Name of God like this in vain. The Psalm closes with a very beautiful and touching picture, as another image is invoked: as well as being the God of power, and the God of the covenant, He is the Shepherd of His people, and they are the sheep of His pasture. Thus does the Psalmist sing himself out of sorrow and despair into hope and confidence, through confession of sin and appeal to the Divine mercy.

90) ***Psalm 80***

The difference between the theme of this Psalm and that of the two previous ones is that, whereas there the distress expressed was due to a single catastrophic crisis, Psalm 80 reflects a condition which is more or less of long standing, if not permanent. It is a desolate scene, that has long been in existence, and which promises no immediate change, except through the direct intervention of God. This is one of the pointers to interpretation and application, and as we have applied the previous two psalms to our more immediate national predicament, so also we may now apply this Psalm to the long-standing condition of spiritual and moral deterioration that has characterised our post-war era. As to the structure of the Psalm, we may take the thrice repeated refrain in 3, 7, 19 as dividing the Psalm into three unequal parts, 1-3, 4-7, and 8ff. If we were to take 14 to be the same sort of refrain, this would make another division, with 15-19 as a final stanza. The Psalm is therefore a prayer for the nation, looking back to the purposes of God for His people, as expressed in ancient deeds of deliverance, and asking that these purposes be fulfilled again, in spite of the present distresses. It is not difficult to apply this in particular to the Church, as a prayer that the Divine purposes might yet be fulfilled for her, present distresses and barrenness notwithstanding.

91) *Psalm 80*

The first stanza (1-3) is a simple appeal for help, and God is asked to give ear (1), to stir up strength and save His people (2), and to turn them back to Himself (3). It is the association of ideas in what is said that is striking. The 'Shepherd' picture is a characteristic one: it goes back, in fact, to the patriarchal words in Genesis 49:24 (which see), 'the shepherd, the stone of Israel'. These are words included in Jacob's blessing upon Joseph, and it is Joseph that is mentioned in 1. The Psalmist is using an evocative association of ideas in remembering the days of old, and God's wonderful works on His people's behalf in those days - the tabernacle days, when the Lord was known to dwell between the cherubim, and the wilderness times when Israel's march was gladdened by God's Presence. The three tribes mentioned in 2 were those who, on the march, followed immediately after the Ark as it went forward, and they had the best view, so to speak, of the pillar of cloud and fire as it led God's people on. The reference in 3 to the shining of God's face may also be to the pillar of cloud and fire, in which God looked in favour upon Israel. The idea here is that one gleam of God's face would be sufficient to change the entire situation, shrivelling up their foes and bringing salvation to them. The second stanza (4-7), with its piteous recounting of the distress of the situation, seems to underline how very different the Psalmist felt the reality of the situation to be, and how needful for the shining of that Face. The phrase 'wilt Thou be angry...?' literally reads 'Wilt Thou smoke...'. God's anger is like a smoking fire, and He is smouldering in anger against them. Hence the reiterated prayer in 7.

92) *Psalm 80*

The third stanza of the Psalm is in three sections: the Psalmist first gives a picture of what once was (8-11); then he presents the contrast to what now is (12-14); and ends with a prayer for speedy help (15-19). In the metaphor of the vine in 8-11 the Psalmist takes up the earlier reference to Joseph, for in Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49:22ff Joseph is called a fruitful vine. The picture is of God the Husbandman, and His people the vine of His care and nurture. The picture is of rich and fruitful growth. But now, in 12-14, the contrast between the glorious past and miserable present prompts the agonising 'Why?' No answer is given, and no reason ascribed for the woeful change, although it is surely implied in the reiterated 'turn us...', a recognition that they themselves needed Divine dealing to put them right. The supplication in 14, itself a modified version of the earlier refrain in 3 and 7, passes into the final prayer for help and deliverance. The vineyard metaphor continues, and now it is the corning of the husbandman to purge and prune the vine, to restore it to its former fruitfulness. The entreaty in 17 is a significant one. Scholars think there may be a possible reference to Benjamin (2) in the play on words here, for 'Benjamin' literally means 'son of the right hand'. Literally, therefore, this is a prayer that God would lay His hand on the man appointed by Him to be the leader of His people, and make him strong for the Divine purpose and commission to be their deliverer. But it is not difficult to see in this a foreshadowing of Christ Himself (cf Psalm 105:16ff for a similar passage, which affords a remarkable illustration of Paul's words about Christ in Philippians 2:5ff). The Psalm ends as it began with an appeal for the Divine intervention.

93) *Psalm 81*

This is a Psalm for a feast day (either Tabernacles or Passover, probably the latter). It divides into two unequal parts: the summons to the feast (1-5); and the lessons of the feast (6-16). Its intention is to encourage God's people to recall the significance of their deliverance from Egypt and so to lead them into obedience, love and worship. The note of joy in the opening verses is very impressive, and it does not need much imagination to think of the glorious and exuberant sound that voices and instruments would raise. This is what worship is about. It is of course true, and always to be remembered, that reverence is a keynote, in all spiritual worship; but reverence is not to be identified or confused with sadness or solemnness, still less with staidness. There is such a thing as reverent exultation; and it is a false piety that equates worship with a long face and a lugubrious demeanour. The reason for the feast is next stated, in 4, 5: it is appointed by God (4), and the words used to describe this appointment are, significantly, words used of the Word of God - i.e. it is the authority of the appointment that is stressed. 'Statute' means the command of God: worship is therefore a duty, and it is a matter of obedience for us to gather together. 'Law' means ordinance, and this may suggest that worship is a means of grace appointed by God for the blessing of His people. 'Testimony' refers to the purpose of God in our assembling ourselves together: it is a testimony to the world; but also, as Maclaren observes, in the sense of being 'A right commemorative of a historical fact, and therefore an evidence of it for future times.'

94) *Psalm 81*

The second section of the Psalm (6-16) tells a different story however. There is an introductory consideration here, which makes for an understanding of all that follows. In 5c: the language referred to here is not the 'strange' of the Egyptians, as the AV translation might suggest. The language, which the Psalmist hears, is the voice of God, and what he hears is what God is saying to His people, this being unfolded in the remainder of the Psalm. Here, then, is a wonderful picture: God Himself breaks in to the worship and praise of His people and speaks to them. We could hardly have a better picture or illustration of the meaning of worship. This is what a church service is about and for. And this (6ff) is the kind of thing He says. First of all, (6, 7), He reminds His people of the facts which the feast was designed to commemorate - Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, and the bounty of His provision for them throughout all their wilderness journeyings. This pattern is very similar to Paul's in Ephesians 2:11ff, 'Wherefore remember...that at that time ye were without Christ...but now...'. To be reminded of this is surely the best incentive to worship, gratitude and praise! Next, the meaning of the wilderness experience is underlined. The purpose of God's goodness to His people is shown to have been to bind them to Himself; and the yearning in his heart is graphically portrayed in 8b, which is best rendered 'Would that thou wouldst hearken unto me'. This is very striking, in the context of the commands of the law given at Sinai, which follow in 9, 10, for it gives us a new insight into the meaning of the law as being not a harsh, legalistic requirement, but the expression of a loving Will. Do we look at God's laws like this?

95) *Psalm 81*

Following on what was said at the end of yesterday's Note, the words in 10b must surely mean that the response of obedience to God from a redeemed people will always lead to fulness. Giving God undisputed first place in our lives will secure the fulfilment of the boldest wishes, and satisfy the most clamant of desires. Here is a lesson for us! The best defence against the temptation to stray from God is the possession by experience of His rich gifts that meet all desires. Therefore, the wider our mouths open, the more we shall experimentally receive from Him. What a word for hungry hearts, especially when we realise that obedience is the opening of the mouth to God! In 11, 12 we have the Divine lament at the people's failure. It is an expression of sorrow but, we must never forget, and are not allowed to forget, that it is holy sorrow. God is holy: and disobedience has a price. To sin, to continue in sin, means to withdraw oneself from the sphere of the Divine protection and grace - to 'our own counsels' (12). In 13-16, the lessons are applied by God. He exhorts these worshippers, who are commemorating the feast, to give Him the obedience of their hearts, as their forebears failed to do. One is reminded in these verses of the famous words in Isaiah 48:18, 'O that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river...'. Similar benefits are spoken of here in 14-16: victory over enemies, and abundance of provision. The phrases in 16, 'finest of the wheat' and 'honey out of the rock' suggest incomparable abundance. Well might the Psalmist say, in another place, 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'.

96) *Psalm 82*

This short Psalm is not without its problems for interpretation. There is a considerable divergence of view among the commentators as to the meaning of 'the mighty' in 1, who are nominated 'gods' in 6. Two main viewpoints have been held: one is that these are angelic beings, tutelary spirits such as those mentioned in passages such as Daniel 10, like the archangels Michael and Gabriel. This would mean then, that the scene in 1 must be regarded as a heavenly court scene, such as we have in the opening chapters of Job, and in 1 Kings 22:19ff. The other possibility is to regard them as human judges, appointed to positions of authority in the and. This has been the traditional interpretation, in which case the scene in 1 represents the assembly of the nation, and the persons at the bar will be those who have betrayed their stewardship and exercised injustice. There is one consideration, however, that is decisive in settling the issue, for our Lord Himself quotes 6 in John 10:34-38. What He says in this passage would be meaningless unless the 'gods' referred to in the Psalm are men. Jesus tells us why they are given this title: 'To them the word of God came'. They were recipients of a Divine word, which constituted them in their office; and insofar as they discharged its duties, their decrees were God's word ministered by them (Maclaren). The first lesson, therefore, in the Psalm has to do with lawfully constituted authority, and with the extremely serious repercussions when that authority is abused: there is the certainty of a day of reckoning. The powers that be are ordained of God (Romans 13). The doctrines of common grace and providence are involved in this. Law and order are infinitely important because they are the expression of the character of God, and they are introduced into society to save society from the worst effects of man's lawlessness and sin. This is the work of common grace, and of God's providential government of the world.

97) ***Psalm 82***

The implication of what was said in the previous note must surely be that it is a Christian duty to be obedient to lawful authority. But the question arises: what if the powers that be are unjust and oppressive? Is it not right to oppose and resist? There are two things to be said here: one is, that so far as the apostle Paul is concerned, in his teaching in Romans 13, it is God's prerogative, not man's: 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay' says the Lord. The other thing is that the Psalm itself bears this out. It is God Who calls the unjust princes and judges to account, and there is no suggestion in the Psalm that it should ever be otherwise.

As to the text of the Psalm, in 2-4 God speaks, calling princes and rulers to account, and this underlines the graphic emphasis in 1: God is there, He is in the midst, and He sees what is going on, however hidden its presence may seem to be. And He is always liable, at any moment, to break in. Experience in public life should confirm this to us: the downfall of those who unjustly abuse authority can be very sudden and very final. This is what faith should see and hold on to, in difficult times. In 5, there is, almost, a plaint from God over human impatience. Maclaren suggests that the Divine voice pauses, to see if what has been said will reach any consciences - and when it does not, God grieves in wonderment at the blindness of our hearts. Being blind, the rulers have lost any understanding they might have had about the nature of their calling, and their responsibility to God for exercising justice. And because this is so, their attitudes are threatening the very foundation of society (5b). More of this in the next Note.

