James Philip Bible Readings

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## 1) *Psalm 101*

This is a Psalm which records the solemn resolve that the King of Israel made as he assumed office under God, and it bears a message for all who would serve the Lord in His Church and kingdom. One commentator refers the question in 2 - 'O when wilt Thou come unto me?' - to David's longing to see the Ark set in Jerusalem. This would mean that the dating of the Psalm would be towards the beginning of his reign, when there was so much of the previous reign - Saul's - with its abuses and confusions to be put right. This is the new king's desire, to make his reign worthy. But David says he will take heed to himself, before he seeks to purge the land of bitter things.

The Psalm opens with a statement which does not appear to relate to the rest of the Psalm, since it speaks of singing God's praise, and there is little of the note of praise in the remainder of the Psalm. Maclaren says that the verse prepares the Psalmist's purpose for his whole life - mercy and justice (judgment). It is probably significant as an introduction to the theme of the Psalm, if it is meant to indicate and define the kind of pattern he wishes to develop, both in dealing with his own life and also with the body-politic of the nation - a wise and gracious attitude to adopt, for it surely reflects the attitude God Himself takes in His dealings with us. Then, in 2-4, we have an outline of David's resolve for himself. We could well entitle it 'truth in the inward parts', for that is what it is about - truth, straight, honourable living in private life, with nothing in which we are insincere with ourselves, or untrue to the highest we know. What is in view is a life of integrity - it is a high, austere standard self-ward - not ascetic but basically controlled and disciplined - a heart of fire toward God, a heart of love toward others, a heart of steel toward ourselves.

## 2) *Psalm 101*

The one effective safeguard in all this against any possible Pharisaism is that this standard, which the Psalmist sets, is for himself. He is not saying 'I thank God that I am not as other men', and what he goes on to say in 5-8 is not application of his own standards to others in a self-righteous way but rather an expression of his concern for 'a clean administration, honest from top to bottom' (Kidner). It is simply that he recognises that before he has any right to expect society to be clean, he himself must be true and clean. It may well be, if the commentators are right in thinking that David's longing to see the Ark returning to Jerusalem lies behind the thought of the Psalm, that his experience recorded in 1 Chronicles 13 and 15 provides an important commentary on what he says in the Psalm. For his first attempt to bring back the Ark to Jerusalem ended in failure and divine displeasure, because the way in which that attempt was made betrayed elements of carelessness and superficiality, and a neglect of the clear instructions of the divine law. In 1 Chronicles 15 things were very different, as the record of David's detailed instructions to the priests and Levites, that the operation was to take place in accordance with the teaching of the law of God, makes plain. For here was a man who had put himself under the discipline of the Word of God. It is this that we must read into the words in 2-4: here is a man whose conscience is captive to the Word of God, and who commits himself to living wholly by that Word. That is the significance of the first part of the Psalm.

### 3) *Psalm 101*

As to 5ff, it would be easy to take these verses as a charter for 'wielding the big stick' in a widespread purge of evil things. But certain things need to be said about this. For one thing, the holiness mentioned in 2-4 does not in fact necessarily express itself in widespread purges of the extreme sort. Holiness produces wisdom also, and wisdom shows great patience and understanding in its work. For another thing, the impact upon society of holy lives in the example they afford, and the influence they exercise, can be immense and far-reaching. It is significant to see that it is not gross crimes that the Psalmist dissociates himself from, but the more subtle ones of slander, superciliousness and inflated vanity. These are danger points in the work of the kingdom too! All the same, the Psalmist does concentrate on the faithful of the land - these are the ones he covets to have around him - and what a joy it is for anyone involved in the work of God to know this. We recall what Paul says to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:2) '... the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also'. These are the allies he covets, in the continuing work of renewal and reform. And what a fellowship is theirs, when they are so involved! Maclaren concludes, 'The Psalm is a God-given vision of what a king and a kingdom might and should be', and surely this has a message for every congregation and fellowship of God's people!

## 4) *Psalm 102*

This is a striking Psalm in many ways. The Psalmist is in deep distress, as 1-11 make clear, and the description of his personal suffering and the bleakness and isolation of his experience are very moving. An over-all view, however, indicates that his distress is off-set by the assurance that God will visit and vindicate His servant, and that his numbered days are encompassed by the unchanging eternity of the divine love and care. Also, the distress is interlaced with the assurance of God's intervention, and when once that assurance has been given, although the pain and distress surface again in 23, it is more quickly subdued by the reality of God's mighty grace. Not only so: the distress in 23 is different from the earlier manifestation, for it is now concerned with supplicating God to be allowed to see the answer of deliverance and not to be taken away before it becomes a reality. Also, and very significantly, in the fact that the Psalm begins with personal grief and the answer in 12ff is deliverance for Zion, we learn that the grief in 1-11 is linked with and associated with the plight of Zion, and that therefore the answer on the larger issue proves to be the answer to the personal one also. This bears out something that the Apostle Paul indicates in the famous passage on the Christian warfare in Ephesians 6:10ff, in the exhortation to make supplication 'for all saints', and the need to relate 'our' battle to 'the battle', and to know that when the battle on the larger scale is won, our lesser battles will share in the larger victory. This is the ultimate assurance the Psalm gives, that God will show mercy to Zion, and all of us, as individuals, will share in that mercy!

## 5) *Psalm 102*

With the general view of the Psalm established in the previous note, it is now possible to look at it in some detail. In the opening verses (1, 2) commentators rightly point out that there are echoes and borrowings from the words of other Psalms: for 'let my cry...' see Psalm 18:6; for 'hide not Thy face...' see Psalm 27:9; for 'when I am in trouble...' see Psalm 59:16; for 'incline Thine ear' see Psalm 31:2; for 'in the day when I call' see Psalm 56:9; for 'answer me speedily' see Psalm 69:17. This could be regarded as artificial; but it is much nearer the mark to realise that the Psalmist's mind and heart were impregnated by the Word, and that in expressing his deepest feelings he used Scriptures naturally - it was part of his life. 'They are nonetheless his own, because they have been the cry of others'. The Psalmist's plight and plaint are unfolded in 3-11 in a series of graphic images, in which the physical and the emotional and spiritual interact with one another. He is passing through the fires (3); he is off his food (4); he is unable to sleep (7); he feels isolated (6 - the pelican is a solitary bird). The reference in 10, 11 is taken by commentators to refer to a consciousness of guilt and sin, which has caused the Psalmist's trouble. Yet, there may be another possible interpretation. One thinks of Job, in similar circumstances, uttering his plaint against God for so doing to him; and at one point (9:24) he cries out, 'If it is not God, who is it?' Who, indeed? It could be the devil! Perhaps there is an element of the demonic lurking in this distress and desolation. It may not, in fact, be as dark as this in reality - it may be that Satan has clouded the issue more than he - or we - may realise. The darkness breaks in 12ff - and sometimes the very recognition that Satan is at work in it brings light into the darkness - and the Psalmist catches a vision of the eternal changelessness of God: 'I may be dying, but He is not dead!' This is the way out: the Psalmist's personal burden, and his burden for the nation, being interlocked, cannot be separated, and therefore the notion of deliverance, which comes from the vision of the Throne, is for both. Zion cannot die, nor can the Psalmist, while God lives.

## 6) *Psalm 102*

We spoke at the end of the previous note about the vision of the Throne. And how much the psalmist saw in that vision! For one thing, there is the word about 'the set time' in 13. How did this assurance come to him? Is Jeremiah 29:10 the answer, if the Psalm is post-exilic? He was, after all, as we have seen, a man of the Word! Even more wonderful is the realisation that God had been looking down to hear the groaning of the prisoner (19, 20) - this, over against the bleak desolation and aloneness of 6, 7! All the time God saw the situation. What an assurance this is, not only for the Psalmist, but for us, and for every burdened believer today!

The final section of the Psalm sees the renewing of the Psalmist's plaint - but with significant differences, for not only is it not so long or protracted as the earlier plaint in 1-11, but also such a recurrence is true to experience even in the context of having seen the vision. We are only human, after all. But even so, the plaint is full of faith, for now, convinced that God can and will deliver, the Psalmist cries to Him not to let him die before it comes to pass. And, once again, the vision brightens, as the reality of the eternity of God becomes his rest and assurance (27). For an important New Testament use of the words in 25-27 see Hebrews 1:10-12, where the Apostle applies them to the Lord Jesus. It is surely in Him that the assurances of the Psalm are sealed to us.

## 7) *Psalm 103*

Alexander Maclaren says of this Psalm: 'There are no clouds on the horizon, nor notes of sadness in the music of this Psalm. No purer outburst of thanksgiving enriches the Church'. This is surely true; but like many of the very well-known passages of Scripture, it is more often read, and savoured, or sung, than studied, and it is possible to miss its real greatness for this reason. It is good therefore to take a somewhat closer look at its message in these Notes.

The Psalm divides into four sections. In 1-5 there is a call to bless the Lord for all His blessings the Psalmist has experienced from His bountiful hand. In 6-13 there is a broader canvas, which provides the background for the experience described in 1-5. The Psalmist sees the blessings he has personally enjoyed against the background of his life in a nation that has been singularly blessed by God. In 14-18, man's frailty is given as one reason for the divine compassion. Man is so frail; God is so great! In 19-22 we see that human praise is not sufficient for the glory of God - all creation, including heavenly beings, must join in.

In the first section (1-5) the Psalmist addresses himself, to rouse himself, to shake off apathy and gloom, using mind and memory to kindle his heart to praise. Memory especially needs to be stirred: we forget so soon. The Psalmist stirs himself to some purpose here, however, and it is the sheer riches and prodigality of God's bountiful dealing with him that inspires his praise. The healing in 3 is more than physical, and includes the removing of the effects of sin from the life - all the things that 'destroy' the believer's testimony. This is renewal indeed (5). Of such renewal one commentator writes: 'The Psalmist realises that the opportunities which life offers lie before him just as they did in the sunny days of his youth; he is able to infer from his own experience that it always means a new beginning when God enters into a man's life'. Spurgeon adds: 'Why is there so little of the 'eagle' in our experience, and so much of the 'sparrow alone upon the housetop' (Psalm102:7)?' A good question indeed!

## 8) *Psalm 103*

Youth renewed like the eagle's, the freshness and exhilaration of youth, with its adventuresomeness and daring, its glow, vitality and joy - can this be possible for those who are no longer young? Yes, according to the Psalmist. But where to find this renewal? The answer to that question is given in 6-13. The significance of these verses is that the Psalmist underlines the fact of God's revelation to Moses, and through Moses to Israel. This is basic and significant in the Psalm. The Psalmist had learned all he knows from God's historical self-revelation, and it is this historical revelation which is the basis of the Psalmist's experience. A God Who had made Himself known in the history of His people as a conquering God - this is the basis of the Psalmist's, and of every man's, experience. But we need to see the implication of this. It means that all that the Psalmist has spoken of divine grace is a truth in the Word, the historical revelation, first before it becomes a truth in experience. And therefore, to find the renewal of which the Psalmist speaks, we must look to the Word, and find it there. The reference in 7 to Moses being given the revelation of God's ways takes us back to Exodus 34:6 (but see Exodus 33:13). The context is the story of the golden calf and Israel's backsliding. And, as no story surpasses Exodus for a record of human unworthiness, so also none gives a more abundant record of grace unbounded. This is where David learned the wonder of forgiveness and of not being dealt with after his sins, or rewarded according to his iniquities. He met this 'historical' God, and found Him to be the same unchanging God of grace. And happy is the man who, meeting with such a God in the Word, proves Him in his experience to be all that that Word says He is.

## 9) *Psalm 103*

Derek Kidner entitles the section 14-18, 'Fading life, eternal love', and this is a good way of pointing the contrast between the transience of human life – 'Frail as summer's flower we flourish...' - the unchanging grace and mercy of God - 'God endures unchanging on'. In ourselves we are nothing - the creatures of but a moment - yet we are 'caught up' into the everlasting mercy, and given a dignity that is unfading in its glory (cf 1 Peter 5:10).

In the final section (19-22) all creation is summoned to help frail man to sing the praises of such a God. And yet, is it right to think of man's praise as so much inferior to that of the angels? Not so. Man's is the solo voice in the choir-piece, and his is the special part. No angel can sing the song of the redeemed as man can. As Maclaren puts it: 'The rest of the universe praises the mighty Ruler; he blesses the forgiving, pitying Jehovah. Nature and angels, stars and suns, seas and forests, magnify their Maker and Sustainer; we can bless the God who pardons iniquities and heals diseases which our fellow-choristers never knew'.

## 10) *Psalm 104*

In some ways this Psalm stands as a companion-piece to the previous one: both Psalms, as one commentator puts it, are 'exuberant in the praise of God', and both have the same opening and closing. The difference between them is that while Psalm103 celebrates the mercy of God revealed in His dealings with His people in faithfulness and love, Psalm 104 rejoices in the God of creation. As Maclaren says, 'The true lesson from it is that nature, when looked at by an eye that sees it to be full of God, yields material for devout gratitude no less than do His fatherly mercies to them that fear Him'. It is perhaps understandable that Christian minds should rejoice supremely in the wonder of God's redeeming love in Christ, but they should not on that account underplay the undoubted emphasis in Scripture on the God of creation. Calvin used to say that creation is the 'theatre of God's glory'; and it is true that in the act of creation the invisible God has arrayed Himself in splendour and glory, making visible His inherent attributes. As another has said, 'The universe is the garment of God'. But we must be careful here in what we say. The garment of God - yes; as Paul puts it in Romans 1:20, 'His invisible nature, namely His eternal power and Deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (RSV). But they are perceived only by those with eyes to see. And it is a simple fact that many eyes do not see it, do not see the glory of God in creation. The words of the hymn are very true,

Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen.

It is the eye of faith alone that sees this. And the Psalmist is speaking from the standpoint of faith. This is something faith sees, and rejoices in!

## 11) *Psalm 104*

The commentators all point out that the Psalm is modelled fairly closely on the account of the Creation in Genesis 1. We may therefore suggest a picture that may serve to bring out the significance of this. Here is the Psalmist, reading his Bible. He is having his quiet time, if you like, and is reading Genesis 1. And this is what he gets out of his reading! He reads the chapter over, and is gripped by its majesty, its sublimity, its greatness of concept, and as he goes over it again slowly, the Spirit of God begins to interpret it to him, bringing out its meaning and its message. And the more its meaning comes out to him, the more his heart is kindled to worship and praise in adoration, as he exclaims, in 24, 'O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches'. But this is not nature worship, and it is not by gazing on nature that he thus speaks. It is by studying the Word and seeing nature as the Word unveils and unfolds it to his gaze. One readily thinks of the words in Job 38:4ff, 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth...'. The Psalmist has caught something of that spirit as he has meditated on the creation story. And what majestic pictures are kindled by the Word and the Spirit in his heart - the world as something God delights in, charged with His energy and alive with His presence (1-4); the world as being in His hands and in His control (5-9); God's creatures at home in His world and provided for, with only man having to work for his living (10-18); the majestic picture of the wild beasts under His control (21ff); and over all, the bounty of God - His own hand (28), and His renewal of the face of the earth (30). Is not such a God worthy of the praise of our hearts!

## 12) *Psalm 104*

The third and final lesson of the Psalm, in 33ff, gives man's response to the revelation of God. Man alone can sing to God (33). Does this reply to, and respond to, 31b, the Lord rejoicing in His works? Here, the Psalmist rejoices in God! Kidner says, 'Here alone the song was content and is meant for God, and offered for His delight'. This is the true end-product of Bible study and meditation - worship and adoration. This is the realm in which the words of 34 become meaningful. It is something, after all, when God's manifest joy in His creation (cf Genesis 1:31, 'Behold, it was very good') comes through to gladden the Psalmist's - and our - heart. How wonderful when this happens in our Bible study!

Finally, is there an allegory here, which sets forth the basic thought that, as God is able to control the forces of nature, so He is also quite able to control all human agencies that are hostile to His oppressed Church? Perhaps: and also to put into order, and keep in order, our little world! We might well conclude our study of this glorious Psalm by reading the words of the hymn 'O worship the King, all glorious above', which is based upon it. Its final verse is a fitting climax:

O measureless Might! Ineffable Love!
While Angels delight to hymn Thee above,
The humbler creation, though feeble their lays,
With true adoration shall lisp to their praise.

## 13) *Psalm 105*

This Psalm and the next are obviously companion-pieces. They represent, as Kidner puts it, 'the two contrasting strands of sacred history: the acts of God the unfailing, and of man the intractable'. Here, in this Psalm, the note of praise predominates, and the emphasis throughout is on the mighty acts and works of the covenant God, while in the next one it is more the ingratitude and impenitence that are stressed. Taken together, we get the whole picture of the Old Testament. Today, we concentrate on the bright side of the picture.

It is interesting to realise that 1-15 occur also in 1 Chronicles 16:8-22, a passage associated with the triumphant return of the Ark to Jerusalem early in David's reign, a time of consecration and dedication for the young monarch, and of his determination to order his life in accordance with the will and law of God (a fact of considerable significance, in view of its message, for it is when a man is most consecrated to the will of God that he sees most clearly what is really going on in the world, and in experience, around him). The great theme throughout is the covenant and the covenant God, and His faithfulness to it towards His people (8). The meaning of the divine will for his life - this is the awareness the Psalmist echoes, and which fills him with joy and exultation. This is what it means to be saved into purpose for life, for 'to call upon His Name' presupposes and implies a vertical relationship of fellowship with God, and therefore an entering into one's true - and truest - destiny; and to 'make known His deeds' and 'tell of all His wondrous works' means to be called into service for Him; and the praising and the singing redeem life from all that is empty and futile.

### 14) *Psalm 105*

In 6ff we have the basic covenant statement - made and sealed with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the unchanging covenant, everlasting (10) and extended to a thousand generations. We should note what is being said in these verses: God, the covenanting God, laid His sovereign hand on one man, Abraham, and his family, few in number (12) and strangers on the earth (Hebrews 11:13), and took them up and made them, not only a great nation (24) but forged them into an instrument of His sovereign, redemptive purposes in the world. And this is the point that is being made: when God calls, when God lays His hand upon a life, that life is taken up, caught up, into meaning and purpose, and into the divine energy and will for the world. That life comes into its own. And it does not matter how small, how insignificant, how unknown that life may be, it can be invested with glorious meaning and destiny. That is what 'covenant' means: it is the grace of a gracious God overshadowing a useless bit of clay and making of it a vessel unto honour and glory. It is to this high dignity (14, 15) that our worthless lives are brought. Is not this something very wonderful, and are there not many salvations involved and implied in such a staggering reality? In 16ff - and this is the heart of the Psalm's message and thrust - we are shown how that covenant worked, first of all in Joseph's life (16-22), and then in the life of the nation (23-45). On the one hand, we are given the story of Joseph, and the dark and terrible experiences through which he passed; and the most important thing said here is expressed in 20: 'The king sent and loosed him'. That is covenant grace. On the other hand, we are also given the story of the people of Israel, in all the dark and terrible experiences of captivity through which they passed; and the most important thing said of this is expressed in 37: 'He brought them forth also with silver and gold'. That is covenant grace.

## 15) *Psalm 105*

We should observe the link between these two main sections of the Psalm, 16-22 and 23-45: the story of Joseph is a kind of parable that has meaning and significance for the nation, a promissory note, so to speak, to assure the people that what God had done in the individual He could, and would, also do in the nation. We should note also, in 16-22 the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in all that happened. He - God - called for a famine! Has this got something to say to us today, in our situation of recurrent crisis? 'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?' The record of God's dealings with Egypt (27-36) is likewise a reminder of what He can do in a society that refuses His Word. And it could just be that - if there is any purpose of grace in our land at all - He will bring us low in order that, with the consciousness of being at an end of ourselves, He might raise us up again. Israel, after all, was brought into captivity because of her sin and rebellion and neglect of God, then brought out again in a glorious deliverance and made into a spiritual people. What is said in 42, 43 was true so many times in Israel's history. And if we are His at all, all that has been said about the covenant applies to us also. He has purpose for our lives - and whether it is in discipline that He sometimes puts us 'through the mill', or in judgment, there is ever the 'afterwards' of grace and blessing. Even the time when it will be true to say what the Psalmist says in 20, 37, 42 and 43. Here, then, is a word for those conscious of being under discipline: call upon the Name of the Lord (1).

## 16) *Psalm 106*

This, as we pointed out earlier, is the companion-piece of Psalm 105. There, it was the faithfulness of the covenant God; here it is the faithlessness of God's people in face of that covenant. In the one, the key note is 'Remember His mighty deeds'; in the other it is 'they forgot His mighty deeds'. After an introduction (1-6), instances of Israel's faithlessness in the wilderness (7-33) and in the Promised Land (34-39) are enumerated; in 40-46 the theme is judgment and mercy; and the Psalm closes (47, 48) with a prayer for restoration. In the opening verses the Psalmist's praise on remembrance of God's goodness (1-3) and a prayer for himself (4, 5) lead into a confession of sin in 6. It is this verse that announces the main theme of the Psalm. And what a confession it proves to be: the murmurings of the faint hearted at the Red Sea (7-12), the lusting for food (13-15), the revolt of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (16-18), the golden calf (19-23), the refusal to go into the land at Kadesh (24-27), Baal-Peor and Baalim (28-31), the waters of Meribah (32, 33), the disobedience of the divine command to destroy the nations when they had entered the land (34, 35), and their involvement in idol worship (36-39). Not to spend time looking in detail at these episodes and learn many lessons from them; our concern from this study is more to grasp the message as a whole, and see what it is saying to us. The first lesson we may gather is that here is an inspired commentary on Old Testament history; and it is of enormous value to study the Old Testament with this kind of key. Several of the Psalms have such an emphasis, and as such are worth their weight in gold (cf also Stephen's apology in Acts 7 and Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament in Acts 13). We are wise to place such an interpretation on Scripture and to be able to see it like this.

### 17) *Psalm 106*

The second lesson that we may learn from this Psalm is that to be able to have such an interpretation of the Old Testament as this Psalm does one has to know the Bible at depth. This is where long familiarity with Scripture is so important and essential for the Christian if we are going to be able to gather the lessons it holds for us. The present writer can recall the experience of reading the Old Testament during the war years in India - there was little else available to read except the Scriptures - and the revelation that came in the study and mastery of the Old Testament period of the Kings. This is how he came to the point where he could really say, 'The Bible speaks today'. This is not something that takes place over a week or two; it is a life-long study, ever-deepening, it is built into us like second nature.