98) *Psalm 82*

Therefore, sentence must be passed (7): judgment will come. This is the assurance the Psalm gives: God will deal with the situation. He will intervene. And that intervention means a final divesting them of all their authority; from being 'gods', they become but 'men'. They are deprived of their power and their office. The prayer to God in 8, 'Arise, O God, judge the earth' is a clear indication that this is something best left to God to do. We are to appeal to Him, rather than take matters into our own hands. And for this reason: resistance and revolt generally bring in their train as many evils as they destroy. Totalitarianism of the left tends to develop when totalitarianism of the right is put down, and vice versa. God's way is often very different, as for example in the history of Israel in 1 Samuel. The house of Eli was appointed by God to rule, but Eli's sons signally failed in their solemn stewardship; and the Divine sentence mentioned here in the Psalm was passed on Eli and his sons (1 Samuel 2:27ff). God arose and brought about the fulfilment of it, and redressed the situation - but how quietly, unobtrusively and almost imperceptibly, in the birth of Samuel and his call to service, and his being raised up to be a prophet of the Lord. Is there not a lesson for us in this? Precipitate action so often brings more harm than good. He that hath ears to hear let him hear.

99) *Psalm 83*

The problem of the silences of God, and man's impatience with them, reflected in the previous Psalm, is underlined once again in this Psalm in which we are confronted by the enemies of the Lord who are threatening the existence of God's people and cause. There are two sections in it, in the first (1-8) Israel's extremity is described: in the second (9-18) we have Israel's supplication. The first consideration in Israel's extremity is that, more even than the fact of the pressure from their enemies, there is the sense that God is doing nothing about the situation, and not moving quickly enough to help. We need to stop here before going any further, to consider a very real issue: in any time of pressure, such as is envisaged here, it is natural to want God to intervene and make bare His holy arm. But intervention does not always come when we want it, or when we think it should; and when it does not, what then? Two things can happen: one is that dark discouragement can come, even doubt, and in extreme cases, loss of faith; the other is that the temptation becomes very strong to try to force God's hand or, worse still, to take matters into one's own hands. Perhaps the best commentary on the first of these points - discouragement and doubt - is to be found in the marvellous words of Faber's hymn, 'Workman of God! O lose not heart...'. How needful to 'learn what God is like'! The other temptation, to take things into our own hands and precipitate matters, is perhaps more linked with the first than we might realise, for it has at its root a basic misunderstanding of God's working. Another line in the hymn already quoted, 'Learn to lose with God' is a word of wide application. There is a word in Isaiah (28:16) that fits all this perfectly: 'He that believeth shall not make haste'!

100)*Psalm 83*

The Psalmist, however, did not fall into either of the temptations mentioned in the previous Note: he neither was discouraged, nor precipitate. Rather, he prayed: he poured it all out to God in prayer. And we see in the Psalm how he did so and what it led to. The rehearsal, in 2-8, of the gathering of the enemies is very impressive, and the sense of their plotting and scheming, dark, sinister and devilish, is solemn indeed. But the answer to such organised malevolence is not to pay back in its own coin. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal. What the Psalmist does is to pray (9-18). Nor does he give way to panic reaction in face of the undoubted pressures and dangers. Faith is operative throughout, as we see from the reiterated emphasis on 'thy' and 'thine'. It is God's battle: they are His enemies and the enemies of His work and His purposes. It is not a personal thing against Israel but against Israel's God, and this in itself is an assurance that He will look after the situation. The phrase in 3, 'Thy hidden ones' expresses the consciousness in the Psalmist that he was in God's hands and in His secret place. Maclaren says that the idea of 'preciousness' as well as that of 'protection' is included in the word, and he adds, 'Men store their treasures in secret places; God hides His treasures in the secret of His face, the glorious privacy of light inaccessible'. Well, that is a thought for some saint under pressure today, is it not!

101)*Psalm 83*

The prayer in 9-18 is very impressive. One recalls our Lord's words to the Sadducees, 'Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Matthew 22:29). But the Psalmist knew both, and made both his rock and his stay. The power of God he was counting on has already been indicated, but look at how he knew the Scriptures (9ff)! He recalls ancient victories, and prays for their repetition, saying, in effect, 'Do it again, Lord'. This is an analogous to Psalms 42:6 and 74:12ff and 77:10. Do we see the implications of this? It is the recognition that it is a living God that we meet in the Scriptures, and that He is the same yesterday, today and forever. We should not be over-concerned about the so-called 'vindictiveness' of the prayer and of the Psalm as a whole, for the call of vengeance is not because of personal wrong, but against the enemies of God for their wickedness and temerity in rebelling against Him. The Psalmist is simply aligning himself with God's own attitude to the wicked. And if he is simply thinking God's thoughts after Him, it can hardly be wrong. What is more, the Psalmist himself is not wreaking vengeance upon his enemies; he is praying to God to do it. It is a prayer to God, not a declaration of intent on his part. We should in this regard recall what is said in Psalm 65:5: when God acts it is like a consuming fire. The God Who hears prayer is the terrible God of the Scriptures, and to supplicate Him brings an incommensurable power into human situations. Above all, we see in the last three verses of the Psalm that the aim of the prayer, and the purpose of the visitation and judgment, is to turn the enemies of God into His friends. And it is worth anything, for that to happen!

102)*Psalm 84*

The loveliness and beauty of this Psalm make it a benediction to read. Its theme takes us to the heart of spiritual experience, for it speaks of communion and fellowship with God, and of the blessedness that that communion brings to the heart. It falls naturally into three stanzas, 1-4, 5-8, 9-12. These stanzas have been variously designated and expounded, as will be seen from the commentaries. As good a way as any to follow, however, is that indicated by the threefold emphasis on the word 'blessed'. This is the heart of the Psalm - the blessedness, the happiness of the life of communion and fellowship with God: the blessedness of those that dwell in God's house (4); the blessedness of the man whose strength is in God (5); the blessedness of the man who trusts in Him (12). First of all, the blessedness of the enjoyment of God's Presence occupies the first stanza (1-4). Commentators suggest that this is a pilgrim Psalm, and that its association is the pilgrimage at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is the expression of heart of the pilgrim on the way to the Temple or Tabernacle. He thinks of the house of the Lord, and longs to be there, his heart crying out for Him, and he exclaims 'Blessed are they that dwell there constantly'. We should note the association of ideas between the house of the Lord and the Lord Himself. The two are necessarily linked together. It is the presence of God that gives the Tabernacle its beauty and loveliness. It is not the building that is important but the presence of God there; and the Church today is the people indwelt by God, not the place. Another alternative rendering of 2 reads, 'My soul longed, yea fainted...' - that is, the Psalmist speaks of past experience in which he yearned for God; then he cries out with joy and gladness to welcome the living God, as God breaks through to his longing heart. As the hymn puts it,

Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings...

103)*Psalm 84*

The picture changes in the second stanza (5-8), and now it is the blessedness and the joy of the progress of the soul towards God, and the spiritual life is conceived of as a pilgrim's progress. The RSV translates 5, 'In whose hearts are the highway to Zion'. Here is a pilgrim whose heart is set on God and on the things of God. And such a man is blessed indeed! (cf Hebrews 11:10, 27b for Abraham's and Moses' experience - again and again, in the midst of the duties and appointments of life, their desires and their hearts were on the path to God). The picture here is one of 'ongoing' - it is the ongoing life of the believer, conceived as a pilgrimage, the path of the spiritual life, in terms of sanctification and growth in grace. This is the force of the words in 7, 'They go from strength to strength' (cf Philippians 3:12ff). Part of this blessedness lies in the fact that it makes a man superior to his circumstances. To have a heart thirled to the ways of God does things to a man, and one of the things is expressed in 6, 'Passing through the valley of weeping, he makes it a well' - that is, 'Sorrow, borne as a help to pilgrimage changes into joy and refreshment...trials borne aright bring down fresh bestowments of power for fruitful service' (Maclaren). Such a pilgrim will make capital out of the pressures of life and the oppositions of Satan. But something more is implied in 6: not only is such a pilgrim blessed himself, he becomes a blessing to others. When he passes through the dry, parched places, the face of the land changes; rain falls, and springs rise from the ground. This is what the quality of his life accomplishes.

104)*Psalm 84*

The prayer in 8 leads to the third section (9-12). It may mean that the Psalmist, thinking of what he has been saying about the valley of weeping, prays that if this were to be his experience, this is how it would be with him - that is, that the experience would be an enrichment to him, and make him an enrichment to others. The prayer in 9 is perplexing as to its precise meaning and significance here at this point. One suggestion is that the Psalm was 'the work of a companion of David's in his flight. If so, the king's restoration would be the condition of satisfying the Psalmist's longing for the sanctuary' (Maclaren). Or, following the AV, it is a prayer to God our shield, to look upon us as His anointed servants, and to succour us in all our weakness and need. In 10 the theme of the Psalm is renewed - the blessedness of the life of the Spirit. That life is to be estimated not according to its length, but according to the richness of its contents. Time is relative, qualitative: one crowded moment is better than years of languid inactivity. Here, then, is the choice he makes: he weighs up the alternatives, the things of the world, its advancements, visions and affluence, and he opts for the pilgrim life. The humble place is chosen, for the Lord's sake, rather than that of affluence, which can only give His 'second-best'. And this choice brings the Divine plenty (11): no good thing does God withhold, for He gives His best to those who leave the choice to Him. In the Christian life we are inevitably going to be faced, not once, but again and again, with this kind of choice. And it is as well to have our priorities clear from the outset. There are stands to be taken: and when they are not taken rightly, impoverishment results. But if we have once tasted the blessedness of the true life of the Spirit, all other taste is spoiled for us, and our preference will be clear and unequivocal.

105)*Psalm 85*

We are faced with certain problems in interpretation with this Psalm, in that different commentators place different constructions upon the situation that is in view, and upon what the Psalmist is in fact saying. It is clear that the Psalm divides naturally into three sections, each one bigger than the last: 1-3 speak of a restoration that has taken place; 4-7 constitute a prayer to God to restore His people and to withdraw His anger; 8-13 tell of a Divine message given to the Psalmist, and the theme of restoration is again spoken of as already accomplished. Some scholars point out that the tenses in 1-3 and 8-13 are perfect tenses, and that the Hebrew usage of the perfect tense is often prophetic. In which case the Psalmist so transports himself into the future in his imagination that the future event is described as having already taken place. He envisages, therefore, the return of the 'Golden Age' as at the beginning - that is a vision of the kingdom of God in its consummation, and that this is contrasted, in 4-7, with the present period of national calamity and misfortune. Others, however, follow the traditional interpretation that what is in view is the return of the exiles from Babylon: the first exiles had come back to the land with rejoicing in the turning of their captivity (1-3) but were now dismayed and cast down at the daunting prospect of all that was to be done; for the restoration was incomplete, and their hearts were heavy. On this interpretation the third stanza is God's word of assurance to them that He that had begun a good work in them would continue and complete it. A third possible interpretation (suggested in the RSV translation) is that the Psalmist is reminding the Lord what He had done in the past for His people, and in view of the present distress was crying to Him to 'Do it again', and received the glad assurance that He would do so. The last two interpretations are not mutually incompatible, and we shall look at the Psalm in their light.