Another lesson is this: the kind of message that this has for us is a twofold one. On the one hand it has application on a national level. Is there any way in which we are able to interpret our national history in this way? The trouble with Israel, as with us, is that so often they did not see this is what they were doing. They had no insight. And it needed this revelation to, and through, the Psalmist, to make them aware of it. As do we! One has only to look at the history of the 20th century, to go no further back than that, to see the truth of this. The First World War - the war to end wars - taught lessons that were alas unlearned. There might have been awakening and renewal, but the opportunity was lost. And World War II came. And afterwards, what opportunity there was! But we lost the peace - and look at the country now. Nationally, we need to take a tumble to ourselves; we need an incisive, prophetic voice to interpret history to us, in the light of the Word of God.

## 18) *Psalm 106*

What is true on the national scene is just as true on the individual and personal level. It is also possible to have blinkers on in this realm, and not to be aware of the pattern that is evolving in our own personal lives. Does not the message of the Psalm make us say, 'Is the story of my life like this? Is this how it is with me, Lord?' Just as, in the history of God's people of old, one of the most desolating features of that tortuous story is the repetition of the same sins and rebellions in succeeding generations, prompting the question, 'Do they never learn?', so also in personal life it is not so much the fact that we sin and fall as that with almost monotonous regularity we make the same mistakes and sin the same sins again and again, prompting the same question, 'Do we never learn?' This is the kind of lesson Paul draws from Old Testament history in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14 where he solemnly reminds us that 'all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:11, 12). Well might the Psalmist conclude with the prayer in 47, 'Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto Thy holy Name'!

The doxology in 48 provides a fitting close to the fourth book of the Psalter.

## 19) *Psalm 107*

With this psalm we begin the fifth and final Book in the Psalter, which opens on a key note of thanksgiving and praise, as Israel, God's people, are summoned to acknowledge with grateful hearts God's unchanging loving-kindness toward them (1-3). In 4-32 a series of four pictures is unfolded of 'the loving Providence which delivers, in all varieties of peril and calamity, those who cry to God', with the divine sovereignty implied throughout. A kind of code follows in 33-43, in which that sovereignty is implicitly stated. God is on the throne, and He has the whole world in His hand, powers and superpowers included; and there is not a crisis anywhere which is not in His control and under His direction. It is because this is so that the implications underlined in this Psalm are true - or, to put it another way, they are true because this also is true. There is something awesome, but very salutary, in the knowledge that, as 25 puts it, 'He commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind'. It is this that gives force to the lesson the pictures in 4-32 give, underlining four kinds of human predicaments and four divine interventions. If anything is clear from the Psalm, it is the folly of neglecting God and the things of God, on the one hand, and on the other, the immensely hopeful results of seeking God in national life. Well might the Psalmist cry out, 'Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!' (8, 15, 21, 31). Nor should we forget that the Psalmist is speaking from the standpoint of the Lord's deliverance. He could not have written and sung this, if he had not in fact experienced the deliverance of God. He is writing and speaking from experience.

## 20) *Psalm 107*

The Psalmist's first picture (4-9) is that of lost travellers being restored to the way and being brought through the perils of their journeyings. The reference to the wilderness wanderings of Israel is very eloquent, because Israel wandered because they sinned. This is a graphic picture of life apart from God. One thinks of the secularisation of our society today, its lostness and its emptiness and its need. We should not miss the force of the 'they' in 6, 7 - it was a nation that was delivered out of its distresses. This is something God can do for nations that have lost the place and are floundering in a morass, unable to find the way forward. The second picture (10-16) is that of the prisoners being set free. Here, the captivity is explicitly related to rebellion against God and the despising of the divine counsel (11). There is a price that nations have to pay, as well as individuals, for such an attitude - darkness, toil and bondage, with no way out. And when a nation is in bondage to its own greed and materialism, its politics of envy and bitterness, it is time to be crying to the Lord for deliverance. The third picture (17-22) is that of the sick being restored to health. This is a still more graphic picture than the previous one: in addition to the bondage, a great and grave sickness is afflicting the nation, a sickness unto death (18b). But a word of hope in 20! 'He sent His word, and healed them'. One thinks of the time of apostasy and faithlessness at the end of the period of the Judges, when 'the Lord appeared again in Shiloh' (1 Samuel 3:21). The coming of the word of the living God into a national situation is fraught with infinite hopefulness. The fourth picture (23-32) is that of the rescue of the storm-tossed. The graphic words of 27 say it all - nation staggering from one crisis to another, from one winter of discontent to another, 'at their wits' end'. Does not this Psalm speak to our own national situation today?

## 21) *Psalm 107*

The tone of the Psalm changes in the final section (33-43). With the facts of divine deliverance still in mind, the underlying principles are now meditated upon. The Psalmist reflects on the changes that can take place, and often do take place, in a national situation with, on the one hand, economic growth and prosperity becoming blighted by recession because of the people's sin (33, 34), and on the other hand, prosperity returning (35-38), in terms of 6, 13, 19, 28. This, in turn, can also change, as 39ff indicate. There is nothing irreversible in national situations, either in good or ill: and what the Psalmist is insisting is that there is a moral and spiritual basis to both prosperity and recession, and that this is something that nations forget at their peril. The Psalm therefore closes with a call to all who would be wise to see these things, to recognise the moral dimension in the affairs of a nation, and to learn and be persuaded, however late, that 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain' (Psalm 127:1).

## 22) *Psalm 108*

This short Psalm is found on examination to be composed of two excerpts from other Psalms - 1-5 come from Psalm 57:7-11, and 6-13 from Psalm 60:5-12. As it stands here the Psalm is a combination of an act of praise and a battle hymn. In the first section, the Psalmist is not cowed by danger but spurred by it; in the second he is not demoralised by failure, but baffled to fight better! Both the earlier Psalms belong to David's reign, one in his pre-kingship days, when he was still on the run from Saul, the other in his ascendency and at the peak of his power, when an enemy (Edom) discomfited and defeated him unforeseenly. Here, the Psalm belongs clearly to a later period, either of David's reign or some subsequent time (Maclaren thinks it may be post-exilic). It is interesting and significant that the parts of both Psalms are the more encouraging parts, with the emphasis on the Lord's deliverance. One commentator says that 'the recent deliverances suggested to some devout man, whose mind was steeped in the songs of former days, the closeness with which old strains suited new joys'. There is nothing, indeed, very unusual about this combining of two different parts of the Psalter together for a particular purpose - the well-known devotional book 'Daily Light' does this constantly, to great effect. And sometimes we do the same ourselves, as for example combining the words of Psalm 102:13-18 with Psalm 72:17-19, in metrical version for our opening praise. Also, we might often quote an appropriate verse or two of a hymn, for a particular purpose while omitting earlier (or later) verses. All the same, when we do quote thus, it is generally true to say that the other verses which we leave out are very much in our minds. And surely it is so also, with this composite Psalm.

## 23) *Psalm 108*

When we studied Psalm 57 (from which the first part of this Psalm is taken) in a sermon, we gave it the title 'The Triumph of Faith'. David was 'up against it', on the run from Saul, yet triumphing over adverse circumstances. The battle to attain this position is graphically described in 57:1-6, and the expression of confidence in 57:3 is very reassuring, all the more so when David's circumstances are described in the verse which follows. Maclaren says, 'Two bright angels - Loving-kindness and Faithfulness their names - will be dispatched 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'. It is something indeed to be able to say 'my heart is fixed' when in circumstances of stress and danger, as David was at this time, and in the midst of his enemies. To quote Maclaren again, '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. Built into the Rock, the building partakes of the steadfastness of its foundation. Knit to God, a heart is firm. The Psalmist's was steadfast because it had taken refuge in God; and so, even before his rescue from his enemies came to pass, he was emancipated from the fear of them, and could lift this song of praise.'

## 24) *Psalm 108*

The second part of the Psalm derives from Psalm 60, which begins with the Psalmist's reaction to an unexpected defeat, which has knocked the bottom out of his world (1-4). The prayer in 60:5, which is where this Psalm begins to borrow, is one which is full of faith and hope. 'Beloved' is a word which speaks of the covenant relationship between God and His people, and there is always confidence when that covenant is pleaded in prayer. Here, in 7 cf, is the reason for the Psalmist's heart being fixed - God has spoken, and what is unfolded in these verses is an expression of the supreme authority of God over the nations of men, over Israel and Israel's enemies alike. The final verses of the Psalm (10ff) indicate that David recognises the greatness of the task before him, in the context of his ongoing battles with his enemies. In face of the assurance of God's unfailing promises, he nevertheless looks hard at the long haul before him, and he is asking, as it were, can God really help me here? Is He able and willing to do even this for me? This is where the Psalm speaks so graphically to us. There are times when we are 'up against it' (Psalm 57:1-4), times when we fall and fail, and are chastised by God for it (Psalm 60:1-4). But, in face of this, and in spite of it, it is still possible to be at peace, and praising Him - not cowed by danger or pressure, but spurred by it, not despondent because of failure, but baffled to fight better - because God has spoken! He has made promises concerning us, and has purposes for us. Will He lead us into battle (10, 11)? Will He go forth with us into the future? Ah, yes! His promises are sure. And since this is so, shall not our response be 'Through God we shall do valiantly'?

## 25) *Psalm 109*

This Psalm presents us with considerable problems, because of its central section (6-20), a passage full of imprecations and cursings. Its outline - 1-5, the complaint; 6-20, the cursings; 21-29, the prayer; 30, 31, the vow of praise - gives a striking, contrasting combination of thoughts: 'The plaint of a loving soul, shrinkingly conscious of an atmosphere of hatred, and appealing gently to God (1-5); while 21-31 expatiate in the presentation to Him of the suppliant's feebleness and cries for deliverance' (Maclaren). Taken together, these two sections, and omitting 6-20, paint a familiar enough picture, which we have seen in other Psalms, with the Psalmist under pressure, with baseless and unjust accusations brought against him. Kidner aptly entitles the Psalm 'The Character Assassin'. The depth of the Psalmist's hurt is seen in 22 - 'My heart is wounded within me'. The hurt that evil men can inflict on God's servant is often very deep and very terrible, and the clinging faith shown in this Psalm is very moving indeed, as cf 4b, 28a, 31. It is this sensitive, spiritual attitude of the Psalmist's in 1-5 and 21-31, which serves to make the problem of 6-20 even greater. How are we to square these imprecations and cursings with such a spiritual and gracious attitude? As Maclaren says, 'The combination of devout meekness and trust with the fiery imprecations in the core of the Psalm is startling to the Christian consciousness'. Because this is so, attempts have been made to 'explain away' or attenuate the difficulty, in different ways. We shall look at some of these attempts at explanation in the Notes which follow. In the meantime, however, we should not become so preoccupied with the problems that 6-21 raise that we lose sight of the deep spiritual content of the rest of the Psalm. Let us, for today, therefore, read 1-5 and 21-31 together, and savour the pathos of the psalmist's attitude. This may be a better background than we realise to our examination of the imprecations in 6-20.

## 26) *Psalm 109*

One possible explanation of 6-20 is to suggest that the curses are not really curses, but rather predictions of what would happen to the evildoers. Another is to take these verses as a quotation, i.e. the Psalmist incorporates into his song the things that his enemies were saying against him, and that he is simply repeating the terrible imprecations that they had uttered against him. Maclaren thinks these are two obviously makeshift ideas that simply cover over a difficult problem. Kidner also questions this kind of interpretation. Nevertheless some notable commentators maintain this line of interpretation including Artur Weiser who certainly is not a commentator that can be lightly dismissed. It is pointed out, in support of this view, that in 6 there is a sudden change from the plural (used in 1-5) to the singular. Also, the words in 28 'let them curse...' seem likely to refer to 6-20, and the enemies' imprecations upon David rather than otherwise. Weiser maintains that the accusation is that the Psalmist has been guilty of the death of some poor man (16), presumably by means of magically effective curses, 17ff (cf the sometimes baseless accusations brought against missionaries of the gospel in primitive societies, when they are blamed for sickness and death in a tribe) - this is by no means a far-fetched notion or idea in the service of God. On this interpretation 27 takes a new and specific meaning: the Psalmist's prayer is that God would show the enemies that the poor man's death (16) was caused by God Himself, not by the Psalmist (so Weiser). A practical lesson here in this connection is this: men of God are always very vulnerable to baseless accusation, and often helpless to prevent it. There will generally be those who will take the attitude of 'no smoke without a fire'. It is all very well to dismiss this by saying 'It is simply mud-throwing'. It may well be; it generally is; but the trouble about throwing mud is that some of it will stick and stain and mark, sometimes indelibly.

### 27) *Psalm 109*

If, however, we think the above interpretation is not satisfactory, and that in fact 6-20 are David's words, what are we to say about them? The fact is, this is not the only imprecatory Psalm. There are others, although this is the fiercest of them all; and certainly there is no possibility of interpreting the others as the words of the Psalmist's enemies. We must therefore say something about the occurrence of these imprecations as falling from the lips of David himself. One commentator speaks of the vindictive spirit that breathes throughout these verses, another of the festering hatred, gloating, undisguised, that seems to stand out in the Psalm. And this is what prompts liberals to assert that some parts of the Old Testament - such as this - are obviously sub-Christian. But we are uneasy about this kind of confident assertion - as we are about the assumption that this is a case of a man giving way to vindictive spleen against his enemies And for this reason: one recalls other times in David's experience, when he was being persecuted so terribly by king Saul, times when some of the hardest and sorest trials came upon him. And yet, in the midst of them - as witness that time in the cave, when he had his arch enemy at his mercy - he showed such generous magnanimity, even when incited by his commanders to put Saul to death. And the question we must ask ourselves is this: was David specially 'Christian' on these occasions, and 'unchristian' on this one and at other times? Were there two Davids? It seems hardly probable that he was a man who sometimes was generous and sometimes vindictive. What if these imprecations are really something else, namely the expression of a passion for justice and righteousness? One of the commentators who is most critical of the 'vindictive' spirit concedes that in the Psalmist's 'book' the enemies of the righteous are regarded also as the enemies of God. Kidner's comment is helpful: 'While giving due weight to the element of righteous anger and of rhetorical hyperbole, we see them as comparable to the outbursts of Jeremiah and Job: recorded for our learning, not for our imitation, yet voicing the cry of innocent blood which God is pledged to hear (Matthew 23:35; Luke 18:8), and thereby becoming God's mouthpiece in pronouncing judgment on the unrepentant.'

**28)** ***Psalm 109***

Kidner has a most valuable excursus on this whole subject in Vol 1 of his commentary on the Psalms (pp 25-30), in which he discourses on the substance of these cursings, their tone, their New Testament use, and their present relevance. He so rightly underlines that David's passion for justice was genuine, and not a cover for vindictiveness. Another helpful book is C.S. Lewis's 'Reflections on the Psalms', in which a notable chapter on the judgment references points out that judgment is something longed for, and to be rejoiced in, that when we think of judgment, the 'fear' element is predominant; and he distinguishes between our picture, which is of a criminal court, and their picture which is of a civil court, where men look for a triumph with substantial damages. In another chapter on 'the cursings', he points some very fine lessons, such as the experience of the natural result of hurting a human being. If the injury I inflict does this to a man, makes him so bitterly resentful, what does that make me? We have robbed the man of his humanity. And, if so, whose is the greater sin, his in uttering such maledictions, or mine whose action has called them forth? And when all is said and done, tolerance of diabolical wickedness is not necessarily the sign of a more Christian spirit than that of the Psalmist! Perhaps we need to think more deeply than we do about these difficult issues.

## 29) *Psalm 110*

The importance of this Psalm may be seen from the fact that it is quoted in the New Testament more than any other Psalm; that is one great significance that it has for us as Christians. Furthermore, the manner in which the Psalm is quoted in relation to the Person and work of Christ is also of immense significance, and it invests it with a unique quality. It is a Messianic Psalm, but, while other Psalms are also Messianic in a 'typical' sense, with their primary reference to an earthly king, this Psalm is directly prophetic of the Messiah and of Him only. It is this aspect that our Lord Himself takes up in His reference to the Psalm, and it is here that we need to begin our study (cf Matthew 22:41ff; Mark 12:35ff; Luke 20:41ff). In His conversation with the Pharisees Jesus showed them that their answer to His question about the Messiah - i.e. that He was the son of David - raised a very real difficulty, which He brought out by quoting the first verse of this Psalm, where David, He said, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, calls the Messiah his Lord. David, then, saw prophetically that the Messiah was to be exalted to the right hand of the Majesty on High, and he called Him his Lord. If so, then how can the Messiah be his son? This was Jesus' question to the Pharisees. And for them it was unanswerable. Not that it was an unanswerable question; there is an answer to it, but it was an answer they could not give, holding the views they did about the Messiah, for they thought of the Messiah merely as a human figure, greater than David but similar to him, a warlike, lion-hearted hero. But Jesus' question - and the Psalm, and indeed the gospel itself - requires the Messiah to be more than merely David's son; he is also Son of God, 'Whose goings forth have been of old, even from everlasting' (Micah 5:2), made of the seed of David, but declared to be the Son of God with power (Romans 1:4).

## 30) *Psalm 110*

The implication of our Lord's words about this Psalm is surely that David in spirit saw the completion of His atoning work and victory and the divine attestation of it (Romans 1:4; cf also Acts 2:34; 5:30ff; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25ff; Hebrews 1:13; 10:11 f). The general picture in these references substantiates the Psalmist's words in 2 about 'the rod of thy strength' going forth from Zion - it is surely that of the victorious Christ going forth conquering and to conquer. What follows in 3 is the natural and inevitable accompaniment of that picture - 'a host of volunteers rallying to their leader in a holy war' (Kidner). One thinks readily of the words of Deborah's song in Judges 5:2, 'the people willingly offered themselves'. The thought is of 'willing sacrifices' ('freewill offerings'), and this readily links with Romans 12:2 as indicating the one adequate response to the mercies of God in Christ and the gospel. It is the enthusiasm of dedicated spirits that is expressed here, and this is surely something worth its weight in gold. Of the phrase 'in the beauties of holiness' one commentator says 'For such high warfare as that which is here involved, certain moral qualifications must mark those who participate'. One thinks of the beauty and attractiveness of the Early Church in Acts - the beauty of the Lord their God was upon them. The 'dew' in 3 has reference to the willing people: there is always a freshness about them - not old and jaded, but ever young, with youth constantly renewed (Isaiah 40).

The statement in 4 about the 'priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' almost interrupts the flow of the Psalm, with 5-7 continuing the picture of the warfare and warriors and we shall make some comment on this in the next Note.

## 31) *Psalm 110*

The Messiah is not only a King, He is a Priest also. But why is this emphasised here? Could it be that there is a reference to the fact that what is said in 3 is an ideal picture, which is not always realised in experience - and that therefore it is always needful to remember that we need the priestly mediation of Christ to forgive us and cleanse us and renew in us that willing spirit of dedication and commitment. One commentator suggests that David wrote this Psalm after his great sin, when he was made conscious of his need of priestly mediation (Psalm 51: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me', cf also Hebrews 5:5-10; 6:19-7:28).

The description of the successful warfare is continued in 5-7. We should note especially the words in 5 'The Lord at thy right hand', and compare them with what is said in 1 'At My right hand'. The two statements are complementary aspects of the same truth. It is because Christ is at the right hand of the majesty on high, pleading our cause that He by His Holy Spirit is ever at our right hand, to aid us in the strife and make us more than conquerors through His deathless love. The spiritual life is a battle, not a bed of roses; but in the King's army it is a high privilege and honour to serve, and by His grace we fight not for, but from, victory. Derek Kidner's final comment on the Psalm is worth noting: 'But the Psalm, by its very form, recalls us to a situation still in movement. We are left with the picture of the Warrior following up his victory, like Gideon and his three hundred at the Jordan, 'faint yet pursuing' (Judges 8:4), pausing only to renew his strength and press on to complete the rout. Such is the leader, we are to infer, who beckons us to follow.'

## 32) *Psalm 111*

The phrase in the opening verse of this Psalm - 'with my whole heart' - gives us a clue as to how to look at it. This is how we should worship and praise God (it corresponds with Psalm 103:1 'all that is within me bless His holy Name') and this is what wholehearted praise should be like as to its content. The Psalm is strangely and impressively similar in content and message to the Christmas songs in Luke 1/2, and especially to the Benedictus (Luke 1:68ff) - one has only to read this to see the common emphasis, the visitation, the redemption, the mercy promised to our fathers, and above all, the covenant and the grace and compassion of the God of the covenant. The Psalmist first of all extols the 'works' of the Lord (2). This occupies 2a-4a. He is giving voice to the truth that God is known by what He does. In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is always the God of action. What is more, it is not so much the works of creation that are in view as those of redemption and power, as we see in 4bff. God is the God of history, and it is His works in the history of His people that the Psalmist extols. A good deal is said about these works before they are specified and elaborated: first of all, they are 'great' (2), and sought out and explored by those who have pleasure in them. This seems to mean that it is to the eye of faith that the works of God become apparent. They become a study to those who love God, in the sense that the saints see ever more deeply into His ways. This is just as true if we take the 'works' to refer to the creation, for it is the man whose eyes have been opened by grace who can see God's glory in nature. As the hymn says 'something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen'.

## 33) *Psalm 111*

The next reference to God's work is that it is 'honourable and glorious' (3). Maclaren says, 'What was at first but dimly apprehended as 'great' resolves itself, as we look; and, first, 'Honour and majesty', the splendour of His reflected character, shine out from His deeds, and then, when still more deeply they are pondered, the central fact of their righteousness, their conformity to the highest standard of rectitude, becomes patent.' Well might the Psalmist say that these divine works are to be remembered, and never to be forgotten. The word 'memorable' in its classical meaning is the real idea here: God works in such a way that what He does is not soon or easily forgotten, and the wonder of it engages the thought of His people from generation to generation. In 4b-7a the 'works' are specified. There seem to be references to particular episodes in Old Testament history in the very wording of these verses: the idea of the 'memorial' in 4a echoes Exodus 12:24; in 4b 'gracious and full of compassion' is borrowed from Exodus 34:6; the 'food' in 5 is a reference to the provision of manna in the wilderness. In thus providing for them God gave a striking instance of how He was ever mindful of His covenant. It was not their worthiness that brought them this great boon, as Leopold puts it, but God's fidelity to what He had promised. The giving of the land of Canaan to His people is the next great act mentioned (6). And all these the Psalmist enumerates as 'verity and judgment, true and just' (7a). To see in these divine provisions not only the power and majesty of God, but His mercy and compassion - this is the inspiration of the Psalmist's worship.

## 34) *Psalm 111*

The Psalmist extols yet another gift of divine grace in 7b-9 - not only food and provision, not only a land for a possession, but also His law, His precepts. Here, the giving of the of the law is spoken of as something to rejoice in, a work of God full of majesty and glory, mercy and compassion - the law, both a revelation of what He is (a commentary on His acts in history) and a standard of what we should be. The Psalmist speaks of a twofold expression of the law of God in 9 - the sending of redemption to His people, and the establishing of His covenant. The phrase 'holy and reverend (dread) is His Name' in 9b is expressive of the frame of mind to which we are brought by a true attitude of praise - and, adds the Psalmist, when we are there, we are at the beginning of all true wisdom (10). On the final words of the Psalm, 'His praise endureth forever' (10b), Leopold comments, 'Those who are firm in their reverence for the Lord and in their keeping of His commandments, will have such experience of the faithfulness of God as will give them ample reason to utter the praises of the Lord forever'. This is a word for all seasons, and especially for those times when we tend to look back and see God's faithfulness. It is a Psalm to encourage and hearten our faith by showing us the nature of God's works throughout the history of His people, for He is the same yesterday, today and forever: as He gave (to the Israelites), so He gives today, to us and to our children. Blessed be His great and holy Name.

## 35) *Psalm 112*

This is a Psalm which portrays with great clarity the attractiveness of the life of godliness, and the magnitude of its impact upon society. One readily recalls the Apostle Paul's words to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:8): 'Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come'. We should note first of all the connection between this Psalm and the previous one: the former magnifies the character and acts of God, and this one, the character and acts of the godly man, with similar phrases used to describe God in the first and the godly man in the second (compare especially the third verse in each Psalm). The point of this kind of similarity is that the man of God is in a very real sense a reflection of God in the world, His image, no less (are we not to be conformed to that image, and is not the work of sanctification precisely to make us more and more like Him?) This is the dynamic concept at the heart of the Psalm, and we shall see its significance at different points as we go on with its exposition. One thinks of Paul's marvellous phrase 'magnifying the Saviour' (Philippians 1:20) - making Him bigger to the gaze of men, making Him easier to see. This is what distinguishes the godly man - he makes it easier for others to believe in God. We should note first of all the juxtaposition of 'fear' and 'delight' in 1. Real godliness, contrary to general belief, is something delightsome, and something to delight in, not a bandage or a burden. C.S. Lewis well points out that although Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, duties and rules, 'yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Everyone there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes'. Have we found out that secret yet? Or is our Christianity very much a chore, a burden?

## 36) *Psalm 112*

The implication in 2 of the words 'seed' and 'generation' is considerable. Here is what we might call the entail of grace, and the impact of godliness on future generations (cf Isaiah 58:12). We should not have little ideas of what we are involved in, in the (often) painful battle for Christian character and integrity, for this will indeed lay the foundation of many generations. This is the contribution that godly families can make to the nation, both in the introduction of standards of integrity and rectitude in society, and also in the ultimate provision of men of stature for public life. Material prosperity for the upright (3) is more an Old Testament theme than a New Testament one; but then, there are different kinds of wealth, and the homes and families of truly godly men are rich in many things, and these are riches that do not fade or change, but continue and persist over the years and indeed the generations. There are varying translations of 4: the AV rendering is admissible, and makes very good sense, especially in view of what is said in 7. 'Goodness' is no guarantee that dark times will not come. Other translations of 4, however, personalise the verse, and read it in some such way as, 'To those who fear God he (the godly man) is like a light that shines in darkness' - i.e. he becomes a blessing to other people, shining as an example to others, a living testimony to, and an indication of, God's mercy, grace and forgiveness. This will express itself (5) in beneficence, a beneficence that is a reflection of God's. This, we are meant to understand, is a principal trait in the godly man's character. True godliness does not make a man stern or forbidding, or mean-spirited, but broad, genial and warm-hearted. And it is by this that the godly are remembered (6).

## 37) *Psalm 112*

The emphasis in 6-8 is surely the stability that godliness of life imparts. One recalls the words of the hymn, 'Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blessed'. Maclaren comments, 'The heart that delights in God's established commandments is established by them, and, sooner or later, will look in calm security on the fading away of all evil things and men, while it rests indeed, because it rests in God. He who builds his transient life on and into the Rock of Ages wins rocklike steadfastness, and some share in the perpetuity of his Refuge. Lives rooted in God are never uprooted.' Spurgeon has a characteristic summing up of the substance of 7: 'The waves: 'evil tidings'; the steady ship: 'he shall not be afraid': the anchor: 'his heart is fixed, trusting': the anchorage: in the Lord.' And with all, as we see in 9, the godly man will come out 'at the other side' of the storm, strong and unchanged and unscathed - still generous-spirited and still beneficent. The Psalm ends (10) with a brief glimpse of how different it all is with the ungodly. What Maclaren calls 'The crumbling schemes and disappointed hopes which gnaw the life of the man whose aims go athwart God's will' are seen in all their pathos and sadness in this final verse. How dark, how very dark, is life without God.

## 38) *Psalm 113*

This Psalm is the first of a number of Psalms (113-118) called the 'Hallel' Psalms - the Egyptian Hallel, so called because of the great song about deliverance from Egypt in Psalm 114 - which were sung by the people of God at the three great festivals of the Passover, Weeks (Pentecost) and Tabernacles. The first two Psalms (113, 114) were sung before the Passover meal, and the other four sung after it. There is little doubt that the 'hymn' referred to in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, as having been sung by Jesus and His disciples in the Upper Room, was one of these Hallel Psalms, and that this one was sung by them at the beginning of the Feast. What a glorious - and moving - light this throws on the message of the Psalm. The Lord is high, says the Psalmist (4); yet He is lowly - how lowly is expressed in 6 and 7. And our Saviour took these words upon His lips, words pregnant with meaning for Him. One inevitably thinks of John 13:1-5: He humbled Himself - like this. Supper being ended, He embodied and exemplified the Hallel theme of this Psalm in His own action, as a prophetic parallel of what He was about to do, when 'He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross', in order to raise the poor from the dust and lift the needy from the dunghill to set him with princes. It is not possible for us as Christians to study this Psalm without seeing it in the context of our Lord's singing of it, and acting it out in the events that were soon to take place for Him - a second exodus being effected, indeed, and the blood of the everlasting covenant being shed for men.

## 39) *Psalm 113*

The Psalm consists of three stanzas, 1-3, in which Israel is summoned to praise the Lord; 4-6, in which God's exalted greatness and sovereignty in history and nature are stressed; 7-9, in which God's greatness is seen in His condescension to the poor and needy. In 1-3 the threefold emphasis on 'the name' constitutes a comprehensive summary of all that God has revealed about Himself in word and deed. 'Name' is the revelation of character and this is the source and inspiration of praise ('Hallel' means 'praise' - cf Hallelujah) - hence the use of these Psalms at the festivals when the mighty acts of God were celebrated. One commentator says 'It is impossible to read a Psalm such as this, in which the threefold mention of the name of God occurs so impressively, without recalling the words of the Lord's Prayer, 'Hallowed be Thy Name''. In 4-6 it is the transcendent sovereignty of God over history and nature that is in view. One thinks of the encouragement this would be, for example, to the struggling exiles in their attempts to rebuild Jerusalem after their return from Babylon (some commentators suggest that the Psalm belongs in fact to the post-exilic period), but it is surely an encouragement to all hard-pressed souls (what must it have meant to the Apostle Paul in the situation he describes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10). There seems to be an echo in 5a of Exodus 15:11, from the song of Moses, and 5b and 6 resemble Isaiah 57:15. The incomparable greatness of God does not, however, make Him remote or detached. On the contrary, He has a care for the lowly, the oppressed and the poor. Indeed, this is precisely the mark of His greatness, that He has regard for them in their need. More of this in the next Note.

## 40) *Psalm 113*

The reference to Exodus 15:11, made in the previous Note, is apt and apposite, for the Exodus deliverance perfectly illustrates not only the incomparable sovereignty of God in the deliverance He wrought, but also His condescension in love and compassion for His poor people (cf Acts 7:34, 'I have seen, I have seen, the affliction of My people...and am come down to deliver them'). This divine condescension is elaborated and spelt out in 7-9, verses in which we find echoes of the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Israel's restoration from exile may be in view here, and some commentators think that 9 refers to the same event, in which case the 'barren woman' would represent Israel. But there is no reason why the literal rendering should not also be taken. Indeed, in the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2) it seems clear that the literal gift of a son to Hannah is not the only thing in view, but that the wider and greater gift of deliverance to the nation is also included, and indeed linked to the other. Hannah's joy became all Israel's, just as centuries later, Mary's joy, expressed in the Magnificat, became joy to the world. Finally, one thinks of our Lord's experience in singing this Psalm on the threshold of His atoning work - here is the promise of fruitfulness and increase. As Isaiah puts it (53:11) 'He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied', and the writer to the Hebrews (12:2) 'Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God'.

## 41) *Psalm 114*

This, the second of the Hallel Psalms, is the only one of the series which speaks directly of the Exodus, and it certainly gains in significance when it is remembered that our Lord and His disciples sang it at the time of the Passover (Matthew 26:30), when another and greater Exodus was about to be accomplished. That is the first consideration in a study of this Psalm; the second is to recall to whom these words were probably first referred, namely the returned exiles from Babylon, engaged in building up the walls of Jerusalem, and apt to be discouraged and disheartened in their work. This twofold reference to the returned exiles and to our Lord serves to illuminate the message of the Psalm, and show its relevance and its thrust in a very marked way. The immediate purpose of the Psalm is likely to have been, as commentators point out, 'To encourage the downhearted people who seemed to be encountering nothing but difficulties and disappointments', and it does so by recalling the mighty deeds of God wrought in the past, and reminding them that the same God is mighty still. In 1, 2 we are introduced immediately to the fact of the Exodus, by which Israel was delivered from a people of unintelligible language. But this is mentioned particularly in relation to what it led to, for Israel was constituted the people of God by the Exodus and were given a certain status, by which they came to be God's sacred possession, His sanctuary, the place in which He dwelt. This is the end-result of the redemption wrought by divine grace. And the New Testament counterpart and parallel to this is expressed gloriously in Ephesians 2:19-22, where the Church is spoken of as 'an habitation of God through the Spirit'. If this is true, if God has come to dwell in His people, then no pressure, no discouragement, can serve finally to bring down their spirits. This is the message of the Psalm.

## 42) *Psalm 114*

The rehearsal continues in 3, 4 with the events following the Passover - the dividing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan, marking the beginning of the journey through the wilderness and its ending respectively, and by implication, all that took place in between, accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders. The message is that all their experience was bounded, from beginning to end, by the activity of a wonder-working God. It was a message to the dispirited exiles that they were encompassed by the divine love and power in all their way, and a reminder to them that the God Who had brought them out of Babylon with a mighty hand would be with them in all the hazards and pressures and oppositions they might encounter. It is the kind of encouragement that was given to John on Patmos, in the wonderful expression, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end', that is, all his experience was bounded by the unfailing Presence of the risen Lord - at the beginning and at the end and all the way through (cf Isaiah 43:1-3; 52:12). The message continues in 5, 6. The RSV seems to have the right of it when it renders 5 in the present tense: 'What ails you, O Sea, that you flee?' There is a great deal here for us, for in the use of the present tense, the Psalmist is not merely 'living in the past' as if it were present; on the contrary faith sees it all happening again in the present. That is the point that is being made. It is faith recognising - and therefore seeing as accomplished - that as He did once, so He ever does, for His people, since He is the same yesterday, today and forever. In such a faith, it is not surprising to see the exuberance of spirit and the exultation that it begets in the Psalmist. Take the exulting spirit, the Psalm seems to say, into your discouraging situation. It is the pulse of victory beating in the Psalm that is so thrilling.

## 43) *Psalm 114*

The rest of the wilderness journey is covered in 7, 8, underlining the sufficiency of the divine provision. What the Psalmist is saying to the returned exiles is: Israel of old did not lack one good thing all the time of their pilgrimage, and the all-sufficient God will not fail you either.

But we must also think of our Lord's inmost thoughts as He faced His future, to accomplish the new Exodus which would seal the new covenant in His blood. Shortly after He sang that Psalm in the Upper Room He went out into the agony and anguish of Gethsemane, and said, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death', as the crushing weight of the world's sin came down upon Him. In such a context, what must this Psalm have meant for Him, with its assurance of the all-sufficient, covenant God, standing with Him all the way through. Perhaps especially we should think of the association of ideas in what we said about 1, 2, and of Judah being His sanctuary, for this, surely, was our Lord's goal, to gather a people for His Name that He might dwell in them and among them forever. We should recall His words to the disciples in the Upper Room, in John 14:21, 23: '...he that loveth Me will be loved of My Father, and I will love Him, and will manifest Myself to him...if a man love Me he will keep My words; and My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him'. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of 'the joy that was set before him' - this is the joy, of having an habitation through the Spirit, a place and a people in whom to dwell.

## 44) *Psalm 115*

This, the third of the Hallel Psalms, opens with a well-known ascription of glory to God that has taken its place in the liturgy and the praise and worship of the church. But its exact meaning and significance, in the context of the Psalm, needs a little examination to ascertain. There are two possible interpretations: one is to take it as having reference to a great deliverance that has just been accomplished - in which case 2 would have to be given the meaning of 'what right have the nations now to say...?' (i.e. now that God has saved us). The other interpretation is to take it as representing Israel in a situation of pressure and extremity, and in that situation an appeal for help is made, not only for their sake but for His Name's sake. This second possibility seems the more likely one. The Psalm probably dates back to the post-exilic times, when the returned exiles were under pressure, with their enemies taunting them and saying, 'Where is their God?' It seemed to them, and perhaps indeed to the exiles themselves, that there was little or no sign of the Lord being with them or doing anything for them. One sees the relevance of the Psalm for the exiles' situation. But what must it have meant for our Lord, on the threshold of His great redeeming work, to take these words on His lips, for how well they fit His spirit and attitude as He went forth to do the Father's will. For the motivating power in our Lord's entire experience on earth was His passion for the will of God and the glory of His Name: 'I delight to do Thy will, O God' was His cry. How apposite, then, to sing this Psalm when He was about to go out to fulfil that will for us men and for our salvation.

## 45) *Psalm 115*

The affirmation of faith expressed in 3 is significant - whether made by the exiles in their predicament or by any other in like circumstances: God is in control, and sovereignly so. That is where their God is - on the Throne. It is this that sets the contrast with what follows in 4-8, in the caustic and sarcastic exposure of idols. We should observe what is happening here: Kidner rightly observes that the Psalmist regains the initiative from the scoffers in 2. This is salutary to remember, when under pressure and subjected to the contempt of the ungodly. And it prompts the question, 'Why should we always be so much on the defensive as Christians?' True, men scorn us, and make our stand the butt of their jokes and laughter. But our God is on the throne, and He controls the destinies of men and of nations. What have they to offer? Look at the idols they worship. It is a salutary exercise to consider this - TV personality cults, pop-idols, sports stars – these empty, clay-footed 'gods' of the modern world. And they are pathetic; look at the final statement in 8, 'They that make them are like unto them'. How true this is! One has only to look at their faces, on TV, on the street, to see the emptiness, the hardness, the coarseness, the futility of their whole lives. What a way to live!

Fading is the worldling's pleasure
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

## 46) *Psalm 115*

Over against all the emptiness referred to in 4-8 the firm and substantial trust in the living God expressed in 9ff is all the more impressive. The threefold exhortation in 9-11 makes it likely that the Psalm was arranged to be sung in parts, with sub-choirs coming in one after the other, each in turn stressing the activity of God in helping His people, over against the dumb idols that can do nothing. At 12, there is a change of tone in the Psalm: 'The Lord hath been mindful of us'. Some commentators think that between 11 and 12 some divine intervention has taken place; others that the sacrifice has been offered, giving rise to confidence. But perhaps it is simply the secret work of the Holy Spirit - as so often in the Psalms - bringing an inner peace of faith in answer to prayer, i.e. the consciousness that prayer has got through, and the assurance that God had not forgotten them - before there was any sign of the answer coming! The phrase from the hymn, 'Lost in wonder, love and praise' aptly sums up the theme of 16-18: the praise of heaven is perfect and complete, the praise of those on earth may be worthy and full, the dead cannot praise - this threefold declaration sounds the note of triumph even over death, for the praise of God's people is to continue for evermore (18). This is the force of the 'But' in the last verse: not only will death not silence the praise of God's people; that praise will continue and indeed be transformed and immeasurably enhanced in the world to come.

## 47) *Psalm 116*

This next Psalm continues to offer the same striking association of ideas as those that precede it, in relation to our Lord's own experience. He had celebrated the Passover in the Upper Room with the disciples, and uttered the memorable words 'This cup is the new covenant in My Name...'. Then they sang this Psalm in the midst of which (13) we have the words 'I will take the cup of salvation...'. It is not possible to grasp the message of the Psalm without taking note of this. Also, at the end of Psalm 115 we had the note of triumph over death; and here, in this Psalm, there is the experience of going down into the sorrows of death and the pains of hell (3, 6, 8, 15), and being lifted up and delivered. We must consider, then, our Lord taking these words on His lips as He faced His great work of atonement and redemption, and bear in mind that He Himself fed upon the Word of Scripture for His sustenance and encouragement, and had fellowship with the Father in and through that Word. The progress of 3-8, as applied to our Lord's experience is very striking, with 9 as the end-product of it all, 'I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living' - this, following 8, is surely a testimony to the reality of the resurrection. In this connection, we should also recall our Lord's words in the Upper Room (John 14:19), 'Because I live, ye shall live also', and realise that all that is said here is made over to His own as their triumph song over death (cf Ephesians 1:21ff '...Head over all things to the Church'). This Psalm is true for us, because Christ has made it true, by His death, resurrection and exaltation. Praise be to His Name!

## 48) *Psalm 116*

There are four stanzas in the Psalm, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19. In the first of these (1-4), the reason for the Psalm is given. The Psalmist records some grave peril or distress through which he has passed, and in which he cried in desperation to the Lord, who heard him, delivered him from his distress, and awakened a new response of love from his heart. The words 'I love the Lord' are a reminder that the fundamental reality of spiritual experience is not an intellectual grasp of the doctrines of the faith, but a heart-response of love to the God Who has saved us. It is not without significance that one important definition of Christians in the New Testament is 'them that love God' (Romans 8:28). There are echoes from other Psalms here, especially Psalm 18:1-6. The earlier songs were clearly this Psalmist's meditation and study, and he thought in terms of what Scripture said. How natural, therefore, that he should express his distress and his joy in the same words. The second stanza (5-9), describing the deliverance that came to the Psalmist, also underlines new discoveries made about God, a reminder that every fresh deliverance discloses something new about Him that we had never fully appreciated before (5). That is the wonder of it all. 'Simple' in 6 has the force of 'simple-hearted' - those like children in their defencelessness and vulnerability. There is a perceptive thought here: perhaps we are sometimes too complicated and unsimple for the Lord to do very much for us or with us. 'Return...' in 7 is significant: to be in trouble (6b) is to be 'away from home', and home in the Lord is our proper place as believers. The word 'rest' is plural in Hebrew, signifying the completeness of it and its many-sidedness. The Lord indeed deals 'bountifully' with us, and we receive so much more than we ask, as 8 makes clear - this is bounty indeed. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think!

## 49) *Psalm 116*

The third stanza (10-15) looks back again to the distress and trouble through which the Psalmist passed. The AV rendering of 10 is difficult. The best meaning appears to be 'I kept my faith even when I said...', or 'even when I said, I am afflicted and men fail me, I had not lost my faith'. Throughout the experience there is an unshaken centre of rest in God. One thinks in this connection of Job, who even in his darkest moments could say 'When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold'. The gratitude expressed in 12 and 13 is indicative of the expansiveness of heart that the divine deliverance wrought in the Psalmist. This continues in 14, of which Maclaren says, 'God delivers His suppliants that they may magnify Him before men.' The final stanza (15-19) begins with the acknowledgement of another lesson that the Psalmist has learned from his experience. Leopold suggests that the words 'involve at least two things: one is that He is manifestly watching over what takes place even when His saints are not rescued but seemingly perish. The other is that He frequently intervenes and will not allow them to perish. His saints can have assurance either way' (cf Psalm 72:13, 14). The remainder of the stanza repeats the thought of paying the debt of gratitude to God Who delivered him, recognising afresh that the loosing of his bonds (16) has made him the bondman of the Lord. We should not miss the significance of the phrase 'the presence of all His people' (18) - this is to be a public avowal, in fellowship with others, not on his own (cf 'with all saints' in Ephesians 3:18). Some things are too big and important for private devotion and worship, they need the company of the faithful for full and adequate expression.

## 50) *Psalm 117*

This is the shortest Psalm in the Psalter, but it says a great deal, and its range of implication is enormous. The first lesson we must draw from it is one that the apostle Paul himself draws, and uses, in Romans 15:11. It lies in the contrast presented, in these two brief verses between 'us' and 'people' or 'nations', 'us' referring to the people of God and 'nations' to the Gentile world. What the psalmist is doing is to call on the nations of the Gentiles to praise God for the mercy God has shown to His own people. It is important to see the implications of this, for it is the recognition by the Psalmist of the real purpose of God's calling of His people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. This is one of the basic and fundamental ideas of the Old Testament and indeed of the divine revelation itself. The whole point in God having chosen Abraham to be the father of the faithful was that, 'In thee, and in thy seed, shall all families of the earth be blessed'. One sees, therefore, that this little psalm is dealing with fundamental issues, and with the main overriding theme of the Old Testament. In Genesis 10, God numbers the nations and, so to speak, bids them farewell, leaving them to their own devices, while he takes up this one, specially chosen people, that through them, in the long discipline of His dealings with them, He might in the fulness of the time bring forth from them a Saviour Who would be for all peoples. It is a sad fact of history that again and again the people of God lost sight of this truth, and therefore lost sight of the real purpose of their calling to be a 'light to lighten the Gentiles.' The narrow exclusiveness of Israel at different points in their history, their contempt for the nations around them and - paradoxically - also their desire from time to time to be 'like other nations' when the point of their calling was to be different from them - all this bears witness to the tragic blindness which so often jeopardised their very existence.