106)*Psalm 85*

The historical circumstances unfolded in Nehemiah well illustrate the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the Psalmist's teaching. On the one hand a great deliverance had been accomplished for God's people; on the other, their rosy dreams had turned out so differently in reality as they saw that it was to be a continuing battle and an uphill fight, and the tendency to discouragement was very real. The parallels for our day are not far to seek. When God re-establishes the gospel word in the land, it is a turning of the captivity of Zion. But much hard work awaits those who are committed to the work of rebuilding, and they must be prepared for battles and discouragements. Two things should be noted in relation to the prayer in 4-7. The first is that the Psalmist uses what God has done in 1-3 as a basis for his prayer: the beginning of a work is in itself an assurance that it will be continued and perfected. The second is that the incompleteness of the work can sometimes be caused by our own failures; and sometimes God has to wait for us to come to terms with His will, if we have flagged in zeal or lost the edge of our earlier consecration.

If we look at the other possibility of interpretation and take the Psalm to mean that the Psalmist is looking back, from his position of distress and calamity, at what God once did in the land, we should see that it is something, after all, for a people in affliction to be praying for reviving, for this in itself is a sign of grace; to cry like this to God brings one into a state of spiritual awareness, in which one is able to hear the voice of God. So often, we are not close enough to Him to hear what He is saying. This is often why the heavens seem to be as brass to us. But when, through prayer and burden we are exercised, our ears are opened to hear things we would not hear otherwise. What the Psalmist heard will be the theme of the next Note.

107)*Psalm 85*

What a word it is that this waiting and trusting saint hears and receives from the Lord! It is the promise and assurance that revival and renewal will come (8). This is the answer to the prayer in 6, 'Wilt thou not revive us again...'. Some scholars take 9ff as a prophetic utterance stating what would happen from God in the fulness of the time. It is true, of course, that the striking words in 10,11 about mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, find their fulfilment in Christ and His atoning work, and that in the last analysis what the Psalmist looks forward to - that is the Golden Age - is consummated in Him and brought about by Him. But in its immediate reference, in the answer it gives to the prayer of the Psalmist these 'graces' are the 'gifts' that accompany the coming of the glory of God upon the land. Mercy, truth, righteousness, peace - what a need for these things in the world, in our society today - in industry, in politics, in the media, in public life. For this we should surely pray, 'Wilt Thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?'

108)*Psalm 86*

This is a very personal Psalm, and very different in substance and emphasis from the previous note. It is a measure of the comprehensiveness of the Psalter that it should so substantially ring the changes in the themes with which it deals. Here, it is personal need that is in view. The first thing one becomes conscious of in reading it is the familiarity of the sentiments it expresses, and the language in which they are expressed. As Maclaren says, it is 'little more than a mosaic of quotations and familiar phrases of petition'. Two lessons emerge here at the outset: one is in the use of Scripture in the time of need and distress. What an immense practical value it is to have the Word of God in our hearts against a time of need - for strength and encouragement as well as for the provision of prayer-language in which to put our requests to God. The other point is that in using the language and words of others, the Psalmist is not simply copying or imitating, but rather sharing the experience of others in the communion of the saints which is itself a means of grace and encouragement (cf 'companion in tribulation' in Revelation 1:9). And simply to use words that have already been on previous occasions used in prayer - and answered! - is an expression of faith and confidence on the part of those who use them.

The Psalm divides into three stanzas: 1-5 give the Psalmist's petitions; 6-13 unfold the power and majesty of God; and 14-17, the Psalmist's predicament set against the background of Divine power.

109)*Psalm 86*

In the first stanza two things are to be noted: the Psalmist's petitions, and the pleas on which they are raised. The petitions are in sequence: 'bow down...' (1); 'preserve...' (2); 'be merciful...' (3); 'rejoice the soul...' (4). The first of these reminds us of Malachi 3:16, 'The Lord hearkened and heard...' - that is, He pricked up his ears at the sound of their speaking, and bent down so as not to miss a single word of all they were saying, so precious it was to Him. This is the idea behind the petition, and it is a wonderfully comforting one, that in time of need there should be such a God at hand to help us. With the other petitions in 2 or 3, it becomes understandable that the Psalmist should ask God to 'gladden' his soul, for if such petitions were heard, that would be the inevitable result. The pleas in these verses -and there are five in all - are each introduced by 'For'. It is perhaps not without significance that in the first three the emphasis is upon the Psalmist himself, whereas in the other two he passes from the consciousness of his own need to God and His grace and power. It is when his mind is fixed on the character of God that he really gets on to praying ground. In the last analysis, and greater than any need in our hearts, we can plead what He is in Himself, and all that lies in the name of the Lord.

110)*Psalm 86*

In the second stanza (6-13) the Psalmist, having got his eyes and his thoughts lifted to God, becomes arrested and gripped by what he sees in Him, and in spite of himself is drawn more and more to the Power presiding in the Name of God, drawing him away from his self-preoccupation to contemplate the Divine majesty. This is how God answers prayer - and He answers us first, before He answers our petitions. This is a very important consideration: the necessity is always to get a proper perspective on the situation. Let God be God: then speak of one's need. As Maclaren puts it, 'The thought of God's sovereign power carries the Psalmist beyond remembrance of his immediate outward needs, and stirs higher desires in him. Hence spring the beautiful and spiritual petitions in 11, which seek for clearer insight into God's will concerning the Psalmist's conduct, breathe aspirations after a 'walk' in that God-appointed way and in 'Thy truth', and culminate in one of the sweetest and deepest prayers of the Psalter 'unite my heart to fear Thy Name''. One can almost see prayer being answered as something happens to the Psalmist and in him, as he seeks a more spiritual life with God. There is nothing like pressure and 'being up against it' for sifting the soul, and exposing to us our divided loyalties. The Psalmist has become conscious that his heart had become more divided than he had realised, hence the prayer 'unite my heart...'.

And now, in 14-17, he is in a proper frame of mind to speak of his problems. They are very real (14), but now they are set against the background of the God whom he has supplicated to help him, and this is enough to draw their sting. This is what makes the prayer in 16 so meaningful, a prayer full of faith and trust, and pleading the right things. Happy is the man who comes this way in his time of need.

III)*Psalm 87*

This is a short Psalm but its message is a striking and impressive one. The words in 3, 'glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God' are well known and immortalized in John Newton's great hymn, and it is interesting and instructive to see their setting in context and therefore their true significance. Our concern must be with the Christian use and interpretation of the Psalms, and in seeking to extract a Christian meaning and significance here brings us immediately to the problem raised by the emphasis on the literal city of Jerusalem, for, of course, the relevance of this literal emphasis is called in question by the New Testament itself (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. This we have already seen in our study of Psalm 48, whose language has affinities with this one (cf 48:2). This is not to say, however, that the emphasis on Jerusalem has nothing to say to us today. For the inner heart of that emphasis remains a constant, and has abiding relevance for us. As Maclaren puts it 'The one thing that made Mount 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''. It is an easy transition, therefore, from the city to the Church of God, for it was the glory of the Church, as it was the glory of Zion of old, that God dwells in her (cf Revelation 21:2, 9, 10). This, then, is the clear warrant for putting a Christian interpretation upon the Psalm, and taking its message regarding Jerusalem to apply to the Church of Christ.

112)*Psalm 87*

Briefly, the gist of the Psalm's message is that it is an expansion of Psalm 86:9. What it gives is a vision of Zion as a metropolis with worldwide influence and significance. The dominant thought is that of a universal and worldwide acceptance of God as Lord and King, and the incorporation of 'ancestral foes and distant nations with the people of God' (Maclaren), universal participation in the blessings of God, and the mode of entrance into these blessings by the reception of new life, by a new birth ('this man was born there', 6). The first thing we need to see in this is that it echoes, and is integral to, the calling of the Jews as the people of God to be His instrument of revelation to all nations of the earth (cf Isaiah 49:6ff). We know, as a matter of history, that the Jews never realised this their true destiny, developing as they did a wrong exclusiveness which misinterpreted and misunderstood their calling; but it is true to say that the New Testament Church of God did recognise this as their calling, having at last overcome their national prejudice and seen the real meaning of our Lord's words, 'Ye shall be witnesses unto Me...unto the uttermost parts of the earth'. This is the real fulfilment of their calling to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. Only in the Church does this vision in Psalm 87 become realised. The Psalmist, then, must be understood as looking forward into the future, as a visionary and a prophet. But it is not to 'the last days' in the sense of the 'end-time' that he looks, but rather to the future in terms of the fulfilment that the gospel of Christ brings to his vision and his prophecy. This being said, we will be able in the next note to look in some detail at the statements made in the Psalm.

113)*Psalm 87*

The emphasis in 1, 2 is thought by scholars to echo Isaiah's belief in the inviolability of the Holy City (cf Isaiah 26:1-7). If so, the spiritual application is clear and sure - the eternal security of the church and people of God. It is well to be reminded of this in a day when so many things are being shaken, and when the inroads of materialism and infidelity are so considerable and ominous. The Christian Church does not work towards a possible victory: it works from victory, and the issues are not in doubt. And if the Church is inviolable and victorious, then there are glorious things to say of her! In 4 the voice of God seems to break in to the Psalmist's song, and it is as if, as he thinks of the glorious things that have been said about God's Zion, he has, through meditation on them, become enabled to hear the voice of God. Holy meditation, in other words, can open our ears to Him, and what the Psalmist hears is a declaration from the loving heart of God concerning those who will yet be gathered into His eternal city, the Church. The phrase 'to them that know me' is better rendered 'as those that know me', and the reference is to the Divine will to gather even His enemies to Himself. The change of emphasis from 4 to 5 is striking: in the one (4) it is the gathering of nations, in the other (5) it is the gathering of individuals one by one. One is reminded of the words of the old hymn, 'When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there'. The Psalm closes with a picture of the redeemed of God singing the new song with gladness and praise (cf Isaiah 35:10 for a full expression of this). The last verse of Newton's hymn affords a fitting final comment

'Saviour, if of Zion's city
I, through grace, a member am...'

114)*Psalm 88*

This is a very dark and sombre Psalm. Indeed, it stands alone in the Psalter as seemingly having no gleam of hope in it at all. The last verse is one which unfolds a terrible and desolating sense of loneliness and abandonment. One might be tempted to think that this must be the utterance of someone who has gone to pieces and is wallowing in his misery were it not for the fact that the title of the Psalm indicates the writer to have been Heman the Ezrahite, of whom we read in 1 Kings 4:31 that he was a man renowned for wisdom, excelled only by Solomon himself, and a man of stature and maturity. The dark experience recorded here therefore can hardly be regarded as the outburst of a fevered and emotional imagination, but a real dark night of the soul. As such, it has real affinities with the book of Job and the darkness recorded there. One commentator suggests that Job's words (Job 13:15), 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him' indicate the very spirit of the Psalm. We should note that in spite of the gloom God is still the 'God of my salvation'. The message, then, is about trusting God in the darkness. In 1-8 the Psalmist describes his hopeless condition. The prayer in 1, 2 is based on the catalogue of distress unfolded in 3ff. The desolating description in these verses has made scholars think that the Psalmist may have been suffering from leprosy; a characteristic feature in the treatment of this was that the victim was already accounted as dead (so 5). In 7 he thinks of himself as overwhelmed by the billows of God (cf Psalm 42:7). The fact that he attributes his woe to the wrath of God makes one wonder whether he was conscious of his own sin that has brought this predicament upon him. In 8 the picture of leprosy may again be in view, although the words may be simply metaphorical, describing the awful desolation of aloneness that comes in time of pressure. It is, indeed, a dark picture.