**51)** ***Psalm 117***

In New Testament times also we see evidences of the same phenomenon, in the bigotry of the Jews, and indeed of the Christians themselves, in their unwillingness and inability to see that the gospel was designed by God to be for all nations (cf Acts 10, and Peter's prejudice against the Gentiles receiving the blessings of the gospel, and Paul's repeated experience of being shouted down in his preaching the moment he began to speak of the Gentiles inheriting the promises). But Paul could see what the Psalmist saw here, that the whole fulfilment of the divine purposes in the world lay precisely in the fact that the 'middle wall of partition' between Jew and Gentile was broken down in the death of Christ on the cross, and that that death effected a great reconciliation, not only between man and God, but between Jew and Gentile, abolishing the enmity between them and the 'making of twain one new man' (Ephesians 2:15). That is the first lesson of the Psalm. And when we link it with Paul's teaching in Romans 15 we see just how integral to the message of the New Testament it is. Furthermore, we must think of our Lord's use of the Psalm at the time of the Passover - it is one of the Hallel Psalms - and consider what must have been His thoughts as He went forth to His Cross, the cross that would in fact fulfil and accomplish that reconciliation, and send forth the light to all the nations of the earth. The use of the words 'merciful kindness' and 'truth' in 2 is significant. We can truly say that these were the realities that were at work in the fulfilment of the divine purposes in the world to which we have referred. Indeed, they are given as the grounds of the praise that the nations are to offer God, for it is through the mercy shown to Israel that the nations are blessed. The Hebrew word translated 'Merciful kindness' is 'Hesedh', rendered elsewhere as 'loving kindness'. It characteristically refers to God's covenant love, the love in which He binds Himself sovereignly and irrevocably to His people (for one of the most notable and moving descriptions of this love, few passages can compare with Isaiah 54, climaxing in the wonderful tenth verse. What more eloquent commentary or better incentive to praise could be found than these marvellous verses?

## 52) *Psalm 118*

This is the sixth and final of the Hallel Psalms sung at the Passover and therefore on the lips of our Lord when He went forth to die for the sins of men. It is a wonderful Psalm, and it becomes all the more rich and satisfying to study when (a) we decide its probable occasion, and (b) we see its association of ideas as it was sung by our Lord and His disciples. First of all, a word about its historical setting. There is general agreement that the Psalm is post-exilic, but there are without question echoes of the Exodus deliverance in the Psalm, as Kidner points out - 14 is a verbatim quote from the victory song of Moses (Exodus 15:2), and 15, 16 and 28 likewise correspond to Exodus 15:6, 12. There is little doubt that these differing 'times' are linked together, and that both are linked to the deeper New Testament fulfilment in Christ's redemptive work. After all, there is 'His exodus which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem' by which the building of God, 'the habitation of God through the Spirit' has to be established. Any analysis of the Psalm can only be tentative and rough, as there are a number of different divisions of it in different commentators. A useful outline to follow is Delitzsch's, under the title 'A Festive Psalm at the Dedication of the New Temple'. The picture it gives is a festive procession going up to the Temple for the celebration; 1-4, at the setting out; 5-8, on the way; 19, at the going in; 20-27, those who receive the festal procession; 28, answer of those who have arrived; 29, all together.

The New Testament associations with this psalm are manifold. Our Lord's own singing of it in the Upper Room at the Passover must have had many moving moments for Him, as 6, 10, 13, 17, 19 and 22 must surely make clear. We must also think of the use of this Psalm in relation to our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:10) the words 'Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord' are a literal echo of 25, 26 ('Hosannas' literally translated means 'Save, we pray' or 'Save now'). Our Lord's entry into Jerusalem was the King's offering of Himself, and He was rejected by the 'builders' (compare 22 with Matthew 21:42). And the stone that the builders refused became the chief cornerstone, a theme taken up in other parts of the New Testament (Romans 9:32; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6ff).

## 53) *Psalm 118*

In 1-4 (following Delitzsch's analysis) the procession to the Temple begins with a full-throated proclamation of the mercy of the Lord in a spirit of glad thanksgiving. The Psalm begins and ends with the same words (1, 29). Kidner quotes Jeremiah 33:11 as an instance of the timeless nature of this great truth, and this is surely a pointer to the way in which the worship of God's people should always be shown forth. The 'I' in 5 surely represents the nation. It may, of course, refer to a true individual experience, which reflected the experience of the nation. If 5-9 give expression to Israel's faith under testing and trial, 10-14 surely express her confidence in the testing and her assurance of the ultimate outcome of the battle. It is significant to see how this confidence developed - the words in 14 are a reference to the Red Sea victory (cf Exodus 15:2). This is the God Who has come to their aid, the unchangeable One, the same yesterday, today and forever. To look back, in the Word, to what He once did provides a sure ground of confidence in present need. In 15-18 there is the rejoicing in the victory, and again there are echoes of the song of Moses (15b, 16, and cf Exodus 15:6). The severity of the testing is emphasised in 17a, 18a, but the triumph of divine grace and power over the chastening experience is complete - life, not death, is the outcome of the testing. This is the real cause of rejoicing for God's people.

## 54) *Psalm 118*

With 19 we are to understand that the festal procession arrives at the Temple (or city) gates, and asks for admission. The picture is of a delivered people entering in to share fellowship and communion with their God. In 20 we have the answering call from within the gates. The Hebrew of this verse plainly reads 'This is the gate to the Lord', i.e. into the presence of God. The thanksgiving expressed in 21 gains in meaning when we think of its being expressed by the returned exiles, who see in the completion of the temple the answer to their prayers in exile. God's deliverance of them is reflected upon in 22ff, in the words about 'the stone'. This is what Israel's experiences mean. The application of these words to Christ, and by Christ to Himself, is striking. One recalls the jeering mockery of the crowd at Calvary, 'He saved others: Himself he cannot save'. He was crucified in meekness but raised in power; rejected by men, but chosen of God and precious. What must this have meant to him, as He went out to Gethsemane and the cross - the assurance that out of the rejection, victory would come! And - by application - surely there is a message for us also. For He entered in for us. Is not this a source of encouragement and assurance for any weak and despised minority, held of little account and dismissed by the builders of today's world. In this regard we may well say, with the Psalmist, 'This is the day the Lord hath made' even if it seems to be a day of small things. All days are His - even the most pressurised and darkened - if we are able to say 'Thou art my God, and I will praise Thee' (28).

## 55) *Psalm 119:1-16*

We come now to the remarkable 'long Psalm', comprising 176 verses. We shall try to study it and gather its message by taking two or three stanzas (or even more) together, in order to gather some general themes from the various groupings of verses. Some commentators seem to see a unifying theme throughout the Psalm, others see none, and speak in terms of a series of disconnected thoughts and statements. There is, however, one basic and fundamental focal point around which everything that is said in the Psalm revolves, and that is the Word of God. There are some eight different terms used in the Psalm for the Word, the law (torah), the revelation from God. It reminds us that revelation is not for our interest but for obedience. The testimonies - God's witness to His own faithfulness; precepts - particular instructions of the Lord; statutes, emphasising the binding force and permanence of Scripture; commandments, underlining the authority of what is said; ordinances, 'judgments', decisions of the all-wise Judge about common human situations, and hence the revealed 'rights and duties' appropriate to them; the Word, God's truth in any form, stated, promised or commanded; promise, sometimes translated 'word' (so Kidner in his commentary on the Psalms).

Why this tremendous, almost monotonous, emphasis and insistence on the Word? There is a historical reason for this, relating to the time when the Psalm was written - the scholars tell us that it is post-exilic and this has significance in our understanding of the emphasis that the Psalm makes. That significance we shall discuss in the next note.

## 56) *Psalm 119:1-16*

The following excerpt from a Holyrood Church Congregational Letter (March 1981) makes plain the historical significance of the Psalm's emphasis on the Word. 'It is a remarkable and impressive fact that in the history of God's people before the exile, even in those times when renewal and reformation took place, there seemed to be so little emphasis on the Word, in the sense of allowing the exposition of the Law of the Lord to shape and fashion the life of the nation. Apart from the time of quickening in the reign of king Jehoshaphat, when that good king established a teaching ministry throughout the cities of Judah (2 Chronicles 17:7, 9), there seems to have been little awareness of the need for such a bulwark for national life. Rather, the renewals that did take place (as, for example, the reigns of Asa, Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Chronicles 15/16, 29/32, 34/35) were all effected in terms of the re-establishment of the great feasts, such as the Passover and Tabernacles - that is to say, the new consecration of the people was expressed in a renewal of worship and liturgy.

'There are those - and there always have been those - who would settle for that, in the conviction that it meets all possible needs. But the later history of the people of God - as well as the more recent history of the Church in modern times - makes it all too plain that the restoration of worship and liturgy without the Word to undergird, direct and inspire it, becomes all too quickly subject to the law of diminishing returns: the worship, and the liturgy too, accomplish less and less, and in the end become lifeless; and we have to confess, with Isaiah (26:18), that we have not wrought any deliverance in the earth.

'This, it would seem, was one of the lessons learned at bitter cost by the exiles in Babylon, and it explains their preoccupation with, and insistence upon, the centrality of the Word in their personal and corporate life when they returned to their own land once again, as may be seen from the important passage in Nehemiah 8, and particularly Psalm 119, in its absorption with the law of the Lord.'

## 57) *Psalm 119:1-16*

It has been easy to misunderstand this emphasis on the Word, and see dangers in it and maintain that it displaces God Himself as the object of worship; but as Kidner points out, every reference to Scripture without exception relates it explicitly to its Author, and that every verse is a prayer or affirmation addressed to God. Of course this is always a danger; but there is danger in anything living, but it need not be. The recovery of the Word, in reality, is worth any risk and any danger.

The first two sections seem to belong naturally together: the first has as its subject matter the law, and the need to observe it, and the second underlines the careful study of the self. One thinks readily of Paul's word to Timothy: 'Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them' (1 Timothy 4:16). Here, 1-8 gives the doctrine to which we are to take heed; 9-16 gives the inward look to the self. The opening stanza, then, depicts the blessedness of the doers of the law and of the undivided heart, the joy of walking in the precepts of the Lord. But the Psalm goes even deeper, praising the advantage that the law of God gives to those who walk in it. It is only because they walk in the law of the Lord that they become the subject of this beatitude.

The first section stands in some ways as an introductory one to the whole Psalm stating the main thesis, as it were, which will be elaborated in various ways and in different aspects in the stanzas that follow. The elements of the blessedness are given in 1-3. To walk in the law (1) is to order one's life in conformity to its teaching. It is this that ensures 'perfectness' or 'undefilement'. In 2 'keeping the testimonies' is the consequence and the proof of seeking Him with wholehearted devotion and examination. In 3, to 'walk in His ways' is the preservative against evildoing. Then, in 4, comes the command of God, and the Psalmist, conscious of his weakness and waywardness of heart (5) prays longingly for grace to enable him to fulfil it. For, apart from divine help and grace, he must inevitably fail (6-8).

## 58) *Psalm 119:1-16*

There is, as it were, a 'question and answer' pattern evident in these verses: one voice, the voice of God speaks of a life of blessedness (1-3), and another, the Psalmist's, asks 'How?', as if to say, 'I see what you are getting at, I see a blessedness and how attractive it is, and I want to know how to find it'. And the answer is given in 9b 'By taking heed thereto according to thy word', that is to say, by allowing the message of the Word to command, shape and direct our lives. And the Psalmist's response to this answer is given in 10, 11 'With my whole heart have I sought Thee... Thy word have I hid in mine heart'. Hiding the Word in his heart betokens his determination to let the Word do all its gracious work in him, not merely cleansing him from specific sins that have marred his life, but touching the deepest springs of his being, allowing the searchlight and disciplines of the Word to make fruitful impact upon the whole of his being: in mental thoughts and habits, in emotional, psychological development, those areas of life where disquieting symptoms of unreliability and inconstancy so often appear, and which makes sustained goodness and sheer integrity of character such uphill work. This is what Paul means by the phrase in Ephesians 4:12, 'the perfecting of the saints' - bringing them into their proper condition in the mind and purpose of God. This is the Psalmist's desire and concern, to be taught of God (12), to rejoice in the Word (14), meditating in it (15), and delighting in it (16). Such was his response to the answer given in 9. Please God ours will not be less.

## 59) *Psalm 119:17-40*

The next three sections of this long Psalm can be usefully linked together in such a way as to see a clear message in them. Again, as throughout the Psalm, the emphasis is on the Word and its centrality in the believer's life. In 17-24, it is the word in relation to the insight it gives to life, and into the meaning of life. The well-known words in 18, 'Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold...' may be taken as the central half of the section. It is a prayer for illumination, for insight. In 17, we already see this insight at work, in the prayer with which the section opens. The Psalmist is expressing something he has discovered about real life, which is possible only in and through the mercy and grace of God. It is when a man is dealt bountifully with by God that he begins to live in the real sense of the term. This is life, he means, to live day by day in obedience to the Word of God. And this is a great discovery to make. 18 and 19 are linked together in their emphasis on subjective illumination and objective revelation respectively. Opened eyes are useless if the commandments are hidden, and the disclosure of the latter is in vain, unless there are eyes to see them. Scales cover our spiritual vision which only God can take away, and His revelation has in its depths truths and treasures which can only be discerned by His help. The phrase in 19, 'stranger on the earth' bears witness to the consciousness of being an exile on earth. And it is the word that brings us both the consciousness of what this feeling is, and how it can be assuaged. God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and only God can meet the deep in us. In this consciousness, the Word is paramount, for in it God meets with us, and assuages the hunger and the longing and gives us solace in our 'cosmic' loneliness. Hence the longing expressed in 20. Doubtless, there are many (21-23) who are contemptuously impatient of such an attitude; but the Psalmist's heart is at peace, for he has access to hidden resources. And the section ends very beautifully with the expression of delight in God's Word, the hidden manna that makes all the difference to life.

## 60) *Psalm 119:17-40*

In 25-32 the Psalmist is in a very different frame of mind. He is down in the depths, with his soul cleaving to the dust, and melting for heaviness (25, 28), and he longs for a time of 'enlargement of heart' (32). The theme of this particular section could well be summed up thus: 'What to do when you are cast down and depressed'. The sense of emergency and crisis in 25-28 is obviously very real: he feels 'dead', and therefore asks for quickening; he feels bewilderment and therefore asks to be taught and given insight into his situation; he is conscious of utter weakness and therefore asks for strength. Such is his prayer. But there is something else also: in 26, he had 'declared his ways', i.e. he has told it all to the Lord. This is the prescription in time of depression. 'Tell Me all about it', says the Lord, and in the words 'Thou heardest me,' we have an assurance for those 'walking in darkness': God hears and God answers! But sometimes this assurance does not suffice to still the distress and lead us into peace. Our souls melt, and wilt, for heaviness. What are we to do then? First of all, we must remember that this is the heart of the crisis, and hold grimly on until His answer does come through. That is the first thing; and the second is this: we must stick grimly to the routine of spiritual life. Go through the motions! This is the point made in 30, 'I have chosen the way of truth' and in 31, 'I have stuck unto Thy testimonies' (or, 'I have cleaved to Thy Word' - we should note the two 'cleavings' in this section, cleaving to the dust and cleaving to the Lord). By and by, an assurance will dawn: 'Thou shalt enlarge my heart.' This is the same thought as expressed in Psalm 43:5, 'I shall yet praise Him'.

## 61) *Psalm 119:17-40*

In 33-40 we have a prayer for understanding and guidance, and it may be that this has something to do with the expression of depression and darkness in the previous verses. For, in such an experience, there is so much that we do not understand and cannot seem to grasp, and we ask all the deep questions - Why? Why? Why? We want light, hence the prayer here. But, of course, the words are true in a more general sense also, without reference to the earlier stanza, for here there is the consciousness that there are hidden depths in the divine revelation that cannot be searched out except by God's help. One thing that it is important to note here is the emphasis on the mind and the understanding. This is not merely an intellectual matter, but something basic in spiritual life. For it is through the mind that all truth comes to men, and it is thus that it influences and shapes the will to obedience (33b, 34b). The Psalmist is conscious, 36, 37, of the things that militate against obedience - worldly gain, temptation via the eyes - and his prayer is therefore to be delivered from such temptation, in the consciousness (wrought in him by the Word itself) that the only real life for man is union with God and obedience to His commandments. The reproach referred to in 39 may be a reference to his consciousness of failure in this regard in the past. Whether or not this is so, he expresses in 40 his real and truest self, in his desire to be revived by God. As Maclaren puts it 'The necessary precursor of deeper draughts from the Fountain of Life is thirst for it, which faithfully turns aside from earth's sparkling but drugged potions'.

## 62) *Psalm 119:41-64*

The next three sections of the Psalm seem also to belong together in such a way as to enable us to gather one central message from them. In 41-48, which commentators have variously entitled as a prayer for grace and courage, a prayer that the Word may be the Psalmist's support in all his worldly concerns, as the inspiration of his testimony, the theme relates to the duty of bearing testimony, and the resources needed to witness a good confession. As such, it is similar in content to Paul's striking words in 1 Timothy 6:11ff, 'Fight the good fight of faith...'. Here, then, is the Psalmist praying for the mercies of God to come to him, so that, thus enriched and equipped, he might be able to give a reason for the hope that is within him. It is a thought echoed also by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:1ff, '...as we have received mercy, we faint not...'. Blessed by the divine mercy, our lips are opened to bear witness to him, for so our hearts are enlarged and enriched that we have something real to say to the world. Here is an important prescription for spiritual life. When witness is faltering, what we need is not so much new and better techniques, but a new experience of the mercy of God. If our hearts are really touched with the divine mercy, if mercy seems a wonderful and glorious thing, gripping us and thrilling our souls, then our lips will be opened to speak well of Him. The quality and extent of the answer to the psalmist's prayer in 41 is unfolded graphically throughout the section. First of all, lips are opened (42) to testify to God's word and grace, and facility and fluency given (43) - the lips and the mouth remain open, and there is an ongoing testimony. It is not a 'flash in the pan', but a settled characteristic of life. Next, there is a sense of liberation given (45). A man is brought into a large place by the Word, and he 'comes into his own'. Thirdly, testimony 'before kings' (46) has a twofold reference: on the one hand it speaks of the extent of the influence that such a testimony can have; on the other hand, it speaks of the dignity that the Word imparts to life. It creates stature in a man. In 47, 48, the delight in the Word indicates how far removed this is from any barren, restricting legalism. This is liberty indeed.

## 63) *Psalm 119:41-64*

The theme of 41-48 forms a good background and context against which to consider that of the next (49-56), where once again the Psalmist is under pressure and affliction (as in 25-32). This serves to remind us that the ideas of stature, liberation, and delight expressed in 41-48 are not incompatible with affliction and being cast down. But the one (41-48) is the foil to the other (49-56), and the latter needs to be looked at in the light of the former. Here, then, is the message: there is comfort, in time of affliction, through the Word of fife. The meaning in 49, 50 is: 'remember the Word given to me, because thou hast made me hope, i.e. hast comforted me by promising me a blessed issue in my trouble'. It is the kind of thought expressed by Paul in Philippians 4:6, 7, when he speaks of the peace of God that passes understanding. Here is the Psalmist passing through a time of affliction, worry and anxiety. It could be any of several situations - that of a believer trying to maintain a faithful witness to Christ, and coming up against the scorn and contempt of his fellows, which he finds hard to bear; that of a burden of a society in declension, appalling and depressing the spirit when involved in an ongoing work of the gospel and seeing little or no response; that of a more personal and private problem, even a health question, that keeps a man from sleep at night (as in 55). In his burden and distress the Psalmist has betaken himself to the Word, and that word has become alive for him, as the divine promises glow and gleam like lights in the darkness. Or, possibly, it is that he has known this to happen in the past, and he is looking now to God for the same to happen in this present time of affliction. This is a great way to pray, in time of trouble. And we may surely do so with confidence, for when God gives us His Word, He binds Himself to us, and obliges Himself to help us. It is this remembrance that brings comfort to the Psalmist's heart, and songs to his lips.

## 64) *Psalm 119:41-64*

The third stanza in this series (57-64) is described by one commentator as speaking of the happiness of resting on the Word from day to day. This is an important consideration for long-term Christian living, whereas 49-56 deal with a short-term experience of affliction. The verses speak of the main direction of our lives. How, then, are we to get to this happy place? The answer to this question is found in 59: we take stock of ourselves, we take a 'tumble' to ourselves, and we betake ourselves to God, and His ways, and His Word. To look at oneself in the light of the Word is to be seeing clearly, perhaps for the first time. We should note particularly the sense of urgency about doing this, expressed in 60. Maclaren comments: 'Such turning of our feet to the right road has many foes, and chief among them is lingering delay. Therefore resolve must never be let cool, but be swiftly carried into action.' We should also note what is said in 63. Having one's portion in God does not mean 'solitary religion': on the contrary, it draws us to the fellowship of like-minded people. This is something very important: it is a corporate experience, 'with all saints' (cf Ephesians 3:18), not something one can comprehend on one's own, but only in the fellowship of God's people. The section ends with the outburst of a full heart (64). The hymn says,

'Everywhere His glory streameth,
God is wisdom, God is love'

- this whole hymn (RCH 33), especially its last two verses, expresses the thought of 64 beautifully. Ah yes, but eyes need to be opened to see this. It is not self-evident. It is the man who through the Word has found God to be His portion that discovers this. It is through the Word that we learn that even in our affliction the mercy of God is at work. One last word: in these three stanzas we see that the experience of affliction is encompassed on the one hand by the victory expressed in 41-48, and on the other by the satisfaction of living under the mercy of God, in 57-64. It is ever so. We only need eyes to see it.

## 65) *Psalm 119:65-96*

We shall attempt to cover the next four sections of the Psalm as a unit, since they seem to have a common factor threaded through them - the note of affliction (67, 71; 75; 81-87; and 92). In 65-72 affliction is the prominent note throughout. But it is not an ordinary run-of-the-mill account and record of misfortune, no hard-luck story. There is no preoccupation with pain and suffering, still less any bitterness or 'chip-on-the-shoulder attitude - as there can so often be! - but on the contrary something very different, and well exemplified by the contrast between Jacob's attitude to his adverse circumstances and that of his son Joseph. Jacob complained, 'All these things are against me' (Genesis 42:36); Joseph said, 'God meant it unto good' (Genesis 50:20). This latter is undoubtedly the emphasis the Psalmist makes here: indeed, the word 'good' occurs five times (65, 66, 68, 71, 72). This reflects his view of life, and constitutes a statement - and a standpoint - of faith. It is this that his faith rises to and lays hold of, hence the prayer in 66 for discernment. It is as if he were saying, 'This is the deepest and truest thing; help me, O Lord, to see that it is so. This is a necessary prayer for us also, for we need to see things as they really are. It is the faith that Paul gives expression to in Romans 8:28, 'We know that all things work together for good...'. This naturally leads on to what follows in 67, 68. Affliction itself has proved to be good, since it serves to have brought him back to God's ways and, having come through the affliction, the Psalmist asserts, not now by faith, but by experience , that God is good (68) in all His dealings. Maclaren observes that there is a deepening emphasis in the later verses of the section: 'There (67) the beneficent influence of sorrow was simply declared as a fact; here it is thankfully accepted, with full submission and consent of the will. 'Good for me' means not only good in fact, but in my estimate.'