115)*Psalm 88*

The Psalmist speaks in 9 of the daily prayer that he has made, and this is elaborated in 10-12. For the thought here, cf Psalm 6:5; Psalm 30:9. The thought is that God's power had no opportunity of manifestation in the realm of the dead and the grave. We know, in fact, from the standpoint and perspective of the New Testament, that this is not so - indeed, we know from Abraham's experience that it is not so, for we are told that Abraham accounted that God was able to raise Isaac up even from the dead. But the Psalmist's attitude does not so much indicate a lack of belief in an after-life as simply his concern for God to vindicate His name and His servant before he dies. It is the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living that he wants to see. The final stanza (13-18) is significant for the evidences of the battle in the soul of the Psalmist, as he desperately gropes for a foothold in the darkness. There are two points in particular to note: one is the change of emphasis in the prayer he utters in 13 compared with that in 2. In 2, he prays that his prayer might enter into God's presence; now he says that his prayer will go up to meet God. This is positive, attacking prayer, and shows that there is still fight and hope in him. The other point is that he now asks why this is happening to him. This means that he sees that he is not in the hands of a capricious, arbitrary God, but One Who acts in a way moved by reason and righteousness. And as long as he thinks there is a reason for what he suffers, he is not in absolute darkness. We will point one or two lessons by way of application of the Psalm, in the next Note.

116)*Psalm 88*

One of the lessons the Psalm holds for us is this: the sentiments it expresses - the awful desolation, and the sense of being impaled upon his grief - remind one very graphically of the agonies of sorrow and bereavement. Here is an experience in which all the emotions expressed by the Psalmist are felt - the loneliness, the desolation, the agony, the sense of impalement, the feeling of finality - all are present in the experience of bereavement and loss. We learn two things here: one is that there is no easy or short-cut way out of the ache and pain of human loss for those who have loved deeply. And yet - and this is the other thing - basic faith can and does triumph; it can hold on to God even when the numbness of grief grips the soul. God is still the God of our salvation, and His secret ministrations can bring unexpected and continuing comfort and consolation. Here is a touching story that illustrates this point. An elderly couple were sitting in Princes Street Gardens, in Edinburgh. A young woman passed by them. The man followed, touched her and spoke, apologising for the intrusion, and told her that he and his wife were disconsolate over the death of their only daughter in South Africa. Something about the woman as she passed by them reminded them of their daughter. Would she, he asked, mind turning and waving to his wife before she went on her way? His wife felt that, in some way she could not explain, this would give her a measure of peace and let her feel as if she had managed to say goodbye to her daughter for the last time. Deeply touched, the woman did more. She went to the bench, leaned over, and kissed the old lady's cheek. For a moment a hand held hers. Then she walked away, turned at the end of the path and waved, her eyes filled with tears, before she walked out of the old couple's sight. God's secret care, indeed, coming graciously and gently to the sorrowing couple, and tenderly ministering to their need in such an unexpected way! When there are some pains and distresses to be borne and endured, not delivered from, this is the kind of thing that can be expected.

117)*Psalm 88*

Another dark experience to which this Psalm's message must certainly apply is the bludgeoning of spirit that takes place in those times when pressures come upon us - in the experience of depression, for example, 'when all around our soul gives way', and the sense of God's presence seems so far off. Concerning this, Maclaren finely says, 'Faith is not to let present experience limit its conceptions - God is nonetheless the God of salvation and nonetheless to be believed to be so, though no consciousness of his saving power blesses the heart at the moment.' In the numbness, when all sense and feeling of God is absent, faith must hold on to the fact of God, the consciousness of the fact that God is there, when all our feelings and senses cry out that He is not. Truth of fact, not of experience - this is the criterion in such a situation, and it is this that keeps us, and will pull us through. This is what we see in the Psalm - all through, the Psalmist is speaking to God, though he is conscious of being forsaken; all through, He is the God of his salvation, and he is conscious of that fact, though not experiencing it, from beginning to end. The word 'trust' in Job 13:15, which we earlier quoted, has the force of 'trusting in the dark', but it literally has the meaning of 'waiting patiently for God'. This is what we must do, in such a sense of desolation, 'wait till the shadows flee', in the assurance that, sooner or later, 'His loving- kindness shall break through the midnight of the soul'.

118)*Psalm 89*

This is a tremendous Psalm. Its 52 verses constitute a very considerable study, and we shall have to spend some time on it if we are to do it justice. It comprises three distinct sections: (i) a hymn to the Divine attributes (1-18); (ii) an expansion of the promise which was the basis of the monarchy, cf 2 Samuel 7 (19-37); (iii) a lament, and a prayer that God would be true to His attributes and promise (38-52). To understand the Psalm aright in the message it bears, we must realise that, impressive as (i) and (ii) are, they are but prefaces to (iii), and that it is the final section which is the important one so far as grasping the significance of what is being said is concerned. For what is said in 38-52 is based on, and said against the background of, 1-37. The contrast presented in 38ff is very graphic and presents a picture so very different from all that is said in 1-37. And it is in this contrast that the lessons of the Psalm are to be found.

It will be noticed that the title of the Psalm mentions Ethan the Ezrahite, who was one of the wise men of Solomon's day (1 Kings 4:31). Here we see something of the calibre of his wisdom, as he 'puts two and two together', and relates the misfortunes of the people to spiritual causes. The scholars point out that the foundation on which the thought of this Psalm is built is the promise and the covenant God entered into with David, and which is recorded in 2 Samuel 7, in the words of Nathan. Nathan's prophetic utterance is first of all given in summary form, in 3, 4, and then is expounded in 19-37. To read through 2 Samuel 7 makes all this very clear.

119)*Psalm 89*

The Psalmist begins - and let us remember that he is faced with a national crisis and disaster as he speaks - by announcing his theme in 1: the mercies and faithfulness of the Lord. This is the measure of the man's faith and trust that he should take this attitude - and indeed take this stand - in such circumstances. Here is a good example of the words 'Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?' This is a man who has cast anchor in the covenant mercy of God; he realises that it is an unchanging reality, and that nothing that befalls him and His people can affect it. Therefore he rejoices even in tribulation. We should note the significant statements in 1 and 2, 'I will sing...' (1), 'For I have said...' (2). It is the fact of his testimony, and his stand, that enables him to sing. That testimony and that stand is divided into two sections: in the first (6-18) the Psalmist underlines who God is and what He has done in the past; in the second (19-37) he underlines what He has said in His covenant mercy to His people.

First, then, who He is and what He has done in the past. The very heavens, he says, praise His wonders (cf Psalm19, 'The heavens declare the glory of God'). It is the wonderfulness of His being, rather than His mighty acts that is in view. This theme is well expressed in some of our hymns of praise: 'My God, how wonderful Thou art', and 'How great Thou art'. Next, the angels ('sons of the mighty', 6) praise Him, and the Psalmist, in joining in the worshipping throng, is caught up in adoration:

'Heaven and earth are full of Thee,
Heaven and earth are praising Thee,
O Lord most high.'

120)*Psalm 89*

God's sovereign power on earth is next sung in 9, 10. Indeed, His sovereign Lordship is asserted over all creation, 11, 12, and in 13 all is summed up in a wonderful affirmation of faith in His strong arm. One is readily reminded of the apostolic prayer meeting in Acts 4:24ff, with its glorious opening statement, 'Lord, Thou art God...' and, as Maclaren says, in 14 it is the moral character of God's sovereignty in justice and judgment that is extolled. Then, in 15-18, the Psalmist expresses the blessedness of those who have such a God, and have the joyful sound of such a God's presence and grace to help them. The phrase 'all the day' in 16 underlines the constancy of that grace, while in 17 there is the glad recognition that although in themselves they are weak, He their God is strong. The future tense, 'our horn shall be exalted' expresses the assurance that although at present they are cast down (this is underlined in 38ff), there will be a lifting up. As Maclaren puts it, the Psalmist is confident of Israel's triumph, because he is certain that the nation, as represented by and, as it were, concentrated in its king, belongs to God Who will not lose what is His. Maclaren also adds that the rendering of 18 in the AV cannot be sustained, pointing out that 'our shield' (RSV) in the first clause is parallel with 'our king' in the second, and that the meaning of both clauses is that the king of Israel is God's King and therefore secure.

121)*Psalm 89*

In 19-37 the Psalmist now proceeds to underline what God has said, elaborating 3 and 4, and echoing Nathan's prophecy in 2 Samuel 7. The section is in two parts, with 19-27 speaking of the promises given to David, and 28-37 those given to David's descendants. It is a very striking passage, but even more impressive is the way in which the thought in 6-18 is echoed in these verses: the greatness of God is communicated to the one whom He chooses and David developed god-likeness of character. God made him and his people invincible in the days of their obedience! Whom He chooses He will protect. One readily thinks of the words of the hymn,

'Ponder anew
What the Almighty can do
If with His love He befriend thee.'

We must pause here, if but for a moment, to underline how true these words also are of David's greater Son. Applied to the Lord Jesus, how wonderful the words of 19 are, 'I have laid help upon one that is mighty'. The whole passage gleams and flashes with light as we think of the fulfilment of these words in the Saviour. In 24 the words 'In my name shall his horn be exalted' parallel those in 17 (which see). Here is the ground of the Psalmist's confidence that there would be a 'lifting up'. In Christ's victory we are victorious! The issue is not in doubt!

In 28-37 the seed of David is in view. And the important thing here is the statement in 30ff. 'If his children...forsake...break...I will visit...nevertheless...'. Chastisement there will be, but not rejection. This is an important consideration in relation to 38-52, and is the key to an understanding of what is said there and to what they were then experiencing. God is bound by His oath: His word is trustworthy, and will never be broken. Sin does not alter God's promise - His unchanging nature makes this sure.

122)*Psalm 89*

The third and final section of the Psalm contains its real burden. The dark picture of present experience is that the people are scattered, their defences broken down, their enemies triumphant, and they are robbed of glory and covered with shame - all the things that are said in earlier verses to be impossible have happened. How can this be? In 38ff the Psalmist's remonstrance seems almost at the point of blaming God for all this. But a deeper and truer interpretation is that he recognises that it is God who has done this, of set purpose, in terms of 32. This is the wisdom of the Psalmist, to know why these things have happened, and to know that God is chastening, albeit in mercy. It is not an utter withdrawal of loving-kindness (33). It is this consciousness that lies behind the prayer for deliverance in 36ff: it is not an empty or vague prayer, but one built upon solid foundation, and having expectation of answer, pleading the covenant and the promise. Here, then, we see the value of the first two sections of the Psalm. For if God is such a God, as He is described in these earlier verses, it is not possible that despair should have the last word in the situation of the Lord's people. They are being chastened, not forsaken; and the covenant mercies will be renewed when they repent and turn to Him. This is the answer to the 'How long...?' in 46: when they 'get the message', His rod will be turned away from them. This is the message for us also, and what we must learn: when we go wrong, things go wrong; and when we get put right, things will begin to go right again.

123)*Psalm 90*

With Psalm 90 we come to the beginning of the 4th of the five books contained in the Psalter. The inscription at the head of this Psalm attributes it to Moses, man of God. One notable scholar says of this that 'the reflective type of mind here exhibited, however, suggests a later rather than an earlier date'. But this is unconvincing: it presupposes an evolutionary idea of development, which has no basis in fact. Why should it be thought that Moses could not have a reflective mind? The idea is absurd. The same scholar says that there is a 'complete absence of any reference to historical events' - yet other commentators, like Maclaren, say that 7-12 are distinctly historical, and refer to the forty years wandering by Israel in the wilderness. The godly Delitzsch holds this also, and maintains that there are many echoes in the Psalm of Moses' words in Deuteronomy, especially 32, 33. This seems a much more likely interpretation; and to take 7-12 as a historical reference to the wilderness wanderings, illuminates the Psalm for us, although it makes very good sense also to take it to refer to mankind in general, rather than to Israel in particular.