## 66) *Psalm 119:65-96*

Affliction lies at the heart of 73-80 also but with a particular emphasis, that of comfort (76, 77), both for the Psalmist himself, and also for those who see and understand his experience. 'When God delivers His servant who has kept His Word, such deliverance will mightily comfort others of God's servants' (Leopold). The section begins (73) with an interesting and suggestive comment on the purpose of creation, as having understanding breathed into life so as to enable men to learn the Word of God. Physical creation finds its true meaning only when spiritual understanding is given by Him. In 74 there is a prayer that the Psalmist may be a witness that hope in God's Word is never vain, and so that his deliverances may be occasions of widespread gladness. 'Judgments' in 75 seem to refer to the providences of God, much on the lines of Romans 8:28. It is in this context that we best understand the prayer in 76 for the divine comfort. The fact is, even when we know that trials are from God and for our good, they are still sore; and we need comfort and quickening in the midst of them. The Psalmist is no stoic, and there is nothing in his words to suggest that even feeling the soreness is a mark of failure or that believers should be 'above' this. In 78-80 a threefold petition is unfolded, first with regard to the proud, then to the devout and godly, and finally to himself. The Psalmist prays that the ungodly will be baulked and set at naught; in 79 the prayer of 74 is repeated, namely that the godly may, from contemplating the Psalmist's security, come to know the worth of God's testimonies (Kirkpatrick translates, 'Let my experience of Thy mercy show the godly the blessedness of keeping Thy testimonies'); for himself, he prays that his heart may be sound in the Word (80, cf Ephesians 3:17; Colossians 2:7; 3:16). It is something, is it not, to get through to this, by being in the crucible of affliction!

## 67) *Psalm 119:65-96*

In 81-88 we see the Psalmist in 'the Slough of Despond'. The picture in the opening verses of the section is a very graphic and moving one. Yet one wonders whether 'Slough of Despond' is the best way of describing it, for the phrase suggests depression, which may or may not have outward causes or precipitating factors; and here the Psalmist is being oppressed and persecuted by his foes (84-86), and so beset by them that he is all but beaten down and put a finish to. As such, the section bears a message very similar to that in 25-32, and it tells us what to do when under extremes of pressure. The Psalmist's soul is fainting (81), but he hopes in the Word; he seems to sink deeper into the darkness in 82, and his heart is shrivelled in 83, but he does not forget God's Word. Yet, after verses in which the malevolence of his enemies is described and emphasised (85, 86), and he is conscious of almost going down under, he is nevertheless, in that dire extremity, holding grimly to the Word. We see, then, the dingdong battle, with the Psalmist finally emerging out of the extremity of it into faith, trust and confidence. Maclaren says of 88 that the Psalmist 'is heartened to pray for reviving, and to vow that then, bound by new chains of gratitude, he will, more than ever, observe God's testimonies. The measure of the new wine poured into the shrivelled wine-skin is nothing less than the measureless loving-kindness of God; and nothing but experience of His benefits melts to obedience.'

## 68) *Psalm 119:65-96*

In 89-96 affliction is still the theme, but the Psalmist is now looking back over his experience, and has realised in a new and deeper way how and why he has won through to peace and deliverance: it is through the Word. And he has such a view of the Word and its place that he explains in terms of 89. The Word is the one impregnable, unchangeable and dependable reality. So 89-91: what a picture of the essential stability of a world undergirt by the Word of God! That is the one picture, the objective one; the other, the subjective response, is delight in God's law (92). And delight in God's law, through being in harmony with all the created order (89-91), 'changes affliction from a foe, threatening life, to a friend, ministering strength' (92), as Maclaren puts it. The Word of God, when loved, not only averts destruction, but also increases vital power (93) and invigorates the soul. But we should note the realism here. All that we have said does not idealise life. The pressures are still there to be coped with, as we see from 94, 95. In 94 it is the fact that he belongs to God that is the ground of his appeal. It is a question of God safeguarding what is His own. 'He cannot but protect His own possession. Ownership has its obligations, which He recognises' (Maclaren). This is the truth inherent in the idea of the covenant: God binds Himself to help His people, and therefore no enemies can prevail against them. The final statement in 96 has been rendered 'To all perfection I have seen a limit' - lifelong experience has taught the Psalmist that there is a flaw in every human excellence. But over against this the commandment - God's Word and purpose - is exceeding broad, of wide scope, broad, open spaces of liberty, freedom and fulfilment. The idea is that within the limits imposed by our sinnerhood, the scope of the Divine Word is simply without parallel as far as other earthly things and values are concerned (Leopold).

## 69) *Psalm 119:97-120*

The next three stanzas of the Psalm have as their themes, Communion (97-104), Guidance (105-112) and Refuge (113-120). Here is the Psalmist rejoicing in the communion he enjoys with the Lord through the Word, and the effects of that communion in his life, imparting rich heavenly wisdom to him. In this respect the thought is akin to that in 41-48 (which see), where we spoke of the dignity that the Word imparts to life. Here is part of that dignity, in terms of the wisdom that the Word imparts. Two qualifications, however, require to be added here. The first is that it is not technical knowledge of the law of God, but heart-love for it that is in view in these verses. It is a deep, personal relationship that the Psalmist speaks of, and the intimacy of communion which is so central to true spiritual life, as the phrase in 98, 'Thou through thy commandments...' makes plain. The second qualification relates to the Psalmist's claim to a wisdom superior to his enemies (98), his teachers (99), and the ancients (100). This could be open to serious misunderstanding, but it is to miss the point to accuse the Psalmist of self-righteous, pharisaic arrogance here. Rather, the kind of contrast being made is similar to, and paralleled by, that made in the New Testament by our Lord and His apostles alike - cf Luke 10:21, '...hid these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes', and 1 Corinthians 2:7 f '...the hidden wisdom...which none of the princes of this world knew...'. There is a spiritual wisdom, spiritually revealed and spiritually discerned; and it is quite possible for a teacher, or one of the ancients, not to know that wisdom, which the simple and the babe may grasp fully. Look at Nicodemus! He was a ruler of the Jews, and in a teaching office, yet he did not know what many a Sunday School child could witness to. These are the kind of teachers the Psalmist is referring to.

## 70) *Psalm 119:97-170*

The theme of 105-112 - that of guidance - may profitably be taken up by considering something which flows from the thought expressed in the previous note. Nothing the Psalmist says about spiritual wisdom gives anyone the right and entitlement to dispense with human teaching, and it is a misinterpretation of 1 John 2:27 (a verse similar in meaning to that in 97-104), 'ye need not that any man teach you...' to suppose that we can arrogantly dispense with the teaching of men in favour of so-called divine inspiration, which may turn out to be nothing more than our own (rather poverty-stricken) thinking and ideas. The Holy Spirit gets the blame for a good deal in Christian life. There is no warrant either in John's words or the Psalmist's for the misguided assumption that we can depend on the inspiration of the moment for divine direction, and dispense with the accumulated spiritual wisdom of God's means of grace. When some believers, thus misguided, refuse to take human counsel, what they are doing is not trusting wholly in the Lord, but in their own subjective feelings (often very unreliable) as to what the Lord is saying. Far better, surely, to grasp the heart of the verses before us now (105-112) with their statement of the power of the Word to lead and direct us in all our ways (105), and also the expression of determination to live wholly by that Word (106). This is a great way to live, but it has its hazards and pressures, as 107-110 serve to underline. No one should doubt but that to live in such a way is a costly matter involving affliction, both outward and inward. Consider our Lord’s experience: there is a sense in which the discipline of temptation, in which He conquered with the words, 'It is written', is fully expressed only in the Garden of Gethsemane, where His determination to do the will of God made Him sweat drops as of blood. This is the cost of living by the Word, and it will not be less for any of us. The Psalmist's testimony here is very impressive: in spite of the intensity of the pressures (109, 110) he neither forgot nor erred from God's precepts, and the words at the end of 112, 'Alway, even unto the end' crown his testimony. God grant that it may be so with us.

## 71) *Psalm 119:97-120*

The next section (113-120) seems to follow naturally from the previous note's emphasis, from the pressures that come upon faithfulness to the thought of a refuge from these pressures that will comfort the heart. One commentator entitles the section as a prayer to be loyal to the Word in face of much opposition; and this is done by hiding in God (114). What is said in 113 is better rendered 'I hate double-minded persons', and seem to have a connection with what has been said in the previous sections, where wholehearted commitment was the order of the day. To those who are totally committed, 'half-and-half' people necessarily seem suspicious. Love for the law is the only way, even if it brings opposition. Hence the idea of protection and refuge throughout the section. Nor is this negative and cowering, but a quiet resting in God and waiting on His Word (cf Psalm 57:1). Not only so, in 115 the Psalmist exercises a positive, even aggressive, faith: 'Depart from me...'. Here is a resistance from the base of refuge (cf Mark 11:23, 'Whosoever shall say to this mountain...') - not prayer, but assertion and commanding. This is something we can do when we are hidden in God! In there, too, one's eyesight becomes wondrously clear: we see the emptiness of sin and its fallacy. This is the meaning of 'their deceit is falsehood' in 118. 'All godless life is a blunder as well as a sin, and is fed with unrealisable promises' (Maclaren). The end of the life of sin is dross (119), to be cast out as slag from a furnace. Hence the sense of dread expressed in 120, as he sees what God does to the wicked - a fear lest any wickedness might persist and prevail in his own life, and incur that judgment too.

## 72) *Psalm 119:121-144*

These three stanzas seem to have one underlying theme which could be summed up in the phrase 'burden and longing' (cf 123, 126; 136; 139). This is not surprising as an emphasis, for, given the other ideas expressed in the Psalm thus far, we realise that the closer we draw near to God in fellowship and love, the nearer to His heart we come and therefore the more we will identify with his cause and concern in the world. There is a twofold thrust in 121-128: first of all we have - yet once again - the pressures on the Psalmist, and the desire and longing for divine protection and vindication. His testimony is that he has done rightly (121) and it seems as if this has brought upon him the ire and opposition of the enemy. Righteous living in this sense makes one very vulnerable and this is something the godly feel very keenly, hence the cry to God for protection and not to be left alone - a very human cry and met with a very divine succour (as the word 'surety' in 122 implies). The second point is the Psalmist's identification with the larger issue, as he becomes conscious that his troubles are simply an expression of something very much bigger, the ultimate conflict between God and Satan, good and evil, and that he is caught up in it. This is the same thought as is expressed in the great battle passage in Ephesians 6:10ff, where Paul by implication, in the words 'for all saints' urges us, 're-late your personal battle to the battle, strike a blow for the larger cause in your prayers. Look at the main strategy of God, not merely the one infinitesimal part that is your prob-lem'. This is the kind of understanding (125) that we need - to understand our little battle in relation to the larger reality. Hence the stirring prayer in 126 - here is the identifica-tion with the divine will and purpose which is so tremendous in the Psalm, and the sense of burden the Psalmist has to see the Lord's vindication in the land. And this is how we as Christians today need to think.

### 73) *Psalm 119:121-144*

The sense of burden referred to in the previous note is just as evident (129-136, cf 136) and there is the same association of ideas as before: desire for the Word, in ever deeper measure (130-131) serves to align one ever more closely with the mind and heart of God, making us feel the woe of the affront to Him when His law is violated. One inevitably thinks of our Lord's tears as He stood looking down on Jerusalem in Luke 19:41ff, 'If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace...'. In 130, it is because the opening of God's Word gives light ('entranced' - 'unfolding') that the Psalmist longs for more of the divine truth (131). Leopold says, 'One of the wonders of the Divine Word is that, when its truth is unfolded to men, it brings with it new and deeper insights to all men and particularly to the 'simple' who are the ones who keep their hearts open to its beneficent influences'. It is indeed the simple heart, rather than the sharpened intellect that penetrates furthest into the deep things of God. The Psalmist's longing in this regard (131), puts us to shame, with our so feeble and fitful desires for spiritual things. It is this burden for deeper knowledge and experience that leads to the other burden in 136. This is always where it begins. What a testimony this is to the primacy and priority of the Word and its teaching. When once we get and give that its proper place, it will do so many things in us!

## 74) *Psalm 119:121-144*

We should note the 'mixture' of righteousness, pressure from enemies, love for the Word, and zeal for God in 137-144, and also the contrast between the Psalmist's own sense of smallness and insignificance and the greatness of the divine will and purpose. Trouble and anguish may be his lot, but - he is caught up in the divine purposes and given a place therein. That for him is the overwhelming reality which makes all the difference in the world.

Looking at these three sections together we are able to observe the progression, in a unified theme: in 126, 'It is time for thee, Lord, to work: for they have made void thy law'; in 136, 'Rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law'; in 139, 'My zeal hath consumed me because mine enemies have forgotten thy words'. First, there is the indignation at the making void the law, and the prayer for God to work; then the tears and sorrow at the godlessness all around; then, finally, the zeal - leading to action. Here is a programme for action indeed! And the zeal that has its origin in this kind of progression, with the action that issues from it will always be both fervent and controlled, since it has its origin in the righteousness of God. One thinks of a similar progression in Paul's words in Romans: 'I am proud (of the gospel) - I am debtor (to the Greeks and to the barbarians) - I am ready (to preach the gospel)', ready indeed for anything (Romans 1:14-16).

## 75) *Psalm 119:145-160*

The emphasis on 'crying to God' which runs through the first of these two sections (145-152) prompts the reflection that every cry, every prayer in the pages of the Old Testament is validated and authenticated by one glorious and fundamental reality - the fact of Christ and His triumph in death and resurrection. It is essential for us, in our studies of the Scriptures, to realise that the message of Christ crucified and risen is the foundation and basis of all the true and valid interpretation we place upon any part of Scripture that we study. It is only because Jesus died and rose again that the lessons we have been gathering from this Psalm, and indeed from all the others, are valid at all, and not a matter of wishful thinking. This is why we can say, to every heart cry here or elsewhere, 'Yes, it will be heard, because Jesus died and rose again.'

We should note the expressions of the Psalmist's faith in 145-148, 'I will keep thy statutes', 'I shall keep thy testimonies', 'I hoped in thy Word', 'That I might meditate in thy Word'. Here is the Psalmist resting in the faith of the promise. His heart is fixed, and because he is there his faith is going to be honoured. He will be heard (145), he will be saved (146), his long night of weeping will be brought to an end (147, 148), and he will be quickened (149) - and all on the ground and on the strength of something that had not as yet taken place, but only promised, i.e. the victory of Christ. Faith in the Old Testament is always faith in the promise. As the Westminster Confession puts it (VII.5) that promise was 'for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation.'

## 76) *Psalm 119:145-160*

The words quoted from the Westminster Confession at the end of the previous note seem well substantiated by the Psalmist's statement in 152, in his conviction that God's testimonies - His eternal truth - stated at the beginning of time in a gracious covenant of promise, are incapable of being broken. This is his assurance that God will, and must, answer his prayers. The prayer for quickening in 149 is repeated in 153-160 on three occasions (154, 156, 159). We need, however, to understand this word in its context: it does not so much ask for spiritual quickening as 'for removal of calamities, which restrained free, joyous life' (Maclaren). It is the cry of a burdened heart, and the Psalmist is in affliction and under pressure. We would not be far from the mark, in view of 154, 'Plead my cause' to think of Job's affliction, and the pressure upon him, in the words in Job 19:25, which the NEB renders 'I know that my Vindicator lives and that he will rise at last to speak in court; and I shall discern my witness standing at my side and see my defending counsel, even God himself...'. It is the sense of the Psalmist's human helplessness that is so prominent, and that makes him call on the Lord's Name as he does. He is a defendant in court, helpless in face of the accusations that are being hurled at him (154); he is surrounded by swarms of enemies intent on doing him despite, and burdened by the faithlessness of those who scorn God's Word and law and it is what he does in such circumstances that is important for us. This we will consider in the next Note.

## ***77) Psalm 119:145-160***

What the Psalmist does in his predicament is first of all to affirm his faith roundly and unmistakably. This is the stance he takes in his affliction: 'I do not forget thy law' (153); 'I do not decline from thy testimonies' (157); 'I love thy precepts' (159); 'Thy word is true from the beginning' (160). He is, in fact, standing on the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. One is reminded of the words of the hymn,

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
He will not, He cannot, desert to its foes.

In the next place, we must note the basis of his pleas for reviving or deliverance: 'according to Thy promise' (154); 'according to Thy judgments' (156); 'according to Thy loving-kindness' (159). One commentator suggests that 'judgment' in 156 is equivalent to 'custom', with the meaning of 'according to thy wont', i.e. 'for that is what Thou art like'. Thy promise, Thy nature, Thy loving-kindness - what a basis on which to pray! This is praying ground indeed. Not for something in us, but for something in Him does He hear and answer our prayers. Thirdly, in 160, we have the foundation for everything. The Psalmist comes out into the open ground of this wonderful declaration that God's Word is nothing but truth, from beginning to end. With this bedrock consciousness the Psalmist has reached something fundamental and unshakable. As Leopold puts it, 'The Word is one of the few things that continue unshaken and immovable through the ages. Happy the man whose life is built on that foundation!'

## 78) *Psalm 119:161-168*

The atmosphere of this section stands in striking contrast to that of the previous verses, and yet there seems to be a real connection between the two. The first verse (161) indicates that the situation is still what it was in 153-160, and the persecution is still there, as it was in 157. But what was true at the end of the last section, namely that the Psalmist himself was heard and answered before his petition was answered for deliverance, is shown to be very true here, for in face of the persecuting princes (161) and in spite of them, here is the Psalmist in a 'large place', in 'the secret place of the Most High' (cf Psalm 91, with the glorious assurance of protection and peace in the midst of the battle). The thought is well expressed in the words of the hymn,

There is a place of quiet rest
Near to the heart of God,
A place where sin cannot molest,
Near to the heart of God.

A place where all is joy and peace,
Near to the heart of God.

Here is that place, in this section of the Psalm! It is surely the mark of victory for the Psalmist to have got there, in face of all that has beset him!

## 79) *Psalm 119:161-166*

We should note the expressions used in these verses by the Psalmist about his attitude to God's Word - he stands in awe at it (161), he rejoices in it, as in great spoil (162), he loves it, and knows its peace (163, 164), in his love, he keeps the Word (167). It is impressive, is it not, and true to deepest experience that 'reverential awe and exuberant gladness' (to use Maclaren's words) blend as the result of listening to the Word. Is not the joy ever touched with a sense of awe, that God should condescend to come to us in His Word at all?

That Thou shouldst love a worm like me
And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect
But music to my heart.

That is the awe - and it is surely expressed in such hymns as RCH 27 and 406.

Then, there is the phrase 'great spoil' in 162. The thought here is that of the battlefield and of the booty that falls to the conqueror as his legitimate prize. P.M. Taylor, a former Principal of Aberdeen University and a devout Christian, once said of the Scriptures that they 'do not yield their treasures to chance enquiry'. One has to dig, and one has to fight. And the reward of victory - often battling against the sloth and disinclination of our hearts, and the indiscipline of our spirits, and our disobedience and negligence - is spoil. One thinks of Isaiah's words (25:9), 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him' - we knew that it would be worthwhile, but nothing like this! The other note in the section is peace (165). Maclaren says, 'The love of God's law secures peace, inasmuch as such love brings the heart into contact with absolute good, inasmuch as submission to God's will is always peace, inasmuch as the fountain of unrest is dried up, inasmuch as all outward things are allies of such a heart, and serve the soul that serves God. Such love saves from falling over stumbling-blocks and enables a man to walk firmly and safely on the clear path of duty.'

## 80) *Psalm 119:169-176*

We come now to the final stanza of the long Psalm, which serves to sum up its whole message. It readily falls into four pairs of verses, and we shall look at these in turn. In 169, 170, we have a twofold petition, for understanding and for deliverances. How often these two cries have rung out throughout the Psalm. As Maclaren puts it, 'The one covers the whole ground of inward illumination, and the other comprises all good for outward life'. And is not the one needed for the other? For without understanding of all that is ours in Christ, how could we ever know the full glory of the deliverance that He gives? It is when we are deeply taught in the Word that we have access to the riches of divine grace (cf Ephesians 5:17, 18 and Colossians 3:16, with their parallel emphasis on the infilling of the Spirit and the rich indwelling of the Word). It is when we are gripped by the Word, in a true understanding of it bestowed by the Spirit, that we have victory and deliverance.

In 171, 172 the prayer of the previous verses passes to praise. One readily recalls the Apostle's words in Philippians 4:6, 'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving...'. The Psalmist offers a wonderful example to us here, for even in the midst of crying and urgent needs, there is surely so much to give thanks for, His many mercies that daily and without charge bless our way, and enrich our lives - and, withal, we always have His faithful Word, whatever else may beset us. It never changes! Thanks be to God for His unchanging Truth!

## 81) *Psalm 119:169-176*

In the next pair of verses, 173, 174, as Maclaren puts it, 'the emphasis lies, not on the prayer for help, so much as on its grounds in the Psalmist's deliberate choice of God's precepts, his patient yearning for God's salvation, and his delight in the Law, all of which characteristics have been over again professed in the Psalm.' The Psalmist has committed himself to God, and to His Word, and it is inconceivable to him that God, being Who He is, should fail to help him when in need. Understood like this, there should be no question of supposing that he expected help because he was 'a deserving case'. That would be to miss the point. The last two verses (175, 176) speak of fellowship and communion with God. To live at all is to be a debtor to grace, and therefore praise is the order of the day (175). 'Life drawn from God, turned to God in continual praise, and invigorated by unfailing helps ministered through His uttered will, is the only life worth living' (Maclaren). We should note, however, that the Psalm closes on a somewhat sadder note: 'I have gone astray like a lost sheep'. All that has been said is high ground, and the Psalmist wistfully recognises that he is often tempted to take lower ground than this; he does not always attain to it, and is conscious of his waywardness and weakness. Are we not all obliged to confess this, even when we genuinely try (176b) to keep His way? But - blessed be God - the last word does not lie with our waywardness and failure. There is a Shepherd, and He seeks the sheep that was lost, not resting till He finds it. And no appeal to Him can ever be in vain!

## 82) *Psalm 119:169-176*

As a postscript to our study of this wonderful Psalm, here is a final comment from C.H. Spurgeon's 'Treasury of David': 'I do not think that there could possibly be a more appropriate conclusion of such a Psalm as this, so full of the varied experience and the ever-changing frames and feelings even of a child of God, in the sunshine and the cloud, in the calm and in the storm, than this ever clinging sense of his propensity to wander, and the expression of his utter inability to find his way back without the Lord's guiding hand to restore him; and at the same time with it all, his fixed and abiding determination never to forget the Lord's commandments. What an insight into our poor wayward hearts does this verse give us - not merely liable to wander, but ever wandering, ever losing our way, ever stumbling on the dark mountains, even while cleaving to God's commandments! But at the same time what a prayer does it put into our mouths, 'Seek thy servant - 'I am thine, save me'. Yes, blessed be God! there is One mighty to save. 'Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation'.'

## 83) *Psalm 120*

We come now to a series of fifteen Psalms that are entitled, in the AV 'Songs of Degrees', and elsewhere as 'Songs of Ascents'. They all have the same general character and theme, and in fact constitute 'a Psalter within the Psalter' (it will help to illustrate this point if we think of the kind of 'mini-hymnbook' some use at Christmas time, in which we have gathered together a group of carols and Christmas hymns, all dealing with the same basic theme of the coming of the Son of God into the world). Historical interpretations of these Psalms have been as follows: (i) that the 'degrees', or 'ascents' or 'steps' refer to the internal structure of the Psalms - that is, literary devices; (ii) that they refer to the actual steps that lead up to the steps that led up from the court of the women to that of the men, and that the fifteen songs correspond to the fifteen steps (Maclaren refers to this as 'a very uncertain tradition'); (iii) that they have reference to the going up of the children of Israel from their captivity to Babylon to their own land, and that they were sung in their long march home; (iv) that they were pilgrim songs sung by the people 'going up' to Zion for the great festivals of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. This last explanation of the title seems the most reasonable and likely one, and we are best to take these fifteen Psalms as 'The Song book of the Pilgrims'. With the addition of Psalms 135 and 136, the group was known as the Great Hallel, as distinct from the Egyptian Hallel, Psalms 113-118. We are going to consider them in the above sense, therefore, as Songs of Pilgrimage, with an important additional consideration underlined by Dr Paul Re'emi, who has done considerable and detailed study on these Psalms, that they represent not only the physical ascent up to Zion, but also a spiritual ascent for 'in these Psalms the thoughts and feelings of the believer progress...from the lowest state of distress to the highest degree of exaltation.'

## 84) *Psalm 120*

Dr Re'emi helpfully suggests a threefold division of the group:

The Exile - Psalms 120-123

Homecoming - Psalms 124-128

Restoration - Psalms 129-134

This is a useful and valuable framework within which to study these Psalms. As to this first one, although now incorporated in the Pilgrim Song book, it may well have originated in an experience of the Exile. It certainly voices 'the home-sickness of those who have settled among strangers and enemies'. Also, 'it appropriately begins the series in a distant land, so that we join the pilgrims as they set out on a journey which, in broad outline, will bring us to Jerusalem in later Psalms'. We should note first of all that the verbs in 1 are in the past tense, while all that follow are in the present. This suggests that 1 is an introductory statement, which is commented on in 2-4 and 5-7. There are two ways of interpreting what is said in 1 - one is to take it as referring to a past experience, in which the Psalmist cried to the Lord in his distress, and that 2ff is a description of that cry. In which case the rest of the Psalm is to be taken as an outline of that earlier experience. The other interpretation is that the Psalmist is reminding himself of God's faithfulness in prayer in the past, and making this the ground of his confidence in praying now, in terms of 2-7, as if to say, 'What God did once, He will do again, if I call upon His Name'. The Psalmist's concern in 2-4 is the distress that lying lips and false accusation and slander have brought. It is not certain who were his enemies: some refer all the allusions to the circumstances of the exiles in Babylon; others to the slanders of the Samaritans and others who tried to hinder the rebuilding of the Temple; others think that his own hostile fellow-countrymen are the Psalmist's foes. There is insufficient indication in the Psalm for us to be sure. The important thing is that he has appealed to the Lord for help, and has been assured of an effective answer: God will vindicate him and deal with his accusers and persecutors. This is assurance indeed, and calculated to bring peace to his troubled soul.

## 85) *Psalm 120*

The reference in 5 to Meshech and Kedar can hardly be taken literally, for they are places far apart from one another, and the Psalmist could not have been captive in both. It is best to take them as figurative, indicating referring in general terms to the heathen (cf our figurative use of the phrase 'in the hand of the Philistines' or 'the wilds of Borneo'). What is in view is the totally alien and strange environment in which he found himself - an environment fraught with such pressures that he feels (6) nearly at the end of his tether. The words in 7 are particularly poignant: 'I am for peace...but they are for war' - that is, much as he desired it, his adverse circumstances would not let him alone. Are there not times when we also feel like this? We long for respite but, in spite of our desperate cry 'Leave me alone', they still keep at us, denying us rest and peace. This is where we need to look back to 1, and remember that God is the Hearer of prayer. And yet, the Psalm ends with this unresolved note. As Maclaren comments, 'It thus sets forth more pathetically the sense of discordance between a man and his environment, which urges the soul that feels it to seek a better home. So this is a true pilgrim Psalm'.

## 86) *Psalm 121*

With this priceless Psalm, which has been the comfort and inspiration of countless saints down the ages, we are brought a stage further in the developing pilgrim journey. The picture may be, and has been, interpreted variously - either that of an exile looking westwards from Mesopotamia to the blue hills of home, which are there, but which he cannot see, except in imagination; or, that of the pilgrim catching the first sight of the mountains on which Jerusalem is built. The question whether the Psalm represents a dialogue or a monologue is uncertain. Perhaps the Psalmist is speaking to himself, reasoning with himself, and strengthening his faith with the recollection of the promises. 'To the hills' in 1 raises some questions. The second part of the verse is certainly in the form of a question; but it may not, as is often supposed, be saying 'There is no help there, but only in God'. It could mean that the Psalmist is lifting up his eyes from his troubles and fixing them on the heights, where God is ! Or, it could mean that he was looking to the far-off hills and, conscious of the distance yet to go, cries for help. Or, it could mean that, conscious of the hazards and perils of pilgrimage, and that there is a long way yet to go, he is thinking, 'How will I ever manage, who will help me to get there? Will I make it?' In this trepidation, he fixes his eyes on the upward look. He knows that his help comes from the Lord. It is the sentiment so wonderfully expressed in the word of 'Amazing Grace':

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

## 87) *Psalm 121*

The trepidation, the longing, the fear, even, embedded in 1, are abundantly answered in the rest of the psalm. The sense of exile is met at the outset by the assurance of grace. The words in 3 should be read as a prayer 'May He not suffer thy foot to be moved; may thy Keeper not slumber. On the pilgrim journey, there are many hazards, and the roads are dangerous and paths slippery in the wilderness. It is perhaps best therefore to take these words as the breathing desire and prayer, as if to say, '0 soul of mine, may the Lord not suffer thee to be moved...?' This is the kind of prayer that lifting up one's eyes to the hills of God, the hills of home, awakens and inspires in us. We get through to Him! We should note the progression in 2, 3: my help cometh from the Lord - O Lord, be my help now, in this my present need. All along the journey, by day, by night, the pilgrim bespeaks and beseeches the divine help. It is the invocation of the pillar of cloud and fire:

Let the fiery cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.

The reality of this prayer in 3 is expounded in 4-8, as is the assurance that it will be heard: 'He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep' and 'The Lord is thy Keeper'. We should note the threefold assurance that the Psalm gives: Jehovah is Maker of heaven and earth, and what He has created He watches over; He is the Guardian of Israel; He is likewise the Guardian of every individual. All this is very wonderful: so often, God had seemed to be asleep while they were in exile, and had been beseeched to awaken (cf Psalm 44:23, 'Awake, why sleepest Thou?'). Here is the assurance that, however much it may seem to the contrary, God never sleeps, He is ever watchful and wakeful. He knows, He loves, He cares - this is always true, and this is the thought behind the idea of the non-slumbering God.

## 88) *Psalm 121*

The 'shade' that the Lord provides (5) is not so much from the heat of the day as a defence from danger, and protection from known and unknown dangers and perils, by day or by night. In 6, however, the reference is to perils from physical causes - the fierce sunlight by day, and the evil influence of the moon by night (our word 'lunatic' is derived from 'moon'). Kidner, in a footnote on this verse, remarks: 'Some kinds of mental disturbance vary with the phases of the moon. (Not all popular belief on the subject is unfounded.) In 7 the increasing scope of the divine protection is underlined, to cover the whole of existence, as is indicated in the phrase 'thy going out and thy coming in'. What is in view is one's whole earthly way, in every aspect, all ventures and enterprises. It is salutary at this point to look back to the fear and concern and apprehension implied in 1 and 2 (see comments on these verses), and realise that this is the measure of the answer given. The repeated emphasis on 'keep' in 7, 8 is immensely reassuring: one recalls Paul's famous words in 2 Timothy 1:12, 'He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day'. Maclaren comments: 'He keeps Israel, so long as Israel keeps His law; for the word so frequently used here is the same as is continually implied for the observation of the commandments'. In relation to Paul's words just quoted, this means that He keeps just as much as we have committed to Him, no more, no less. The final words of the Psalm, 'from this time forth...' are very evocative. We can begin with the 'committing' from today!

## 89) *Psalm 122*

This, the third of the Songs of Ascents, is a most beautiful and moving utterance, immortalised as it has been in its metrical version in the minds and hearts of the Scottish people. It would be true, however, to say that because of the sheer beauty and familiarity of the words, we tend to savour them rather than grasp the initial and original meaning with which the words were first invested. And this must be our first task in studying it. The first problem and difficulty is that of determining the Psalmist's position and point of view as he utters these words, for 1 and 2 have been variously interpreted and translated, particularly 2. The AV renders the verb in 2 in the future tense, but all the commentators and versions agree that a future tense is impossible here - either past or present is possible but not future. If the present tense is taken, the opening verses mean that the Psalmist recalled the joy in being invited to join the pilgrimage to Zion (1), and now rejoiced in reaching the goal. Then, in 3-5, he paints the sight that so gladdened his eyes, as he gazed on the longed-for city of God. With the past tense, however, the interpretation must be, either that the psalmist has 'been and gone' so to speak; he is recalling a past experience, how he had rejoiced to be invited on pilgrimage and how wonderful it had been to stand together within the gates of the city. He is recalling the joyful events of the festival which now lie behind him; or, he is still in exile, but he remembers and recalls the joy of former occasions when he had stood within the walls of the city, and this recollection is comfort and strength to him in his exile now. There is a third possibility of interpretation, combining in part both the first and the second. It is this: in his exile, the Psalmist is projecting himself forward, in faith and in imagination and longing, to what he believes will yet be his position and happy lot, to be there at last - that is, it is an expression of faith in the promises of God, and faith sees as already present what is as yet in the future (perhaps this is what the AV translators had in mind when they used the future tense, 'our feet shall stand...'). We shall continue discussion of these possible interpretations in the next Note.

## 90) *Psalm 122*

The longing in the hearts of the people of God for Jerusalem is something very powerful and compelling, even today, as may be gathered from the well-known phrase 'Next year in Jerusalem!'. From one point of view, the first interpretation is most attractive ('and now our feet are standing...'). At long last, the pilgrimage is over, and all the hazards and dangers of the road are past and fading into insignificance in the full attainment of the longed-for hope. The joy of fruition surpasses that of anticipation, and difficulties and dangers are forgotten. And - from a spiritual point of view - how fruitful is the application to the pilgrimage of the Christian life, and its glad consummation. All the same, if there is a sequence and progression in this group of Psalms, it may be that the second interpretation is a fitter one, especially if we follow Dr Re'emi's unfolding pattern – (see pages 85, 86) - which suggests that the deliverance from captivity is signalised only at Psalm 124 which speaks of having escaped out of the snare of the fowler, and that the Psalmist is still in exile, and that he is recalling the joy of former occasions. As Dr Re'emi puts it 'The memories of his youth come back to him. He remembers the joy of attending the services in the Temple, where he saw all types coming up to praise the Lord'.

In 3-5 we are given a picture of the city - whether in the Psalmist's imagination or memory, or in amazed present realisation. Is it the city as it once was, the seat of the monarchy, hallowed by the sanctity of its history, as he recalls its former glories, or is it the city rebuilt that he rejoices in? And what of the 'spiritualised' concept? What is it that moves the heart of the Christian when he goes today on pilgrimage to Jerusalem? He does not have Jewish blood in him, to be moved by the 'stones' and 'towers'. Is it not because it speaks to him in symbol, of 'another Jerusalem' to which he will one day come, nay, indeed, first of all, one to which he has already come? More on this in the next Note.

## 91) *Psalm 122*

The writer to the Hebrews says, 'Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an to innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect' (Hebrews 12:22, 23). This, ultimately, is the ground on which we can best understand, and participate in, the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. For us, ultimately (although in the present critical Middle East situation it must always be incumbent upon us to pray literally for peace for that troubled area), it is a prayer for the coming of the Kingdom. And consequently, it pledges us to work for that Kingdom, and for bringing the King back (cf 2 Samuel 19:10) - the vision of what one day will be, 'the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs' joining in the worship of God, and the prayer that it may come to pass. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Finish then Thy new creation:
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in Thee,
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

## 92) *Psalm 123*

If we maintain the idea of a sequence in these Songs of Ascents, and if Psalm 124 represents the liberation of the people of God from Babylon, then this psalm must be taken to precede that liberation. It therefore represents the longing for deliverance, characteristic of the exiled Israelites. Some commentators, however, think of it in terms of the exiles having returned to Jerusalem, and having encountered opposition and contempt from their enemies, and quote passages such as Nehemiah 2:19; 4:1-4, 7ff in support of this interpretation. Certainly the sentiments of this little Psalm match such situations. It is hardly necessary to decide between the two interpretations; for even if the exiles were back, they certainly did not know full deliverance from their enemies when they first returned. That came only later, when the Lord had vindicated them. Either way, therefore, Psalms 123, 124 stand together, the latter proving to be the answer to the former's prayer. This is important for us to learn: when hearts go out to God in agonising prayer, there is the assurance of an answer from the hand of God.

It is a beautiful jewel of a Psalm, and its imagery in 1, 2 is very moving. In 1 and 2a the verses use the first person singular, but in the remainder of the Psalm it is the first person plural. It seems clear that the personal prayer in 1, 2a is on behalf of the whole people of God. The Psalmist is praying for them all, and he identifies with the nation's need. And what an affirmation of faith the Psalmist makes at the outset of his prayer, 'O Thou that dwellest in the heavens'. Even in the distress of their experience there is the upward look to the Throne. It is the same kind of confidence as is expressed in Psalm 121, 'my help comes from the Lord'; but it is even more so, for it is the reminder that God is in control. This is the one great circumstance that validates all prayer.

## 93) *Psalm 123*

There is a wonderful double metaphor in 2 - slaves and their master, handmaid and her mistress. What these eloquent pictures convey is this: slaves wait silently, submissively, expectantly on their master, as do handmaids on their mistress. The picture is one of quiet submission and trust, and this is what looking to the God Who is on the Throne does to our hearts. It gives a peace and assurance in the midst of great pressures. That is the first thing: we are answered, before our prayers are answered (cf Philippians 4:6, 7). The next point to note is the nature of the pictures given in 2. There seems to be a juxtaposition between 'the hand' of the master and of the mistress and 'the Lord'. It is perhaps unwise to press the metaphors too far or too literally - either the dread that slaves have of their master, lest he punish them, or the timid waiting for a sign of mercy from a strict mistress, although reverential awe, and the consciousness of trustful hope in the family care experienced in a good household, are both present. But they do represent two different sides of the divine attitude to His people. It is the same kind of distinction as is represented by the forensic terminology of justification, in which God the righteous Judge acquits the guilty, and the family language of the doctrine of Adoption, in which we are 'pitied, protected and provided for...and never cast off' (Westminster Confession). This is the background against which we need to read 3ff. The cry for grace and mercy does not deny the trust expressed in 1, 2, but rather explains it. It is a cry of confidence, not a plaint of distress and despair.

## 94) *Psalm 123*

It is not difficult to find illustrations in Scripture itself of the quiet waiting upon God expressed in this Psalm. Mention was made in the note on page 94 of Nehemiah 2:19; 4:1-4, 7ff, which described the ongoing saga of the returned exiles' difficult times, and which echo the thought of the Psalm perfectly, as for example, the sudden failing of spirit in 4:10, and Nehemiah's rallying cry in 4:14, 'Be not afraid...remember the Lord, great and terrible...'. Nehemiah could well have prayed the prayer of the Psalm, and passed on the assurance of the Lord's grace and power to the struggling people. Another instance may be found in 2 Chronicles 20, in the story of Jehoshaphat and the invasion by Moab and Ammon, especially 20:12, 'Our eyes are upon Thee'. The story is a thrilling and moving one, and the answer to prayer (cf Psalm 124) just as thrilling and sure. A similar pattern unfolds in the prophecy of Habakkuk, whose first chapter unfolds the distress and perplexity of a difficult situation, and the answer to it is unfolded in 2:1, where the prophet goes to the watchtower to see what the Lord would say to him. Then in 2:20 the wonderful calm and stillness in the consciousness of the Lord's Presence, and finally in 3:17-19, the expression of utter trust. Other references abound, as for example, Isaiah 40:26; 49:18; 51:6; 60:4, all alike inviting us to 'look up' (cf also 2 Kings 6:17). What a picture of the waiting church, looking expectantly to God! May this Psalm produce such an effect on us as we read it!

## 95) *Psalm 124*

This glorious burst of victory and praise is the first of the 'Homecoming' Psalms, and deals with deliverance and redemption. The sequence of the Psalms up to this point is as follows: 'The Psalmist remembers his years in exile, the oppression of the enemy, and his distress. He dwells among a people who hate peace (Psalm 120). So he lifts up his eyes to heaven, to the Lord Who is his keeper, in his longing for Zion (Psalm 121). The memories of his youth come back to him. He remembers the joy of attending the services in the Temple, when he saw all the tribes coming up to praise the Lord (Psalm 122). He looks up in his weakness to the Almighty Father in heaven, but also in devotion like a slave to his master, in hope, and waiting for deliverance (Psalm 123). And now the chains of slavery are broken at last. They have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare (Psalm 124). Free to live in the joy of the Lord, the Psalmist lifts up his hands in gratitude to God'. One sees the force of the title particularly here - Song of Ascents - since the Psalm speaks of an ascent from the misery of exile, from the mocking and slander of the enemy (Psalm 123:3 f), from their brutality and insolence, into the freedom of the people of God. There is a sense in which there is not very much in the way of exposition necessary in the Psalm. Its message is simple: the people of God are set free. If our idea of continuity in these Songs of Ascents is valid, then the reference must surely be to the deliverance from the captivity of Babylon. The wonderful passages in the latter part of Isaiah's prophecy are a good commentary on this, cf Isaiah 48:20-22; 49:24, 25; 51:9-11, 12; 55:11, 12.

## 96) *Psalm 124*

The imagery in the Psalm is impressive. There is a threefold picture or metaphor used to describe the danger and predicament that the people of God had experienced, and the deliverance that God worked for them. In 3, in the words 'swallowed us up quick', the idea expressed is that of a monster devouring them. This is not fanciful, or mere poetic imagery, but something very profound. One recalls the 'monster' themes in the Book of Revelation, and it is not difficult, in the light of what we read there, to think of great, godless nations rising up as monsters to devour helpless and defenceless peoples. And this kind of 'monster-like' swallowing up is so much part of our modern scene. In 'the waters had overwhelmed us' (4, 5) the idea is that of a roaring, raging torrent of flood water coming down resistlessly, carrying all before it. In 7, in the 'bird out of the snare of the fowlers', it is the picture of a weak and helpless creature, hapless and hopeless, and with no prospect of escape. Together these metaphors underline the totality of the disaster, its overwhelming nature, and the people's utter helplessness in face of it, and they underlined the magnitude and the glory of the deliverance accomplished for them by God.

## 97) *Psalm 124*

The Psalm has an even wider application, however, and it is well illustrated by all kinds of scriptural incidents (as indeed is the case with many of these Songs of Ascent). One thinks, for example, of Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah, under attack by Sennacherib in 701 BC (cf Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Chronicles 32). One thinks also of Jehoshaphat and the invasion of the Ammonites and Moabites (2 Chronicles 20), and the glorious words in 2 Chronicles 20:17, 'Ye shall not need to fight in this battle...stand ye still and see the salvation of the Lord with you', words that echo yet another deliverance much earlier, in Exodus 14:13, 14. One thinks of David in 1 Samuel 23:19ff, kept by the power of God, and delivered 'in the nick of time'. He could truly have said, 'If it had not been the Lord Who was on our side...'. One thinks of Acts 12 and the record of the Apostle Peter's deliverance from prison. But for the Lord's intervention he would have been 'swallowed up', overwhelmed by the flood of persecution. There he was, 'snared', and in prison. This is undoubtedly the word on which Wesley based the words of his wonderful hymn,

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

All the joy and thrill of deliverance are underlined in Acts 12, not excepting the amazed incredulity of Rhoda, the servant girl, who could not believe the evidence of her own eyes when Peter turned up at the door, even as they were praying for him. To use the words of a later Psalm (126:1, 2), they 'were like them that dream', and their 'mouth filled with laughter and their tongue with singing'. This is always the result when God intervenes on behalf of His people.

## 98) *Psalm 125*

This Psalm stands in natural sequence, both historically and spiritually, with those that precede it. For, after the return of the exiles from Babylon, and the first rapturous joy of their homecoming, they soon began to realise that, set free and liberated though they were, the war was not over, and there were enemies to cope with and pressures to come to terms with. One has only to read the book of Ezra to realise just how real these pressures were, and how easy it was to lose heart and even hope. It is against this historical background that we can best understand the words of this Psalm. We are told in Ezra 4 that the work of rebuilding the Temple was brought to a standstill by the enemies of Israel. This was not due to anything wrong in the returned exiles; but it certainly led to a situation in which something became wrong, for their discouragement turned into complacency, backsliding and apathy. and the Lord sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah with His life-giving and life-restoring Word, which galvanised the people into action and into a new enthusiasm and dedication. The Psalmist stands in the tradition of these post-exilic prophets, and speaks the same language as they did. This is how we are to understand the message of the Psalm: it is one of encouragement and reassurance to hard-pressed and frightened people, and exhortation to trust and faith in the living and true God. 'Look at Mount Zion', cries this prophetic Psalmist. 'It remains evermore the same, unchanged and unchanging. Nothing affects it, it is a fixture. And those who trust in the Lord are like that. To trust in Him imparts this kind of immovability and impregnability to a man's life. There need be no fear. Such is the first picture, given in 1.