There are two ways of dividing up the Psalm into stanzas or sections. Maclaren suggests the following: (i) the transitoriness of man set over against the eternity of God (1-6); (ii) that transitoriness is traced to its origin, namely sin (7-12); (iii) the prayer that God would visit His servants is built upon both His eternity and their fleeting gaze. This is a reasonable way to take the Psalm, but there is another, to which we shall turn in the next note.

124)*Psalm 90*

The second possible analysis is similar to the first, but more detailed and it gives a real insight into the meaning and message of the Psalm as a whole: (i) God the eternal (1, 2); (ii) man the ephemeral (3-6); (iii) man under wrath (7-12); (iv) the God of grace (13-17). This serves to highlight the real thrust of the Psalm, for what it tells us is this: man's mortality and his sin are compassed about by the unchanging grace of God. And we need to think of the message of the Psalm in these terms. Its words are almost too well known, in the sense that they thereby tend to be rehearsed almost unthinkingly. They are also read frequently at funeral services, which have their own sorrows and sad and grievous associations. But, suitable as they are for this, their primary context and intention do not lie here. The following comment makes a worthy contribution to its interpretation: 'Is life worth living? For the individual it is one long struggle against forces which threaten its destruction, and the wrestler, impelled by the physical instinct of self-preservation, battles on, with the certain knowledge that sooner or later, the powers of decay will triumph.... What is the purpose of it all?' This is what the heart of the Psalm (3-12) is about. But what makes the Psalm transcend such gloom and sadness is the fact that the acknowledgement of man's transience and sinfulness is prefaced by a confession of faith, and an outgoing of the soul to God, in which the Psalmist finds in God his eternal home, and therefore his answer and his rest, and a ground of confidence of crying to Him for grace to help in time of need.

125)*Psalm 90*

The two central sections of the Psalm, 3-6 and 7-12, require some specific comment. The words in 3 may be taken either as underlining the temporal nature of man's life as being the creation of a moment before returning to the dust whence he came or as a creative word from God which replaces one generation with a succeeding one, as if to say that God causes men to die without letting them die out. In 4, it is the timelessness of God that is in view, and set in contrast with the mortality of perishable man. In 5, 6 the idea is that of early promise leaving only frustration and disappointment and disillusionment. It is the sentiment expressed in Ecclesiastes that 'life under the sun', taken by itself and apart from God, is vanity and emptiness. In 7ff the Psalmist's vision is narrowed from mankind in general to Israel in particular, a transition marked by the change from the third person to the first. The point that is made is that mortality as such, in itself, would not create this general feeling of desolation and gloom; it is its association with sin that does so. The sentence passed on a whole generation of Israel for its sin, to continue in the wilderness till they died out, is what seems to be in view in these verses. They underline the dreariness, emptiness and purposelessness that sin brings to human life. The verdict in 9, 10 is full of pathos: 'We spend our years (bring our years to an end) as a sigh (or whisper)'. T.S. Elliot's well-known words are very apposite here:

> 'This is the way the world ends,
> Not with a bang, but a whimper.'

126)*Psalm 90*

It is when we take the opening and closing sections of the Psalm together (1, 2 and 13-17) that light breaks for us. In the glorious affirmation of faith in 1, 2, we are shown that God's eternity and changelessness is the answer to, not simply the antithesis of, our homelessness and the brevity of our life. To make this affirmation is to cast anchor in a sure and safe anchorage, for it is to recognise an eternal dimension in our make up. God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV), and man finds his truest destiny and fulfilment in God. This is the Psalmist's testimony. The prayer for mercy in 13-17 is really a cry for a reversal, that is, a prayer for a complete change in the situation through the mercy of God, a turning back of the clock - and more, a going on to the new things of God. It is faith rising to challenge the doom of man with a sense of his destiny in God. 'Return' in 13 echoes the 'return' in 3, and there seems to be an echo here of Deuteronomy 32:36. In 14 the completeness of the change of mood from 3-12 is very graphic. The note in 15 seems to find an echo in Isaiah's words 'double for all her sins' (Isaiah 40:2). The association of 'Thy work' (16) with 'our work' (17) is an important one, indicating God's purposes in the world and our being caught up into them. This is the work of God, for man to be brought to this, from the desolation and sadness of 3-12.

Here, then, are the two possibilities: either, bringing our years to an end with a sigh, or lives touched with the beauty of the Lord and their work established. That is surely a gospel worth proclaiming!

127)*Psalm 91*

This Psalm conveys an atmosphere of sunny trust in the merciful care and protection of God. We do not mean by that that the sun is necessarily shining on the Psalmist, but rather that, whatever may come upon him of pressure and danger, he has found a place of quiet rest and peace, where he can rejoice in the Lord. This is the true realism: for it is certain that no one can expect the sun always to be shining upon life. Dark patches do come; and this Psalm is the answer to them.

The first thing to note is the difference in the personal pronouns used throughout it. First of all, in 1, a statement is made in the third person about God and the man who trusts in Him: 'He that dwelleth...'. Then, in 2, it is the first person singular: 'I will say of the Lord...'. Then, in 3-8, it is the third person again, speaking once more, as in 1, of God: 'surely He shall...He shall...'. (The 'thou' and the 'thy' in 5, 7 are addressed on the basis of what is said in these verses about God). Then, 9a is rendered by Maclaren and others as 'Thou Lord art my refuge' - that is, a repeat of the confession in 2. And 9b should read 'You (O man) have made the Most High your dwelling'. Following this in 10-13 we have once again the third person, expressing what God will be and do for those who trust Him. Finally, in 14-16 it is the first person, and obviously it is God Himself Who is speaking.

All this can be taken in two ways: either the Psalmist is speaking to himself, reminding himself of the truths of revelation, and evoking from his heart a personal expression of faith, or he is listening to someone preaching, expounding the bountiful provision there is in the Lord for all our needs, and that preaching calls from him a spontaneous response of faith (2, 9a). Then God Himself speaks, confirming His word to the Psalmist.

It is one thing for us to say to ourselves, or to hear a preacher say, that God is a refuge for the oppressed; it is another thing for us to respond in faith and claim this provision; it is still another thing when God Himself confirms His word to us, saying 'What you have heard is all true, I will indeed be this to you'. This is the message of the Psalm.

128)*Psalm 91*

The circumstances of the Psalm, and the kind of problem for which it offers the answer, are described by Maclaren thus: 'Its central idea is that of safety. That safety is guaranteed in regard to two classes of danger - those from enemies, and those from diseases. Both are conceived of as divided into secret and open perils'. Kidner concurs with this, while another commentator maintains that it is a testimony to how to gain protection from demons - not in formulaes or by magic acts and enchantments, but only by placing oneself under the protection of Jehovah. This latter suggestion follows the interpretation placed on the Psalm by later Judaism. There is no reason why we should not take all these interpretations together, for they are all applicable, and all find their echo in our hearts. And here is the first lesson for us: God's people are not left alone and defenceless, in face of the pressures and attacks that come upon them, whether temptation, trial, disappointment, or frustration, or direct attack from the evil one himself. There is ample, bountiful and sufficient provision for us, whatever be our need, in the God of the four Names, which underline the sublimity of God (Most High) - you cannot go higher; the all-sufficiency of God (Almighty, El Shaddai); the personal covenant God (LORD, 'Jehovah'); the God (Elohim) Who combines in Himself all the fulness of Divine perfections in their manifold powers and operations. It is this exposition and declaration that evoked personal trust expressed in 2 and repeated in 9. Several, and different, kinds of danger of attacks are underlined in 3ff, and we shall look at them in the next Note.

129)*Psalm 91*

First of all, in 3-6, the Psalmist speaks of dangers that strike suddenly and unseen, against which the strong are as helpless as the weak, attacks on mind and body alike. There is no assurance that these will not come to the trusting soul; rather, we are assured that we need not fear them, for God will protect us in them. The twofold picture of that protection in 4 - the tender care a mother eagle gives to her young, and the hard, unyielding strength of armour - is very wonderful. In 7-10 it is individual protection that is in view. What these verses assure us of is that nothing can touch God's servant but by God's leave (Kidner). In 11-13 it is miraculous protection, and we are given in these verses a revelation of the unseen host 'sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation', and who will draw all the poison from the arrows of the evil one before ever they reach us, so that any wounds they make will be clean wounds. The assurance that these verses give, taken together, cover the whole ground of life, as Maclaren says, both in moments of hidden communion in the secret place of the Most High, and in its times of diligent discharge of duty on life's common way.

The high point of the Psalm comes in the last verses (14-16), in which God Himself speaks, for in them He confirms His word and announces it to all the world, especially the words 'Because he hath set his love upon Me...'. This is the construction that our Lord places upon our service for Him, and our feeble and faltering faith and love. We often say, 'weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought...' and this may be true; but God looks on it differently. He says, 'My child you have done better than you think, and your love - poor, faint and fitful as you have often thought it to be - has delighted My heart'. This, then, is what He thinks of us! C.S. Lewis says somewhere, 'This is the courtesy of deep heaven: that when you mean well, He always takes you to have meant better than you knew'. And because this is so these verses tell what God undertakes to do for us, He is no man's debtor. Please God the encouragement of this wonderful word will bless and hearten us in the circumstances we face today!

130)*Psalm 92*

It will be noticed that this Psalm is entitled 'A song for the Sabbath Day'. This has been held by the Jewish Church from time immemorial, although there is no special mention of 'Sabbath' in the Psalm. In this connection it is significant to see the writer's emphasis - the things, so to speak, that the Sabbath is for and about - praise (1-4); meditation on the mystery and greatness of God's ways (5-9); and the assurance that comes, of blessing, renewal and refreshing (10-15). This is as good a division of the Psalm as any that could be suggested. The first thing the Lord's Day is for and about is praise and thanksgiving. It is not only right (and our bounden duty) to give thanks to God, but it is also good - good for God, in the sense that He treasures our worship and praise - it means much to Him (cf Psalm149:4) but also good for us, for it does things to us. Indeed, there is a sense in which praise is the starting point of a process, which ends with the wonderful statements in 10 ('anointed with fresh oil'), 12 ('flourishing like the palm tree'), 14 ('fruitful in old age'). One readily thinks of the words in 2 Chronicles 20:22, 'When they began to sing and to praise, the Lord sent ambushments against the enemy'. The words 'morning' and 'night' in 2 imply the times of offering sacrifice (cf Exodus 29:39, 41; Numbers 28:4) and remind us that the Sabbath is the Lord's Day, not His morning only! In 4 the source of true worship is underlined - what the Lord has done for our souls: 'to God be the glory, great things He hath done'. God's people are made glad by His works and His ways. What follows gives the reason for praise - the greatness and depths of the Divine works and purposes. This will be our consideration in the next Note.

131)*Psalm 92*

We should note the order of the verses in 4-6. The central verse, 5, expresses the wonderment and reverent awe at the greatness and mystery of God's ways and purposes, while 4 and 6 give two differing interpretations and estimates of this, 4 giving the Psalmist's and 6 giving the ungodly's. This bears witness to the reality of there being two ways of viewing the mysteries of God - as, for example, predestination: either you regard this mystery with adoring wonder, and magnify the greatness of the Divine sovereignty, or you kick against it and let it become a stumbling block. It is so with many of life's mysteries, and faith must learn the meaning of the words of the hymn,

To one fixed ground my spirit clings,
I know that God is good.