## 99) *Psalm 125*

The second picture, in 2, is just as wonderful as the first. The force of the metaphor is this: Jerusalem nestles among the hills, with Olivet to the East, Scopus to the north, and higher ground on the south, and on the west not so much high hills, but hills that successfully hide the city from those approaching it until these hills are scaled. To get to Jerusalem, you had to conquer and overcome these surrounding hills; and, to get to God's people, enemies need to get past and over the insuperable object of the living God (cf Zechariah 2:4, 5). In 3 the Psalmist gives voice to the fear that some of the people might lose their faith under the pressures that were upon them and begin to abandon the ways of righteousness and become careless and complacent (this, in fact, is what happened, as can be seen, in Haggai and Zechariah). And the Psalmist gives the assurance that the Lord will not allow the wicked to rest too long upon them. To the cry, 'How long, O Lord?' came the assurance 'yet a little while, and he that shall come will come'. The old hymn says,

Ho, my comrades, see the signal,
Waving in the sky,
Reinforcements now appearing,
Victory is nigh.

The prayer in 4 is not so much a prayer expressing a doctrine of salvation by works - for that would be to contradict the whole biblical revelation of salvation by faith - rather, it is a prayer asking for the fulfilment of God's own promise, 'Them that honour Me I will honour' (cf Psalm 18:24ff). The truth is, God does all He is allowed to do, for us and in us. And the same applies to what is said in 5 also. We shall look at this further in the next Note.

## 100)*Psalm 125*

What is in view in 5 (as also in Psalm18:24ff already referred to) is the total correspondence of God's dealings with character. There are lives that have not known God's lifting up, and have not known His victory, because He has not been allowed to lift them up or to give them the victory. We sometimes use a phrase like 'He is not a right man', and this well expresses what the Psalmist refers to as 'crooked ways', a phrase which Maclaren renders 'they bend their ways, so as to make them crooked' and he adds 'Sometimes the tortuous path points towards one direction, and then it swerves to almost the opposite. Those crooked, wandering ways, in which irresolute men, who do not clearly know whether they are for Jehovah or for the other side, live lives miserable from vacillation, can never lead to steadfastness or to any good'. This is the classical expression of the Apostle James' 'Double-minded man' who is 'unstable in all his ways' - the waverer, the sitter-on-the-fence, neither the one thing nor the other, Mr Facing-both-ways. And when a man is there, it is very easy to slip into the wrong camp. Indeed, the Lord ultimately 'makes them go with the workers of iniquity' (5b). This is the danger for those who with faint or double hearts tend to temporise. The need is for out and out dedication. The Psalmist knew where he stood, and he knew which side he was on. Do we?

## 101)*Psalm 126*

This psalm is a very beautiful one, although it is not without its difficulties for interpretation. Luther translates 1 in the present tense, 'When the Lord turns back the captivity of Zion', pointing the deliverance to the future, and taking 4ff as a prayer for the fulfilment of that golden age in the future. But the tense of the verb is past, and we are really obliged to take it as such. The question therefore that arises is, how can the Psalmist be rejoicing in deliverance in 1-3, and supplicating God for deliverance in 4-6, at one and the same time? But there is surely a simple answer to this: 1-3 speak of the first, initial setting free of God's people, with all the joy and exaltation that that brought; while in 4-6 the Psalmist prays for still further and more complete deliverance, in the context of all the pressures and difficulties, not to say discouragements and setbacks, that the returned exiles experienced, as we see in Ezra and Nehemiah. In other words, there is the deliverance in, and the deliverance yet to be given. This makes very good sense, and is amply illustrated in the history of the time. Much hard work and discipline faced the people of God, and they needed God's continuing enabling and empowering for all they had to do. Some think (e.g. Kidner) that there is a wider reference than to the return from the Captivity and that the Psalm should be taken in general terms for the restoring of the fortunes of the people of God at different times. It is certainly legitimate to apply the Psalm's message in this way, if we are to maintain the sense of progression in these Songs of Ascents, we must surely take the Captivity as the real subject here.

## 102)*Psalm 126*

The people of God, then, are looking back in recollection to the experience of deliverance from Babylon. There was a dream-like quality in what happened, and they could hardly take it in. But it set them rejoicing and singing - these are always the marks of divine visitation, and the history of the Church down the ages affords ample and unmistakable evidence of this. The Reformation set all Europe singing; the Wesleyan revival of the 18th century brought songs of joy in all England; and every subsequent revival has made the hearts of men rejoice in the greatness of God's salvation. And, as 2b makes plain, the world heard it and heard of it, and took note. Every visitation of God is a witness to the world. A fire does not need any publicity, it announces itself, and the world knows of it. We sometimes speak of the problems of communication today, but when God begins to work, men get the message over, they hear! The point that is made in 3 is that the people of God themselves take up the strain, and echo the world's verdict (2b), saying, 'How truly you speak of our great God'. In 4-6 the Psalm takes a different turn, with a prayer for release from captivity, in the language of 1. And the reason is this: The work was but partly done. Difficulties and hardships were not abolished from the world by that first manifestation of divine power. There remained yet much land to be possessed. And so the Psalmist prays for the renewal of divine power - with this connotation and implication: What God did once, He can do again. 'Do it again, Lord!' Just as He had broken the power of Babylon, so He could also break the power that even then was holding them and hindering their ongoing work. As Kidner puts it, 1-3, 'set the tone and scope for confident intercession'.

## 103)*Psalm 126*

A word about the structure of 4-6: 4 is a prayer, while 5, 6 seem to be the answer to that prayer. Perhaps in the singing of the psalm, 4 was sung by the people, and 5, 6 sung by the priest. But, better still, it could be taken as the voice of God answering the prayer in 4. We should note also the two different pictures given of renewal in these verses. In 4 it is the 'givenness' of the blessing that is underlined - it is all of God. The parched south is transformed by the torrents and rivers of water made by the refreshing rains. But the second picture is very different. The first gives the completed picture. The second is not saying something other; rather, it shows how the completed picture is to be completed, and here the metaphor changes to that of farming at its most heartbreaking: all its joys hard-won and long awaited. Here, the Psalmist means, is how the miracle is going to happen. The hard, arduous toil of sowing is what brings the assurance of reaping. And, in the more general context for us today as we look for, and long for, awakening and revival, long to see 'streams in the south', this is also the way, the faithful sowing of the seed of the Word. As the hymn says,

Send them Thy mighty word to speak,

Till faith shall dawn, and doubt depart,

Then all these wastes, a dreary scene,

On which, with sorrowing eyes, we gaze,

Shall grow, with living waters, green,

And Lift to heaven the voice of praise.

## 104)*Psalm 127*

The next Song of Ascents, or pilgrim Psalm, begins with words which are amongst the most familiar in all Scripture - but, like so many other verses of this nature little more is known of the rest of the Psalm. We should remind ourselves of the sequence we have seen in those songs of pilgrimage. The message here has to do with the ongoing work and activity of the returned exiles. They are engaged in a work of reconstruction and rehabilitation, building the Temple and the Walls of Jerusalem, and refurbishing the depleted nation of Israel, building up its family life. And the Psalmist reminds them that, as they proceed with this work, in face of many difficulties from without and within, they will succeed only with God's help. Some scholars maintain that 1, 2 and 3-5 are so distinct that probably two separate Psalms have been brought together. But the message of both parts is the same: that 'only what is from God is truly strong' (Kidner). Indeed, as Kidner goes on to point out, the word 'house' in 1 can have two meanings - a building, and a family. And we may legitimately take the implication that both kinds of 'house' are in view in the Psalm and that the 'except' in 1 applies as much to 3-5 as to 1, 2. We should note that the phrase 'in vain' is mentioned three times in 1, 2, referring in turn to 'the house', 'the city' and 'one's work'. The application of these words is very wide, and we are entitled to take as wide an application as we may, for any building - whether homemaking and marriage, life and career, or the home of the soul - but the first reference must surely be to the rebuilding in which the returned exiles were involved and the Psalmist gives a timely reminder that their work could only be done with God's help and in His strength. They were looking around them at the ruin and devastation of a generation that had not made God their portion. Hence the Psalmist's forthright challenge to them.

**105)*Psalm 127***

In 2 what is in view is domestic life within the built house and guarded city. Except the Lord be in this also, the Psalmist means, it will be in vain for a man 'to eke out the laborious day by early beginning and late ending. Long hours do not mean prosperous work' (Maclaren). Kidner comments very trenchantly, 'It is not simply that our projects will fail - there is at least 'bread' to show for them - but that they lead nowhere. In terms of 1, the house in the city may survive, but were they worth building?' Here is a man who, as we say, 'works his fingers to the bone', in his determination to do things his way, according to his plan and his ideas. Poor man, he has started off wrong, with the wrong programme, and has been wrong right from the outset, for it was not God's plan and programme for him. But he did not see it, would not see it, perhaps; but it took him over until he was totally taken up with it. He did not lack application or determination; but alas the question does arise: Was it worth it? Does it get anywhere? No; it is in vain, for it has left God out. It is not easy to see the connection that the last sentence in 2 has with the rest of the verse, 'He giveth his beloved sleep'. The contrast seems to be between labour which effects nothing, and God's gift of the good which the vain toil had aimed at. There may be a possible allusion to Solomon's experience in 1 Kings 3:5ff (which see - Solomon's other name was Jedidiah, which means 'beloved of God'). As one commentator says, 'God's gift to His beloved secures to them the same result as is ineffectually sought by godless struggles'.

### 106)*Psalm 127*

The second part of the Psalm, 3-5, dwells on one special instance of God's gifts, that of a human family. And it is the way in which children are given by God, not engineered by man's planning and efforts, that stands in contrast with living in independence of Him. Commentators mention the illustration that is given of the two parts of the Psalm by the first and last paragraphs of Genesis 11, the one giving the story of man's abortive building of the tower of Babel, and the other the gift of a numerous progeny to Terah, the father of Abraham. The contrast is between the pretensions in the tower of Babel story and the quiet and obscure man whom God blesses and enriches with a notable family. The fact is, so often we just do not allow God to bless us. He longs to do so; but we clutter up our lives by our foolish pretensions and determinations and ambitions, which effectively cut us off from the blessings He purposes to give us. Maclaren's final comment on the Psalm is helpful: 'There are two ways of going to work in reference to earthly good. One is that of struggling and toiling, pushing and snatching, fighting and envying, and that way comes to no successful issue; for if it gets what it has wriggled and wrestled for, it generally gets in some way or other an incapacity to enjoy the good won, which makes it far less than the good pursued. The other way is the way of looking to God and doing the appointed tasks with quiet dependence on Him, and that way always succeeds; for, with its modest or large outward results, there is given likewise a quiet heart set on God, and therefore capable of finding water in the desert and extracting honey from the rock.'

## 107)*Psalm 128*

This Psalm follows naturally from the previous one, in which the Lord is spoken of as the alone Builder and Establisher of the home. Here we have the voice of experience speaking of the happiness and blessedness of having the Lord as Builder and Establisher, and finding the reality of this blessedness through walking in His ways. The sentiments expressed here are very beautiful, but they raise problems and questions in thinking minds. For example, as Maclaren comments, 'Outward prosperity does not follow good men's work so surely as the letter of the Psalm teaches'. Indeed! And what are we to say to those, and of those, to whom the blessings of 3 are withheld and denied? Do we have to assume that it is because they do not fear the Lord or walk in His ways? Hardly! And one has only to think of the trials and tribulations that the apostle Paul endured on his missionary travels to realise that life is no bed of roses for the dedicated believer who walks in the ways of the Lord. What are we to say, then, about the emphasis in the Psalm? That it is too simplistic? That it is only sometimes true? That we are not meant to take it literally, in terms of literal blessings? There are two ways of looking at these problems. On the other hand (following one scholar's comments), 'The deeper meaning which the Psalmist associates with both these similes (the vine and the olive) and wants to bring out is that a man's delight in wife and children is experienced as joy in God, and that the happiness of his family is thankfully recognised and experienced as God's blessing.... It is a universally valid truth that true blessing dwells only in a home in which the fear of God reigns and provides the inner strength and unity of the members. It is the pedagogic intention of the Psalmist to lead man to that stage where he learns with God's help to be satisfied with what he has, to see the importance of homely things, and to find in them his riches and dignity…. The Psalm deliberately confines itself to a strictly limited field of devout conduct in everyday life and should be understood within these limits.'

## 108)*Psalm 128*

The other, and even more important, thought is this: it will be noticed that the earlier verses of the Psalm envisage the earlier stages of married life, with the family as children in the home; in the later verses, however, it is the man's children's children that are in view. That is to say, the Psalm sweeps through the whole of life, and in a sense a retrospect of that is given. This is an important consideration, for it is when we look back on life that we tend to see it in perspective, and are able to say, with the Psalmist in another place, 'I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread' (Psalm 37:25) - although at times it may have seemed very much otherwise. There are many who can look back over life and say, even in the context of hard and difficult times (not excluding the pain and anguish of unrequited longings and yearnings), that the true picture of life for them has been that the blessing of the Lord has been upon them because they have sought to build their life and their home in obedience to the way and will of God. As such, this is surely a Psalm for the young as well as the old. This is how to do it, the Psalmist means: 'Build your life, and your home, according to this teaching. Young lads and lasses, boys and girls, make this your aim, catch this vision, and settle in your minds and hearts that when you grow up, this is how it will be with you.'

The pictures in the Psalm are clear enough not to need much in the way of formal or detailed exposition, and what has already been said serves to put their teaching into proper perspective. But there are other important implications in the Psalm and we shall turn to these in the next Note.

## 109)*Psalm 128*

The further implications of the Psalm are twofold. In the first place there is the influence of godly families in the life of the community and of the nation. In this regard we should note the progression in the Psalm - the man (1); the family (3); the city (5); the nation (6). Such a progression is not accidental, for the influence of true godliness is something that in itself will inevitably spread and make fruitful impact in society, like a good leaven. For the true family does not become self-absorbed and selfish; it has an outward look. This does not so much mean that godly Christians ought to be involving themselves in public life (although this is certainly a Christian duty, and there is much need of Christian influence in this area), as that the existence of godly families will prove a bulwark to society, simply by being there. And for this reason - and with this we come to the second consideration - the influence of right thinking on society can be critical and decisive. For with godly families there will be godly thinking that is based on fundamental biblical positions, and this is something that will have a great deal to do with the framing of responsible public opinion. One of the great realities of the 19th century was what came to be called 'the Nonconformist conscience', which had an immense influence on public life. What need there is today for such an influence, in relation to the many vexing problems of our society. It is humanistic thinking, not godly theology, that has undermined so much of society in some of the great public issues of our time, and led to such confusion and uncertainty in society's thinking about things like abortion, euthanasia and other such issues. This is why it is so important not only to be godly but also to know one's theology and one's biblical position, and the basic biblical principles that constitute godliness of life. In this way, influence for good will surely be brought to bear upon society, through the testimony to a clear-cut, unequivocal moral and ethical position that is in accordance with the ways and will of God.

## 110)*Psalm 129*

With this Psalm we come to the third division within the group of Songs of Ascents: Psalms 120-123 dealt with the Exile itself; Psalms 124-128 with Homecoming; now in Psalms 129-134 it is the theme of Restoration. The context in this Psalm is the situation in which the returned exiles found themselves in Jerusalem. As we learn in Ezra and Nehemiah, the fact that they had returned to their homeland did not mean that 'everything in the garden was lovely' now for them. On the contrary, there were many difficulties, and many oppositions from enemies all around them, which on more than one occasion were like to overwhelm them. It is over against this that the Psalmist exhorts them to look up in faith to God, and look back on the many deliverances wrought by Him on their behalf in the past, and the way in which the divine guardian care had preserved them, often against all odds and probabilities. It is therefore a Psalm of assurance for the people of God and, as such, it can be applied very generally in any situation of pressure. For example, Calvin says, 'What the Psalmist intends to stress is that the world is fraught by innumerable enemies, whom Satan arms for the destruction of good men, and that the people of God have to be continually on their guard and cling to their Lord, Who is righteous, and will give the final victory to His faithful people.' This is one obvious application of the Psalm for the believer. That there are other applications will become clear in the Notes that follow.

### III)*Psalm 129*

The Psalm begins very similarly to the beginning of Psalm124, and the point of view in both Psalms is very much the same - sore affliction and wonderful deliverance. We could well take Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8, 9, 'Cast down but not destroyed' as the theme, for the Psalmist looks back on all Israel's history, from its 'youth' in the deliverance from Egypt, onwards to his own time. The consciousness of God's deliverance in the past gives confidence for present dealing with enemies, and all future dealings also. In 3 the 'afflictions' endured by Israel are described in graphic metaphor, combining two figures, a slave under the lash, and a field furrowed by ploughing. Yet another metaphor is seen in 4, this time of Israel as a beast of burden that has been whipped and scourged, and now the yoke is severed and it is set free. God is both the righteous One and the rescuer - His righteousness is an active, powerful force that goes into action on behalf of His people. In the second half of the Psalm (5-8) it is the certainty of the Lord's vindication that is in view. It is interesting and significant that now the picture is of harvest time, whereas in 1-4 it was that of the ploughing. The suggestion seems to be that those who sow evil and wickedness against God's people will reap a bitter harvest for themselves. The general prayer is stated in 5, and it is elaborated in 6ff in the 'harvest' picture. But there is another idea also expressed in the harvest metaphor, besides the reaping of the whirlwind. It is that no real harvest will ever be reaped from such a sowing and such reapers can have no joy in it, nor can the blessing of God be invoked on their work. It is with Israel, not her enemies, that the blessing of God rests, in fruitful harvests.

## 112)*Psalm 129*

Another application of the Psalm is this: we are confronted in its opening words with a mystery of momentous importance and significance, namely, the persistent survival of the people of Israel down the ages, in spite of all efforts on the part of various enemies to exterminate and destroy them. Pharaoh of Egypt tried to destroy them; so did Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, as did Antiochus Epiphanes; the Roman Emperor Titus tried to destroy them, the Turks tried to destroy them, as did Hitler, then Stalin, in modern days. But they would not be destroyed, for God had willed them to continue in existence, because they are His chosen people. And - historically - this is the awesome thing: even in their rejection they are still God's chosen people, the instrument of His revelation in the world, a light to lighten the Gentiles. And even having refused their calling and election, they are still His people, rejected though they be. Now it is here that we see the depth of the mystery, in the link that exists between the ancient, covenant people of God, and Christ the Messiah. It is certainly no accident that some of the most characteristic passages in Isaiah about the 'light to lighten the Gentiles' are just as applicable to Jesus as to Israel, for both alike are instruments of the divine revelation of salvation. Why is it that anti-Semitism is, and has been down the centuries, such a grim and constant factor? And why was it inevitable, a foregone conclusion, that when Jesus came into the world, He should be put to death? The answer to both questions is the same: Israel - and Jesus - were both instruments of revelation to the world, representing God in the world, and the world's reaction to both alike is inevitable because the world is in revolt against God. Christians and Jews share common ground in the persecutions they suffer: both alike stand for God; and the opposition in the human heart against God is primal and fundamental, going back to the Garden of Eden. This Psalm bids us think on these things.

## 113)*Psalm 130*

We said in an earlier study that the Songs of Ascents have a spiritual as well as a physical and geographical message - not only the ascent of the pilgrims to Jerusalem for worship, but also the ascent of the soul from the lowest state of distress to the highest degree of exhortation. This is particularly true of the great and tremendous Psalm now before us, of which one commentator says 'It is the confession of a God-fearing man who was able to rise from the uttermost depths of anguish engendered by sin to the assurance of the divine grace and forgiveness'. The first part of the Psalm is an address to God, while the second includes Israel and applies the message to them. In other words, the Psalmist's experience becomes his message to the people, an invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good and that the experience of forgiveness is the greatest experience in all the world. The Psalm contains four stanzas of two verses each. In 1, 2 the Psalmist's cry issues from the depths, which here refer, not to distress and trouble, nor to depression of spirit as such, although these are included; rather, he is in the depths because of sin. It is the consciousness of sin, and the awfulness and seriousness of it that the Psalmist feels. In such a position, there is only one thing that can be done, and that is to cry out to the Lord to hear our prayer for pardon and release from the intolerable burden of sin. In 3, 4 there is a further sense of awareness: it is the terrible consciousness that if God were to deal with him according to justice, there could be no hope for him. The very awfulness of this thought brings the Psalmist to a confidence about God: 'there is forgiveness with Thee'. One commentator points out that he does not directly ask for forgiveness: 'He feels too strongly that his situation scarcely justifies such a request'. Whether or not God will forgive will depend on His free, sovereign grace. But he reminds himself of Who God is, and what He is like. Maclaren points out that the word for 'forgiveness' here is used in only two other places (Nehemiah 9:17; Daniel 9:9). It literally means 'cutting off', and so suggests the merciful surgery by which the cancerous tumour is taken out of the soul. Some think that the word 'feared' in 4b would be better changed to 'loved'; this misses the point that is being made - it is the awe that comes in the experience of forgiveness, the sense of the awfulness of the act of forgiveness that grips the Psalmist's mind and heart. That is something for us to think about today.

### 114)*Psalm 130*

In 5, 6, following the 'indirect' appeal for forgiveness, we see the Psalmist waiting for God. This can be interpreted either in the sense of waiting for God to be gracious, or in the sense of an attitude of peaceful patient hope in God consequent upon the experience of forgiveness. Both experiences are true for the believer, and can be true at different times. The metaphor of waiting for the dawn in 6 is a graphic one, from two points of view: on the one hand, forgiveness is like the dawning of a new day, after a long, dark night; on the other hand, dawn is certain to come after the darkness of night, and so forgiveness is certain to come, God being Who He is. In 7, 8 the Psalmist becomes an evangelist, inviting Israel to share in his hope and his experience. His message expands from 'forgiveness' to 'mercy' and 'plenteous redemption' - that is, the motivating power of forgiveness is shown to be the mercy of God, and its content plenteous redemption, from all iniquities. Maclaren adds, 'In the depths he was alone, and felt as if the only beings in the universe were God and himself. The consciousness of sin isolates, and the sense of forgiveness unites'. When men learn the sweetness of divine pardon, they are impelled to invite others to learn the same lesson.

## 115)*Psalm 130*

We may apply this wonderful Psalm in two ways, first of all to Christian experience. One is bound to say that so often Christian experience does not seem to include much of a sense of sin nowadays. This raises some very real questions, both about the teaching of the Church and about the depth of contemporary Christian experience. The Methodist scholar, Norman Smith, in his book on the Penitential Psalms, points out that in earlier days, people were conscious that a man had to be saved from something, as well as to something. There are a number of reasons for this loss: one is that there has been a loss of emphasis on the reality of hell and the wrath of God upon sin. Another is the contemporary emphasis on the gospel as the fulfilment of human need, the adoption of psychological categories to describe the predicament of man and the answer to it in Christ - alienation, disorientation replaces sin, guilt; identity crisis replaces crisis of faith, and so on. It is not so much that these modem categories are wrong, but it is wrong when they displace biblical emphases. Our task must be to translate into biblical terms the modern manifestations of alienation and disorientation, and trace them back to their origin in the fact of sin. We need to think biblically, and take a good look, again and again, at the basics of the gospel, and why Jesus died on the cross, and what the real alternatives to sin are.