One thinks of the Apostle's words in Romans 8:28, 'We know that all things work together for good...', and his wonderful doxology in Romans 11:33ff, 'O the depth of the riches...how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out...'. By contrast, the 'brutish man' is insensitive to the truth, and his eyes are blinded to any understanding of the situation. The statement in 7 may be one of the things that he cannot understand or grasp, namely that the prosperity of the wicked is of short duration. He certainly lacks the spiritual dimension that would enable him to discern that material prosperity is transient and that the seeming immunity of the wicked to misfortune is only a temporary thing, like grass that withers very quickly. This is because God is on the throne (8) and it is this reality that calls the tune in the affairs of men. It is this assurance that gives the Psalmist his confidence and peace, and enables him to speak so triumphantly in 10ff. For if God is on high, He can raise us up on high too. We shall continue this thought in the next Note.

132)*Psalm 92*

Triumph and vindication are both included in the thought of these verses (10ff). 'Fresh oil' speaks of a renewed anointing, and the thought could be either that of renewing after passing through difficulties or recommissioning for service, or both. There is some doubt, however, as to the precise meaning of 10b, as modern translations indicate and some commentators read the idea of 'growing old' or 'wasting strength' into the original, in which case the Psalmist would be representing his deliverance as being like refreshing a failing old age by anointing with fresh oil. The imagery in 12 is very graphic, the palm tree with its 'graceful erectness' and the cedar with its 'strength and majesty' (Kidner) are eloquent of the vitality that God bestows on those who anchor themselves in Him. In 13 the Psalmist's thought is that the native soil of believers is the house of God. We should remember that this is a Sabbath Psalm. To be most at home in God's house on God's day is the secret of stability and peace, and this is something that does not cease with advancing years. As Maclaren says, 'The law of physical decay does not enfeeble all the powers of devout men, even while they are subject to it. As aged palm trees bear the heaviest clusters, so lives which are planted in and nourished from God know no term of their fruitfulness, and are full of sap and verdant, when lives that have shut themselves off from Him are like an old stump, gaunt and dry, fit only for firewood'.

133)*Psalm 93*

This is the first in a number of Psalms, which celebrate the Lord as King (cf Psalm 95:3; 97:1; 99:1). This Psalm, as one commentator puts it, 'strikes the keynote for the group; it is the overture to the oratorio, the prelude to the symphony'. Two points may be made by way of introduction, which gives a guideline as to the Christian interpretation of it. The first is that in some of the later Psalms the emphasis is on a future coming, and what these Psalms look to is the Lord's universal dominion, which will one day be universally recognized and rejoiced in. The second point is that the words in 1 here, 'The Lord reigneth' describe an act rather than a state - 'The Lord has become King' by some specific act of sovereignty. 'He has shown the world, by a recent deed, that eternal truth that He reigns. His coronation has been by His own hands' (Maclaren). When we take these two points together, we get the message of the Psalm from a Christian point of view. Commentators have thought that the specific act of Divine sovereignty may well be the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 BC. Whether this be so or not, this certainly serves to illustrate the point, for this was a demonstration of the Divine sovereignty in history. But any such act would serve to illustrate it just as well. But this, and any other manifestation of sovereignty in history is also prophetic, in the sense that it points forward to something greater and grander - the Old Testament Messianic hope for a King reigning in righteousness is fulfilled only in Christ, in His victory and exaltation. The true fulfilment, and therefore the deepest meaning of the Psalm, is found in the New Testament statements such as Ephesians 1:20-22 and Philippians 2:9-11. What is a prophetic promise in the Old Testament becomes a reality in the New (although hidden still, and perceived only by faith), and will become a demonstrable reality at the End, when the King comes!

134)*Psalm 93*

Since these things are so, the best and truest commentary on the Psalms is to be found in the New Testament, and particularly in the book of Revelation, with its glorious and comforting reference to the Lamb on the throne. It is good, therefore - and indeed necessary - to look at the thought of the Psalm in that light, for in the Psalm we have the contrast between the throne of God and His reign, on the one hand, and the tumults of life as we know it - 'the hostile scene familiar to us at ground level' (Kidner). It will be useful in this regard to read through Revelation 4/5, with their majestic message that above all the turmoil of the world ('the floods have lifted up their voice') there towers the throne of God. This is indeed a word for dark days, and when we are immersed in, and even overwhelmed by, the pressures and the darkness that surround us, it is then that faith needs to lay hold, and calmly and resolutely, by an act of will and purpose, take this assurance and be at rest; and know that no matter what may come upon us, God will turn it unto good, make capital out of it, and make it contribute to His and our ultimate glory. In this connection we should not miss the statement in Revelation 4:1, which tells us that a door was opened in heaven, for this means that prayer enters in, and help comes out; and the rainbow round about the throne is a constant reminder of the grace of our covenant God towards us (cf Isaiah 54:10 - to set these glorious words into the heart of this Psalm will surely invest it with profoundest meaning and fill our hearts with peace. This is the message of the Throne).

135)*Psalm 93*

If Revelation 4 unfolds the vision of the Throne, Revelation 5 underlines the specific act by which the Divine sovereignty is established, for it portrays the appearance of the victorious Lamb at the right hand of the majesty on high, in his ascension and exaltation. This is well described in the words of the hymn,

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

The authority of the Throne becomes effective because Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, by His victory, earns the right to open the sealed book, and therefore to rule the universe according to the plan and purposes of God. The Divine plan is made possible of fulfilment through His triumph in death and resurrection, and evil has lost the initiative in the world, and it no longer has the last word in the human situation. Christ holds the seals in His hands, which means that all the distresses, turmoils and convulsions are ultimately in His control, and therefore all things are made to work together for good to them that love God.

It is when all this is read into the message of Psalm 93 that it becomes a gloriously triumphant song of praise, matching the wonderful doxology at the end of Revelation 5, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...'. Well might the Psalmist exult in the fact that, be the floods never so great and mighty, the Lord on high is mightier than them all! 'Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!'

136)*Psalm 94*

There is a certain fitness in this Psalm following the previous one, for there is a logical sequence in them, in this respect: Psalm 93 gives the doctrine of the Lord as King; in this Psalm we are given its application. Here, the Psalmist puts the doctrine to the test. In the one the floods and storms that beset the people of God are spoken of; here we see the people of God in the midst of the floods, and how they react, and use and apply the truths of grace in time of need.

The Psalm opens with an appeal to God the Judge of the earth to punish the wicked and the oppressor (1, 2). The mere mention of 'vengeance' is enough to set the teeth of many people today, making them dismiss such a sentiment as totally unchristian and unethical, and the Psalm is thereby ruled out of court as being inadmissible as an expression of religious or spiritual values. But this is to misunderstand and misjudge the situation, as well as to misread Scripture. For one thing, the New Testament does not disavow these sentiments: the saints under the altar in Revelation 6 cry out these very words of the Psalm, 'How long, O Lord?' Paul says, in Romans 12:19, 'Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord'. And Jesus says, 'Shall not God avenge His own elect...?' It can hardly be wrong for the people of God to cry for something that Jesus Himself says and promises that God will do! There is a great deal of confused thinking in this whole matter today. One confusion is to equate this cry with a thirst for personal revenge, i.e. vindictiveness, but the two things are not the same. It is not personal vindictiveness in God, but a passion for righteousness and justice, that makes Him the Judge of men.

Another point is this: we should not assume that the Psalmist was speaking from a position of helplessness, in asking God to avenge him. He may have been; but this is not just a word for the helpless, but the acceptance of a way and pattern of life, in which one leaves things to God rather than taking matters into one's own hands.

137)*Psalm 94*

A word about the nature of punishment will not come amiss at this point. The 'humanitarian' idea argues that to punish a man because he deserves it, and as much as he deserves, is mere revenge, and therefore barbarous and immoral. Thus, as C.S. Lewis observes, 'It removes from punishment the concept of desert. But the concept of desert is the only connecting link between punishment and justice. It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust. Whether it deters, or cures, is not a question of justice'. It is not without significance that it is generally those who have departed from the classical idea of retribution in punishment that are given to advocate taking things into their own hands, in terms of violent revolution. Assuredly, something does not tie up there!

To go on: in 3-6 the evil of the oppressors is described in words and ideas very similar to those expressed in Psalm 73, and echoed many times in the Old Testament and in human experience alike. They need little comment! In 7-11, the Psalmist is reminding himself of needed truth - or perhaps the afflicted, who are doubting God's goodness and remonstrating with themselves - in the assertion that God does take to do with mankind (10): He has built His universe on moral lines, and this is how He means things will be. This is a much needed and timely assurance, which we do well to remember. One recalls in this connection the story of an atheist farmer who sowed his grain and harvested it on Sundays, and who wrote to the editor of a newspaper in the following terms: 'Dear Sir, I have been trying an experiment. I have a field of corn, which I ploughed on Sunday. I planted it on Sunday. I cultivated it on Sunday. I cut and hauled it to the barn on Sunday. And I find that I have more corn to the acre than has been gathered by any of my neighbours this October'. The editor published the letter, and added a brief editorial note: 'God does not make full settlement in October'.

138)*Psalm 94*

In 12-15 the Psalmist turns from the oppressors to their victims, and here it is all gracious consolation. We can take this either as the Psalmist speaking to them or, alternatively, the afflicted giving expression themselves to an attitude of faith and discernment. Either way, it is the assurance that when afflictions come they can work for good to them that love God, to see in them part of God's educational processes. God instructs His people, and by 'law' teaches the right interpretation of such afflicted providences. It is when we learn this that peace can come - this is the deeper 'end' and purpose of God's dealings and of His allowing the pressures to come. In 16ff the Psalmist is very personal, he is himself conscious of the pressures upon him and of what he has suffered in times of perplexity. There is a sense in which the whole thought of the Psalm is summed up and illustrated in these words of personal experience. The heart cry in 16 corresponds to that in 1, 2, and there may be a sense of rising panic in it with a feeling and fear that 'there is no one'. But past experience confirms to the Psalmist the present help of the Lord. He cannot change, for He is God. The words in 18 echo Psalm 73:2, 23. When we go down into despair or doubt of God's goodness and love we prove afresh that He is greater than all our weakness. In the wonderfully reassuring statement in 19 it is a further enrichment to consult alternative, modern renderings of the Psalmist's words: the RSV reads 'When the cares of my heart are many, Thy consolations cheer my soul'. Maclaren suggests the idea of 'divided' thoughts, alternating between open despair, doubt and faith, and this seems corroborated by the doubt expressed in 20. The Psalm ends with a final thrusting away of the dark doubt and fear (22, 23) and the assertion of faith and trust.

139)*Psalm 95*

This is one of the best known of the Psalms, and its metrical version has for long been one of the great songs of worship in the Scottish Church. A cursory glance at it shows that it divides into two main sections - the first (1-7a) a call to joyful worship, and the second solemn warning (7b-13) in a historical retrospect in which Israel's experience in the wilderness is brought before us. The fact that this Psalm, in its warning aspect, is expounded and applied in the New Testament (Hebrews 3:7-4:13) is sufficient proof that its message is not an Old Testament one relating to Israel only, but a New Testament challenge. It has something to say to us today, in our worship (7b), and the rest of which it speaks is not Canaan, but salvation.

The theme of the Psalm is worship, and it has some important things to teach us in this regard. This is our primary consideration in studying it. The first thing that comes over - and it does so loud and clear, in a literal as well as metaphorical sense - is the note of joy in worship. One commentator says that the Psalm was sung by worshippers on the way to the Temple: they had gathered together for the purpose of celebrating the Sabbath - and this is good enough warrant for us to think of our Sunday worship in church. The commentators are at one in describing the spirit of the words used in the opening verses: Kidner speaks of 'unashamed enthusiasm' and adds 'The full-throated cries urged in 1, 2 suggest an acclamation fit for a King who is the Saviour of His people'. What comes to mind are the shouts of acclamation uttered by the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. There can be little doubt that what is in view - and advocated - is exuberance in worship. And this tells us something important: it is not so much musical excellence as such, as the spirit of the music that ought to be the primary consideration in worship. The criterion is not cultural appreciation, but spiritual pulse. And, in all conscience, have we not much to rejoice in, and to make us rejoice! In 3-7b, there is a threefold reason given, introduced by the word 'for'; and to this we shall turn in the next Note.

140)*Psalm 95*

The word 'for' in 3 introduces three reasons for worshipping God: God is our King; He is our Creator (5); and He is our Shepherd (7). As to the first and second of these, the words of the well known hymn 'How great Thou art' express the thought as well as any, in the sense of adoring wonder and joy that fills the heart at the thought of all that He is, and all He shows Himself to be. More particularly, however, the idea of God as King speaks of His sovereign sway over all the universe: it is the emphasis that we see throughout the Book of Revelation, with the throne of God towering over turmoil and convulsions of the world. Also, in the idea of the Creator God, the language the Psalmist uses in 4 - 'the deep places of the earth, the height (AV margin) of the hills' - is surely echoed in the New Testament (cf Romans 8:38; Philippians 2:10; Colossians 1:16 - 'neither height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God...'). This is the ultimate meaning of the doctrine of God as Creator. For the idea of the Shepherd - 'the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand' - see John 10:1-16, and the remarkable association of ideas here in the Psalm, 'My sheep hear My voice' (10:27), said Jesus - and look at the words in 7b, 'Today if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts'. These words bring us to the second part of the Psalm, with its challenge and summons to obedience. We shall consider the implications of this in the next Note.

141)*Psalm 95*

In the context of the Psalm, which is worship, the solemn words in 7b tells us three things: first of all, it tells us that where God's people gather in His house, He is there to meet with them and He will speak to them. What an unspeakable joy and privilege it is to realise that God comes among His worshipping people! Jesus said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in My Name there am I in the midst'. O for the realisation of His Presence, each time we come together to worship! Secondly, to hear God's holy Word is presented here as one of the prime acts of worship. To hear, and obey - this is the truest worship we can offer. Worship is not mystical but moral. In the mount of Transfiguration story, Peter's words, 'It is good for us to be here' stand alongside the Divine statement, 'This is My beloved Son: hear ye Him'. In the third place, worship is empty unless we hearken to, and obey, the voice of God. Mere external acts of worship, without sincerity of heart, become a mockery and a travesty, if we fail to hear and obey. The responsive heart is a sine qua non of true worship. We should also note the emphasis on 'Today', which 'stands first with strong emphasis, to enforce the critical character of the present moment. It may be the last opportunity. At all events, it is an opportunity, and therefore to be grasped and used. A doleful history of unthankfulness lay behind; but still the Divine voice sounds, and still the fleeting moments offer space for softening of heart and docile hearkening. The madness of delay when time is hurrying on, and the longsuffering patience of God, are wonderfully proclaimed in that one word' (Maclaren).

The word 'provocation' and 'day of temptation' in 8 are given proper names in the modern versions, 'Meribah' and 'Massah', two place names from the sorry history of Israel's experience in the wilderness, linking, as Kidner points out, 'The early crisis at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1-7) with the climactic one at Kadesh which cost Moses the Promised Land (Numbers 20:1-13)' - a solemn warning indeed. Israel had so many 'Today's'!

142)*Psalm 96*

At a first reading, this Psalm is a lovely song of praise and worship. It is a Psalm, which has given us the wonderful words 'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness', and it is worthy of our attention for this alone, apart from anything else. But there is much more in the Psalm than this, and we must look at its significance, in getting behind it to see what it is saying. The Psalms in this section of the Psalter all celebrate the Lord as King, and this is a key note here also, as we see in 10, 'the Lord reigneth' (or, 'is become King'). When we studied these same words in Psalm 93:1 we said they celebrated an act rather than a state, and we should assume the same interpretation here. Some think the reference is to the return from the exile in Babylon, but any Divine act of deliverance serves to illustrate the words. Also, just as in Psalm 93, here also there is a prophetic note, which looks forward to the final consummation, and this is what gives the double message of the Psalm. But there is something else: we should notice the association of ideas between the fact of Jehovah's becoming King (10) and His coming (13). There is something important in this, in relation to a Christian understanding of the Psalm. And this needs to be looked at in two ways, which will be the subject of the next Note.

143)*Psalm 96*

What was said in the previous note about the association of ideas between the fact of the Lord's becoming king (10) and His coming (13) illustrates the story of the gospel itself. It is when Jesus is enthroned, and exalted as King, that He comes, by His Spirit, in blessing to the world (cf Acts 2:33 and Philippians 2:5ff). The sentiments expressed in the Psalm are indeed very apposite in relation to the history of Acts and the Early Church - the new song (1), the declaring of His glory among the heathen (3), saying among them 'the Lord reigneth', the general rejoicing in spirit. The sense of mission and of message is very real throughout. The gospel lights up the whole psalm wonderfully. In the second place it is interesting to note that the whole psalm is quoted in 1 Chronicles 16:23ff in a very significant context. In the Old Testament story, David is intent on bringing back the Ark to Jerusalem. An earlier chapter (1 Chronicles 13) shows an abortive attempt to do so, which incurred God's anger, because it was done carelessly and presumptuously. But the second time, all went well. And the significance of this is that David was intent on doing it in accordance with the Word of God and in obedience to that Word. David had put himself under the discipline of the word of God, and was determined to submit to its teaching. And his life was thereby changed. The spirit of worship that pulses in 1 Chronicles 16 flows from the work God had done in his heart in making him obedient. Furthermore, when a man is seeking to do God's will and live in obedience to His commands, his mind and spirit tend to become awakened to discern the meaning of that Divine will for his life, and the purpose of God for His people.

144)*Psalm 96*

David (in 1 Chronicles 16) recognises he has a message for the world, and this is reflected in the Psalm, in 3, 7, 10. This is the discernment that being in the will of God gives to a man, it gives him vision. One thinks of Isaiah 6, where we see that after the revelation of God and the cleansing that came to him, Isaiah heard the voice of God saying, 'Whom shall I send...?' Men's eyes are opened, and they begin to see the far horizons. This is surely how it was with David on this occasion. Also, it is clear from 1 Chronicles 16:12, 'Remember His marvellous works that He has done...', that God's deeds are Israel's message to the world, and this is implicit also in the Psalm. We can also look at it in this way: it is very true to say that the Lord had become King in David's own life. The Psalm is sometimes called a coronation anthem, an enthronement Psalm. Well, there has been a coronation in David's life at this point. This is the heart of everything. It is this that creates a situation in which the mighty works of God can be meaningfully and significantly told forth and proclaimed. It is this that opens the heart, awakens the vision and gives the joy and burden for the souls of men.

Finally, as Kidner says, 'The build up of repeated words and phrases (e.g. 'sing...', 'ascribe...', 'he comes...') gives the Psalm an insistent vigour (see 93:1) and contributes to the air of almost irrepressible excitement at the prospect of God's coming'. What could convey more tellingly the truth that coronation creates expectation of things happening, of days of the Son of Man, days of the right hand of the Most High!

145)*Psalm 97*

There is a sense that the message of this Psalm is similar to those that precede it - the coming of God as King. But there are differences and developments: Psalm 96 rings out the delight and joy that that coming will bring to the world; Psalm 97 underlines the awe associated with that coming; Psalm 96, the homecoming of a beloved Master, Psalm 97 the awesome approach of a Conqueror. That is one area of contrast. And we may see a development in that Psalm 97 contains a 'theophany', a manifestation of God through nature, which could be taken as a further description of the 'coming' of the Lord given at the end of Psalm 96. Common to all the 'enthronement' Psalms there is the double aspect of the reign or kingdom of God, present and future. It is, of course, true that, in general, it may be said that the kingdom of God is something that is promised in the Old Testament, and that it comes in the New, in the coming of Christ in His redeeming work. But the coming is in itself a twofold mystery, characterised by reconciliation on the one hand and consummation on the other. So that, even in the New Testament era, the kingdom is still in the fullest aspect of it a promise and a hope and an expectation. For Christ's kingship is recognised in the present time only by the Church. He does rule, even now, in the world of men and nations - this is the meaning of the vision in Revelation 4/5, with the throne and the opening of the seals, indicating that the course of history is even now in His hands - but evil is still permitted, men still refuse His rule. This is where the evangelistic outreach of the Church comes in, and this is why there is the collision of the kingdom of light with the kingdom of darkness. And this is why this Psalm is so relevant and apposite with its twofold emphasis.

146)*Psalm 97*

It is because of our Lord's coming into the world, and of His having made atonement for sin and won the victory over evil in His death and resurrection, that He is Lord and that He in fact manifests that Lordship again and again before the final manifestation of it at His coming in glory. This is the message that comes over to us in the Psalm, for our encouragement and hope. The idea of a 'theophany' runs through the Psalm from 2 onwards. It will help us to understand the point here, if we look at another famous theophany, in Psalm 18, with its emphasis on the plight of man (4, 5), the despairing cry (6), and the movement of eternity for our help (7-19). God hears our cry, and will move heaven and earth to help us - this is what it means when we say 'the Lord is King'! The contrast is tremendous: one poor mortal's need, and the mighty Divine manifestation for His help! What disproportion! But that is how important our concerns are to God.

The sense of awe is very clear in 2, in the reference to the clouds and darkness. But this is not gloom and foreboding for the believer, though it is for the enemies of God. As Maclaren puts it, 'Faith, built on experience, enters into the cloud, and is not afraid, but confidently tells what it knows to be within the darkness. 'Righteousness and judgment - the eternal principle and the activity thereof in the several acts of the King - are the bases of His throne, more solid than the covering cloud. Earth can rejoice in His reign, even though darkness may make parts of it painful riddles, if the assurance is held fast that absolute righteousness is at the centre'.

147)*Psalm 97*

The unfolding of the theophany in 3ff is something to be savoured and exulted in, as 8 makes clear; and it is this that provides the encouragement to hold on till daylight and victory come. This is the note struck in the epilogue of the Psalm (10-12). The idea is 'In view of the foregoing, this is what you must do!' And what we must do is resolutely to take a stand: 'Ye that love the Lord, hate evil' (10) - stand up and be counted! Such a stand will be costly, hence the words that follow in 10, 'He preserveth...He delivereth'. In a firm adherence to the Lord, many difficulties arise, and foes are made; but those who obey the summons to stand for Him will not lack protection. In 11, the phrase 'light is sown' has the force of 'light dawns' - it is a word used regularly of the sun's appearing - but 'sown' has its own force: the idea is that, even if the righteous are at present in darkness, God has already sown light for them, and in His time it will spring up in beauty for them, to bless their souls. If this is so, we can surely rejoice in hope (12) and be thankful to Him. One last word: we may be tempted to think that such manifestations of God's presence and power rarely, if ever, touch our experience. Perhaps if our stand for God were more resolute and wholehearted things might be different!

148)*Psalm 98*

Here is a Psalm wholly given over to praise. As Kidner says, 'Here there are no comparisons with the heathen, no instructions in right worship: all is joy and exhilaration'. The commentator Delitzsch points out that the opening and closing of the Psalm comes from Psalm 96:1, 13, and that almost everything in between is taken from the latter chapters of Isaiah (1c-3, see Isaiah 52:10; 63:5; for 4, see Isaiah 44:23; 49:13; 52:9; for 8, see Isaiah 55:12). The association of ideas is very wonderful, for if what is in view is the return from the exile, and this manifestation of Divine power in setting free His people from captivity in Babylon, then there is something indeed to sing about (cf Isaiah 49:13ff).

Let us look first of all, however, at the Psalmist's own message here. Once again we have the twofold thrust: on the one hand the Psalm speaks of an accomplished victory. God had made bare His holy arm and wrought mightily for His people. Any number of situations in Israel's history would match this statement, in addition to the return from exile. On the other hand, it will be seen from 4ff that the call to rejoice in the Lord is based on a future coming, or an imminent coming, of the Lord to judge and vindicate (9). It can hardly be doubted that, in the mind of the Psalmist, the two events are somehow linked together, and that the first is an illustration and earnest and foretaste of the second. The fact that the Lord had made bare His holy arm in delivering His people was to him an inevitable evidence and indication, a specific instance, of a general principle that would finally be manifested on a universal scale.

149)*Psalm 98*

What was said at the end of the previous Note bears a Christian interpretation, and this is its importance and relevance for us. There is a Christian fulfilment of the Psalmist's message and vision. In the Christian gospel there is also this twofold thrust: on the one hand, we have the victory of God in the death and resurrection of Christ - and of this, we can certainly use the phrases in 1-3, and invest them with a glorious new meaning. On the other hand, in the Christian gospel there is also the promise of the consummation of that victory in the coming at the end of Christ in glory. And, as in the Psalm, the first is the pledge and guarantee of the second. The implication of this is tremendous, for it means that the victory of Christ is really a victory, and as Christians we can be true optimists in the world, for evil no longer can have the last word in the human situation. We can face life with a great new confidence, in the consciousness that God can make evil work for good for His people (cf Romans 8:28ff). The rather trite phrase 'every cloud has its silver lining', which on the merely human level can be misleading and even false, bears witness to something that is basically true for the believer; for at the heart of the universe, and embedded at its core, God has placed a victory, the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and this victory has virtue to influence and condition every human situation, and if the Psalmist can so rejoice here, how much more ought we to do so!

150)*Psalm 98*

The final lesson of the Psalm lies in 7, 8: inanimate nature is called upon to rejoice with man in the victory of God. There are two ways to look at this: one is to think of the Psalmist's words in terms of a poetic and highly metaphorical extravaganza, reflecting the exuberance of his spirit. But this is to miss the real point: it is the recognition that nature itself is involved in, and shares in, the victory of God. Paul is very specific in his teaching about this, in Romans 8:20-22: the creation, he says, was made subject to vanity because of man's sin, and was tragically involved in the ruin of mankind in the fall, and now awaits with eager longing for man's redemption to be complete, for when this takes place creation itself will be blessed and rejuvenated in the final redemption. Paul speaks in Colossians 1:20ff of a 'cosmic' redemption and reconciliation: the wound that sin afflicted on the universe will be entirely healed, and God's creation will come into its own when the King comes. This is the prospect - it is as great as that!

151)*Psalm 99*

We continue in the Enthronement Psalms. The last one (Psalm 98) was one of unalloyed praise, celebrating the accomplished victory of the Lord, and its consummation in the End-time, and a consummation that embraces the whole of the created order. Here, as one commentator puts it, we pass beyond the event of the Divine victory, to grasp the eternal principle of that victory, viz. holiness. The Psalm has three stanzas, each ending with an almost identical phrase, 'He is holy', or 'holy is He'. In 1-3 it is the enthronement of holiness: in 4, 5, the integrity of holiness; in 6-9, the encounter with holiness. The theme, then, is the holiness of God. Perhaps one of the best modem comments on this is to be found in the conversation recorded in C.S. Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe':

'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe.
But he is good. He is the King, I tell you.'

Not safe, but good. He is the King! This is an important emphasis, and one that tends to be discounted and played down today, when the idea of fear is replaced by that of love: instead of 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', we have 'the beginning of wisdom is the love of God'; instead of the phrase 'In the faith and fear of Christ', we have 'the faith and love of Christ'. There is a sense in which the message of the Psalm for us is the timely reminder of the holiness of God, and that He is a God to be feared. We may not presume upon Him. This is the true biblical emphasis and it is completely consonant with the equally biblical note of the love of God, for another Psalm (Psalm 130) says, 'There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared'.

152)*Psalm 99*

The AV rendering of 1 obscures the statement of cause and effect that the verse contains. It should read 'The Lord reigneth - the people tremble...'. It is a description of the effect the glory of God has on the creation. With the best will in the world, we must surely own to a feeling of awe and fear when we see the real God intervening in human affairs. In 2, 3 it is His greatness in Zion that is in view. It is by His deeds in Israel that God's exaltation is made known. He has manifested Himself among His people in acts. This is the ground of praising His great Name. In 4, 5 this theme is continued: God's reign is based on righteousness, and He manifests righteous judgment. He governs His world in integrity. How reassuring all this is! He means that His creation will take Him seriously, and His demands for righteousness are meant to be obeyed. This is the source of our peace in face of the evil in the world. Men break His laws at their peril. In 6-9, the 'lovingness' of the living God is once again underlined, and illustrated from the ancient history of His people. The clear implication is that what He was to them in olden times He is prepared to be to us today. Three lessons are drawn from the Old Testament history for our instruction, in 6ff, the first (6) being that God is the Hearer of prayer: Moses, Aaron and Samuel called upon the Lord, and He answered them. This is one of the things that the sovereignty and enthronement of the Lord means and implies. And, as Kidner says, 'By naming the great men of verse 6 as among the priests and among the men of prayer, it refuses to place them in a class apart. We can be in their company'.

153)*Psalm 99*

The second lesson from the Old Testament makes reference to the cloudy pillar, and this is a reminder of the 'double nature' of God: the face that smiled on Israel was hot with wrath against their enemies. How could anyone be familiar with such a God, knowing that there was always this side to Him? The reference to obedience in 7b is a reminder that keeping His commandments was the basis - and it is the only basis - of their fellowship. The third lesson from the Old Testament, in 8, amplifies the manner of the Divine answering of prayer. The holy God is a forgiving God, but inextricably linked with pardon is retribution for evil. The love that will not let us go is at the same time that which will not let us off either - with anything. Pardon for sin does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin, 'penalties which are the natural results of sin, whether in character, memory, habit or circumstances' (Maclaren). As Kidner puts it, there is a 'distinction between the healing of relationships (forgiveness) and the punishment of actions (retribution on wrongdoing). So the negative lesson reinforces the positive, and is twofold: neither to despair of mercy nor to trade on it'.

The emphasis in the Psalm therefore is twofold. First, for those who know not God: He is a holy God, and He is not mocked. There is a flame that burns in Him, that is a consuming fire. Second, for the people of God: He is a holy Father, and we may not trifle with, or presume upon, Him. This is not a word for tender consciences, but for the careless and the complacent! But the last word lies with grace. Of 9b, Kidner says, 'The majesty is undiminished, but the last word is now given to intimacy. He is holy; He is also, against all our deserving, not ashamed to be called ours. Well may we worship.'

154)*Psalm 100*

The message of this Psalm, hallowed in the worship of the Scottish Kirk for countless generations, is a very simple one, with a simple message, and the commentators are quick to point out that it is very similar to the first half of Psalm 95, and reminiscent of it. It is a call to joyful worship. And, just as it was said in our earlier notes that Psalm 95 was sung by worshippers on the way to the Temple, to celebrate the Sabbath, so also here, as 4 indicates, this Psalm was sung by a procession of worshippers as they drew near to the gates of God's House. And, like the earlier Psalm, it emphasises the joy of worship, and the exuberance of hearts that really feel what they are singing. Joyful tumult of the Temple worship, the shrill cries of gladness, the loud shouts of praise, the songs with musical accompaniment - this is what lies behind so many expressions in the Psalms. There is nothing anaemic about true worship - rather, an unashamed enthusiasm, and full-throated song. First of all, then, a lesson at the outset - here is a Psalm that was pure praise and thankful worship, and nothing else. It is interesting to see the sort of progression we have in this group of Psalms that we have been studying. The emphasis has been on the sovereignty of God over against the storms and pressures of life, and we have seen how that sovereignty prevails in the lives of those who trust in Him. But here there is no evidence of any storm or pressure, no conflict, no warnings or exhortations - only pure joy. And this may convey to us the message that there are times when the tribulations of life are simply eclipsed and pass out of view, in the larger reality of God's grace. These seasons of 'clear shining after rain' are God's gifts to His people. And we should make the most of them.

155)*Psalm 100*

The Psalm has a simple structure, and divides naturally into two parts, in each of which a call to praise the Lord is given, followed by reasons for that praise - the first call being grounded in His dealings with Israel (3), the second on His character as revealed in all His world (5). The call to worship in 1 is addressed to all the earth - the whole world of men. We should bear in mind that this is sung by God's people as they make their way to His house. This means that all men are called and welcomed to the Sanctuary. The reason for the praise is now given in 3: it is the Lord's special relation to His people Israel. The words 'He hath made us' refer not to creation but to His constituting Israel as His people. The second phrase 'and not we ourselves' is better rendered, with the RSV and modern versions, as 'we are His'. We should note the change from 'ye' in 3a to 'we' and 'us' in 3b. The significance is this: Israel, God's people, calls all men to rejoice in the Lord because of His mercy to Israel - i.e. Israel discerned, in her calling and election to be God's people, a message of hope and joy for all men. This is the theme 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' par excellence coming into its own! God revealed Himself in Israel, but in them, and through them, to the world. It is, as Maclaren says, 'The conviction that mercies shown to the nation had blessing in them for all the world. This has important implications, to which we shall come in the next Note.

156)*Psalm 100*

The question that arises from what we said at the end of the previous Note is this: If there is blessing to the world through our calling as God's people, how is that blessing to be mediated to others? One answer must surely be that when God's people show a real awareness of the amazing privilege that is theirs, and show forth the sense of wonder that such Divine condescension should be shown them, this is the very best kind of evangelistic outreach. This is something that is echoed again and again in the New Testament itself, as for example in 1 John 3:1ff, 'Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us...' and 1 Peter 2:9, 10, '(He) hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light'. What comes through in 3 and 5 alike is the overwhelming reality of the covenant relationship with God: 'the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting' and when this obtains, testimony is always made. And for us, this is seen in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the wonder of His redeeming love. This is our message as Christians to the world. And when we live it, by His grace, when our lives are touched with its wonder and its glory, the message will surely get through to others. The one unanswerable argument for the truth of the gospel is life abundant, seen in the radiance of lives touched and transformed by Divine grace.