The other application of the Psalm is to see it as a gospel challenge. Luther regarded it as breathing the spirit of the New Testament, and especially in its doctrine of grace and justification. The 'depths' referred to in 1 represent the experience of anguish that comes from being separated from God, by the unbridgeable chasm of sin. Without God man is lost, and only He can throw across the gulf the bridge which man has broken off by his own guilt. So from the depths he stretches out his hands to God, and pleads that He may graciously stoop down to him. There is a true consciousness of helplessness expressed in the Psalm which makes it impossible for man to do anything for salvation. Only God can save. And it is only the Spirit Who can illumine the darkness of the soul, and enable a man to grasp the truth as it is in Jesus, and close with God's offer of mercy in the gospel.

## 116)*Psalm 131*

This is a beautiful Psalm, short and brief though it be. Maclaren's initial comment is very apposite: 'Simple words best speak tranquil joys. One note only is sounded in this Psalm, which might almost be called a lullaby. How many hearts it has helped to hush!' It is a Psalm of trust, a wonderfully tender and intimate song, reminding us of the words of the hymn,

There is a place of quiet rest

Near to the heart of God.

It may not be accidental that it follows immediately upon Psalm 130, and may well be designed as a companion piece to it. At all events, there is little doubt that the experience of forgiveness and quiet waiting upon God is what enables a man to see his life as it really is, and cuts him down to size, so that he is the more ready to take 'his proper place' before God. Hence the confession in 1 about presumption and arrogance. The Psalmist has learned a lesson that some apparently find very difficult to learn. Restless striving for what can in the nature of the case never be ours is a fruitful source not only of discontentment but of breakdown also. There is, in fact, a twofold danger in coveting the task that belongs to another: one is that you are perhaps not cut out for his task and not big enough to undertake it; the other is that in coveting it you will neglect the task that is yours. This is why the Apostle Paul warns in Romans 12:3 against cherishing exaggerated ideas of your own importance. There is nothing so calculated to cause trouble in one's own experience as persisting in holding an unrealistic estimate of oneself and refusing to face up to one's God-given limitations. A true surrender to Christ is the only thing that can shrink our inflated 'ego' to its proper size, in relation to Him and to our fellows, and impart reality to our lives. And it is always better to be real, even if being real means being quite small, than to be an inflated, unreal creature. A man with exaggerated ideas of his own importance is living in a dream world of unreality from which he is liable to be rudely awakened at any moment. It only needs one pinprick to burst a balloon.

### 117)*Psalm 131*

In 2 the indication seems to be that it was not without considerable struggle and effort that the Psalmist got himself sorted out and brought to this place of quiet rest. As one commentator puts it: 'The poet briefly and simply indicates this fact: 'I have calmed and quieted my soul'. We can but surmise how many struggles against his own arrogance and sinfulness and against striving for honour, wealth and recognition, how many renunciations of the beautiful dreams of youth and the headstrong ambitions of manhood, are concealed behind that statement, till at last he holds in his hands the prize of victory: the peace which passes all understanding'. The metaphor of the weaned child is a very graphic one, and when some thought is given to what it is really saying it becomes very graphic indeed. As has been said: 'That for which the child craves, it at last comes to be content without. So the soul of the Psalmist, which once was ambitious and restlessly attempted to walk in ways for which it was not fitted, is with him in quietness and contentment'. As Paul would put it, 'I have learned to be content'. What the metaphor is saying is this: when an unweaned child is at its mother's breast, its instinct and its nature is to suck and to feed. Life, for that child, at that moment, consists on feeding: and if it could conceive anything consciously, it could not conceive life as anything different from that. To conceive that there could be a life in which it could lie quietly at its mother's breast and not want to suck is something beyond it. But we know that there is such a life. And so it is also in the spiritual realm, as we shall consider in the next Note.

### 118)*Psalm 131*

Sometimes, in some situations, the things that 'bug' us, whether temptation, ambition, or other aspirations, are so pressing upon us, so clamant, so demanding of fulfilment, that we simply cannot conceive of any sort of life in which they were not so demanding. Yet there is such a life, in which victory is given, not from these things but in them, in their presence. That is the wonder of it all. Our soul can be as a weaned child on its mother's bosom, in contact with its mother's breast, but no longer wanting or needing to suck. That is the point that is being made. And there are countless situations in which it needs to be that sort of deliverance and victory, for the good reason that it is just not possible to opt out of real-life situations. The man with a drink problem obviously has to take various steps to keep himself clear of drink, places where it is available, company which would be a source of temptation, and so on. But just as obviously he needs something more, namely the kind of deliverance which can enable him to be in its presence, in close proximity, and not want it, and not feel a desire and craving for it anymore. The same can be said about the problem of impure thoughts, which many young folk agonise over. Obviously there are things to do to help oneself - guarding the picture gallery of one's mind, etc. But there is also the kind of deliverance - not without many battles and struggles! - which can enable a man to be in the midst of the things which would set him off, and not want them, and not feel a desire and craving for them. In this, it is not absence of desire, so much as desire disciplined and at rest, that is the all-important consideration. That is the message of the Psalm.

## 119)*Psalm 132*

This is the only Psalm in which the Ark of the Lord is mentioned (8), and it is clear that the return of the Ark to Jerusalem (cf 2 Samuel 6:12ff) is the initial subject matter in the opening ten verses of the Psalm. The significance of the Ark for Israel was that it symbolised the presence of the Lord, from the time it was built for the Tabernacle in the wilderness. In the wilderness it had guided God's people all the way to the Promised Land and when the Ark was captured by the Philistines, the word 'Ichabod' aptly expressed the situation, 'for the glory had departed from Israel'. This is the background against which the theme of the Psalm needs to be seen and understood, and it explains the burning desire in the heart of David to find a place for the mighty God of Jacob (5), and so give Him His rightful place at the heart of His people. Such is the theme of 1-10; and 11-18 unfolds God's resolve and oath to stand by David's dynasty. Such is the general outline of the Psalm. A problem arises in the Psalmist's clear reference to another 'anointed' than David. Commentators differ as to who this refers to, but it is quite likely that the Psalm belongs to the time of the completion of the Temple in Solomon's reign, and that the recollection of the Psalm is of the long years of preparation that David made for the building of the Temple. If we think of it in these terms, the whole Psalm lights up. The Lord's anointed in 10 is Solomon; and the prayer of the Psalm is made for him, and the promises of God to David are pleaded on Solomon's behalf. It is the Psalmist saying, as it were, 'do as Thou hast said, O Lord'.

## 120)*Psalm 132*

In 1, the 'afflictions' refer not so much to the hardships of David's earlier life, as 'the heart-searchings which he brought to his task' (Kidner) - that is, the agonisings after the will of God, not excluding the distress in the matter of the death of Uzzah, at the first attempts to restore the Ark. The language of David's vow in 2-5 breathes a spirit of earnestness and total commitment, and it is not surprising that down the history of the Church these words have been used as a prayer for spiritual awakening and revival. They certainly embody a burning passion and determination to give God His true place. The imagery in 8ff goes back to Numbers 10:33-35, with this difference, however, that whereas in Numbers the Ark guided Israel on pilgrimage, here the Ark was 'come to rest' in Zion itself, and the Temple. Hence the joy and felicity in 9 (cf 1 Chronicles 15:25ff). If God (represented by the Ark) be with them, then there will inevitably be joy, a joy which is the fulfilment of the prayer and agony in 3-5.

In the second part of this Psalm (11-18) the Psalmist petitions for answer and God's oath and vow match David's, with a pledge to perpetuate the house of David. The historical background is outlined in 1 Chronicles 17:1-27 in which we see that while David wanted to build God a house, God promised to build him a dynasty. Thus wonderfully God answers the longings of His servant's heart. 'The divine promises teach the great truth that God over-answers our desires, and puts to shame the poverty of our petitions by the wealth of His gifts. He is 'able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think'....' (Maclaren).

## 121)*Psalm 132*

It is impressive to see how David's desire for the Ark - and for the Lord - to dwell in Jerusalem is simply a reflection of a prior purpose and intention in God Himself to dwell there. In other words, David's Prayer was itself planted by the finger of God in his heart. As Maclaren says, 'He Himself had chosen His habitation long ago. He is throned there now, not because of David's choice or Solomon's work, but because His will had settled the place of His feet. These correspondences of expression point to the great truth that God is His own all-sufficient reason. He is not one to dwell with men by their importunity, but in the depths of His unchangeable love lies the reason why He abides with us unthankful.' It was Wesley who said that the prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work. When God raises up a praying people in the land, it is not, primarily, something they are doing, but something He has already done in their hearts, to awaken them to pray for His will to be done. In this regard what it said in 14-18 is immensely encouraging, for in every case, the answer is larger than the prayer. What we see in the Psalm is the 'overruling' and 'upgrading' of David's prayer. God will not give us less than we ask; He may give far more. Here, He takes up, and far surpasses, the people's prayers. And what we have groped after, in labouring for the recovery of our lost heritage in Scotland, He may yet far exceed, and grant above all that we could ask or think. Prayer for revival could be answered far more wonderfully than we could suspect or imagine! What an incentive this Psalm is to pray.

## 122)*Psalm 133*

The message of this brief but beautiful Psalm on the theme of unity is simple: it sings the joys and the blessedness of true fellowship. Its value for us lies in the various association of ideas that are conjured up in our minds as we study it and think of its implications. First of all, there is the association with the message of Psalm132 about the restoring of the Ark to Jerusalem, symbolising the coming of God in the midst of His people. There, it was the Psalmist's burden and desire to find a place for God; and it is when God comes in His grace and power that the blessings and sweetness and unity become very evident and very precious. The history of revival movements afford ample evidence of this (cf also 1 Chronicles 29:9ff and Ezra 3:11ff). But there are other sorts of association also. For example, some scholars take the Psalm as referring to the time when David became king of the united kingdom, after reigning for seven and a half years in Hebron (2 Samuel 5). Whether or not this is a correct interpretation of the Psalm, it affords a good illustration of its meaning. It may also, however, refer to the gathering of the pilgrims to the holy city to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, the Old Testament's Harvest Thanksgiving, as they rejoiced in God's goodness and remembered His provision for them during the wilderness years (cf Psalm122:1). But to see Israel gathered together in unity is itself a source of joy, just as any large gathering of God's people is a source of joy; and it is not difficult in this regard to pass to Ephesians 4:3ff, and to Paul's great utterance on Christian unity - 'Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', remembering that that unity comes from our being in Christ.

## 123)*Psalm 133*

The twofold metaphor, in 2 and 3, which the Psalmist uses to illustrate his point - the anointing oil upon the high priest, and the dew of Hermon upon the mountains of Zion - is very graphic and full of instruction. Let us look at each picture in turn. Unity among the brethren is like precious ointment, having a sweet perfume but we should note first of all the emphasis on 'descending' - 2a, 2b, 3a - that is, it comes down from above. It is bestowed, rather than achieved or contrived, and bestowed indeed by God Himself. This is the source of its sweet perfume (cf Exodus 30:22-33). It is also a holy thing - the ointment was used only in the Lord's service. It is a diffusive thing: being poured on the high priest's head, the oil dropped on his garments and all his robes were touched by it. It had a special use, setting apart the high priest to the special service of God; and this spirit of fellowship and love and unity is a necessity for all who would serve Him. But the main point of this metaphor lies in this: the anointing oil did not remain at the point where it first fell, but spread to Aaron's beard, and his robes; and in the same way a spirit of fellowship and brotherly love and unity 'distils and descends, anointing as it runs, and perfuming all it lights upon once set in motion, it would not cease from flowing'. So said Spurgeon, and he adds, 'Even thus does brotherly love not only flow over the hearts upon which it was first poured out...but it runs where it is not sought for, asking neither leave nor licence to make its way. Christian affection lays no limits of parish, nation, sect or age'.

## 124)*Psalm 133*

The same emphasis and point is made in the second metaphor as in the first, the dew of Hermon touching the mountains of Zion. Some commentators take this idea literally: Delitzsch comments: 'An abundant dew in Jerusalem might rightly be accounted for by the influence of the cold current of air sweeping down from the north over Hermon'. But Maclaren wisely adds: 'There is no need to demand meteorological accuracy for a poet!' The point that is being made is that the Lord's refreshing in one place can mysteriously affect and bless other places also. The history of revival certainly shows this. Blessing in one place mysteriously has brought blessing to others in other places - often on the mission fields of the world, in what Maclaren calls 'a mysterious chain of transmitted good'. It is not difficult to understand this when we remember the blessed reality of the doctrine of the communion of saints, who are united together in one common Lord (this is one reason why we often think of our missionary colleagues throughout the world on Communion Sunday as we sit at His table, and ask Him to bless them as He blesses us). The last statement of the Psalm (3b) explains all this: there, that is, in the place of unity, God commands His blessing, life for evermore. And here is something important: this spirit of unity is something that God gives, and that comes down from Him; but at the same time, it is something we have to strive after. As Paul makes plain in Ephesians 4:3, 'Life for evermore', the blessing of God, may depend more than we realise on getting things right and sorting things out in relationships with one another. The Psalmist invites us to take this 'picture' to heart, and to let it search out our own situation.

## 125)*Psalm 134*

This is the last of the Songs of Ascents, or of pilgrimage. These pilgrimage Psalms, as we have seen, have a wide application, whether we take them as illustrating the pilgrim journey from captivity back to the Promised Land or the 'spiritual' pilgrimage up from the depths of darkness and despair to the heights at spiritual communion with God, or the pattern of every pilgrimage from different parts of the land to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. This final Psalm is illuminated by either and all of these differing applications; for the blessing of which it speaks is the blessing of consummation, first of all as the culminating grace of the long pilgrimage from captivity - the returned captives are back in their own land, and the longed-for blessing of their God is now theirs; secondly, as the fruition of the long 'journey' from distress and bondage to the brightness and joy of deliverance and peace; and thirdly, as a final blessing on the departing pilgrims, having fulfilled all the joys of the feast, and how they receive a parting benediction to bless them on their way home. It is in this light that we should look at the Psalm. We should note first of all that in the first part of the Psalm more than one person is addressed - 'bless ye the Lord' - while in the last verse a single person is addressed – 'the Lord bless thee'. Those addressed in the first part of the Psalm are the 'servants of the Lord', that is, the priests and Levites whose charge it was to patrol the Temple through the hours of night to see that all was safe and right there. Some think that it was the high priest who thus addresses them, but it is more likely to be the pilgrims themselves, and that they in turn receive the blessing from the priests, in 3, as they depart from the Temple and from the city on their way homewards. It is the priests and Levites, then, rather than the whole congregation who are here called to bless the Lord and to praise Him.

### 126)*Psalm 134*

The application of the Psalm for Christians is that we, who name His Name, are 'a royal priesthood', that we should show forth the praises of Him Who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. This, after all, is the climax and consummation of all spiritual pilgrimage - a praising, worshipping community. But we should also note the praise in 2, 'lift up your hands'. Praise and prayer must always belong together. Praise in the sense of service can be outward, and dead and barren, hence the need for service to be undergirt and shot through and through with prayer. This may be the origin of Paul's phrase in 1 Timothy 2:8, 'lifting up holy hands'. It is possible, after all, to keep others' vineyards, and neglect one's own. Praise and prayer - this is the exhortation from the pilgrims to the priests, reminding them of their proper task, and summoning them to be all they can be for God. This is never out of place, and all God's servants need it - not in terms of criticism or critical, censorious appraisal, but in terms of a longing in people's hearts for men of God to be all they can be, and their continuing, constant prayer for them, that they might be just that. For where there is a godly, praying ministry, there the Church will be blessed and enriched, and will be prosperous in the only sense that really matters.

### 127)*Psalm 134*

The response to the exhortation in 1, 2 comes in 3, when the priests in turn pronounce blessing on the speakers in 1, 2. But we need to note the difference between the two 'blessings'. To bless the Lord is to speak well of Him (cf Ephesians 1:3); but for the Lord to bless us is not for Him to speak well of us, but to make of us what we are not, and to give us what we do not have. divine blessings are specific and decisive, they do something, and are irrevocable. As Maclaren puts it, 'Our blessings are but words. God's blessings are realities. We wish good to one another when we bless each other. But He does good to men when He blesses them...God's blessings are powers. They never miss their mark. Whom He blesses are blessed indeed'. What is more, the God Who blesses is the Creator of the ends of the earth. He gives without measure, and creates new things with which to bless His children. Furthermore, the blessing of the Name of the Lord on our part, praising His Name, leads in itself to the blessing of God coming upon His people. As C.S. Lewis finely says, 'It is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His Presence to men'. When hearts really go out to God, in worship and adoration, they are really blessed by Him.

## 128)*Psalm 135*

This Psalm is a psalm of praise. The scholars point out that it borrows from a number of other Psalms, as some others do. Maclaren says, 'We have not here to do with a song which gushed afresh from the singer's heart, but with echoes of many strains which a devout and meditative soul had made its own. The flowers are arranged in a new bouquet, because the poet had long delighted in their fragrance. The ease with which he blends into a harmonious whole fragments from such diverse source tells how familiar he was with these, and how well he loved them'. This is a lovely way to put it, dispelling any suggestion of artificiality in the psalm. Perhaps the best way for us to think of it is along the lines of the way some old saint of God, weary and worn, and nearing the end of the road, will softly repeat well-known words from the psalms as they are read to him. It is in such an experience that we see so clearly that this is no mere rote, but something precious to him, and absolutely real and authentic. The first thing to note is the eulogy in 1-4, the speaking well of the Name of God, and the exaltation that this God has chosen His people to be a peculiar treasure to Himself. The phrase in 3 'it is pleasant' has been interpreted in different ways. It can have the meaning of 'it is pleasant to sing praises'. In support of this Psalm 147:1 is quoted, where in the AV it is the act of praise that is pleasant. But there are other renderings: the RSV renders the phrase, 'For He is gracious', and it translates Psalm 147:1 in the same way. In other words, the reference is not so much to the act of praise as the subject of praise, namely God, and His great Name. The American Standard Bible translates the verse thus: 'Sing praise to His Name, for it is lovely'. This is attractive as a translation, ringing truly in our hearts and thoughts, for the Name of God is a lovely Name. As we sing, 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear.'

## 129)*Psalm 135*

The other side of our exalting in God's lovely Name, and speaking it forth in our praise, is His exalting in us, His people. We are 'His peculiar treasure' and He treasures us. This is the unaccountable, amazing mystery of grace, that the Lord should take pleasure in His people (cf Psalm 149:4). In 5-7, His Name is worthy of our praise because He is the God of our creation. The majesty of God is set forth in nature. This is a great theme in many Psalms: the Old Testament saints unquestionably rejoiced in God as Creator (our next Psalm also emphasises this in even greater detail). It is the power of God that exalts the Psalmist's heart: the God of creation is a great and glorious God (cf Psalm 95:3). But His Name is also worthy of praise because of what He has done in the history of His people (8-12). It is impressive to see how the God of creation does really become the God of history in the experience of His people. His 'power and Godhead' are translated into divine intervention on their behalf (the great and notable example of this is seen in Psalm 18, where the glorious theophany proclaims that the living God is prepared to move heaven and earth to come to the aid of His people). This stands in very marked contrast to the emptiness and ineffectualness of the idols of the heathen, spoken of in 15-18. Only a living God can do things for His people. One readily recalls Elijah's taunting of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, with his 'Call him louder', and their frenzied and unavailing cries to their dumb idol. Well might the Psalmist exult in such a living God, and well might we!

## 130)*Psalm 135*

The point of the Psalmist's reference to the great historical acts of God on behalf of His people is not in doubt. As Maclaren says, 'The Psalmists are never weary of drawing confidence and courage for today from the deeds of the Exodus and the Conquest.... That Name, proclaimed then as the basis of Moses' mission and Israel's hope, is now, after so many centuries and sorrows, the same, and it will endure forever.... That judicial deliverance of Israel is at once a sign that His Name, His revealed character, continues the same, unexhausted and unchanged for ever, and the reason why the Name shall continue as the object of perpetual adoration and trust'. Ah yes, what He did once, He can do again. This is the point that is being made: confidence and courage for today from all He has done in the past. This is what it means when we speak of God being the God of history, for He is also the same yesterday, today and forever!

15-20 are taken almost word for word from Psalm 115. In 21, which looks back to the last verse of Psalm 133, speaking of the Lord's blessing coming out of Zion to His people, the people's blessing in return goes from Zion and rises to the Lord. 'They gathered there for worship, and dwelt with Him in His city and Temple. Swift interchange of the God-given blessing, which consists in mercies and gifts of gracious deliverance, and of the human blessing, which consists in thanksgiving and praise, fills the hours of those who dwell with Jehovah, as guests in His house, and walk the streets of the city which He guards and Himself inhabits' (Maclaren).

## 131)*Psalm 136*

This is a Psalm evidently intended for liturgical use. In this particular structure, it is unique in the Psalter. Probably the first line of each couplet was meant to be sung by the priest, with the congregation echoing the refrain 'His mercy endureth forever', each time. The exposition of this refrain therefore constitutes an exposition of half the entire Psalm. The Hebrew word for 'mercy' is 'hesedh', and is translated variously in the versions. The RSV has 'steadfast love', with NIV, NEB and TEV rendering it 'love'. The commentators ring the changes with words such as 'fidelity', 'loyalty', 'kindness'. The word actually refers to 'covenant-faithfulness' and 'covenant-mercy', with the emphasis on covenant. The idea of the covenant must certainly be read into any understanding of it. The word 'kindness' is a good one if we read into it the covenant idea. Perhaps the most striking reference we could look at - and there are many in the Old Testament - is Isaiah 54:10, with the verses on either side of it: 'For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee. What a message from on high at the outset of our study of this lovely Psalm - as, indeed, at the outset of any act of worship! What could be more calculated to warm the heart and make it go out in love and adoration to God!

### 132)*Psalm 136*

It is helpful to read the Psalm without the refrain (but not ever forgetting it!) to see what is being said in it and savour the richness of its teaching. After three verses of invocation (the first stanza, 1-3), in which a threefold summons to give thanks to God is given, the second and third stanzas (5-6 and 7-9) celebrate God as Creator. The emphasis in 5 on wisdom (or understanding) being involved in the creation surely implies that there is meaning, purpose and design in the universe for those with eyes to see it (cf Psalm 8:3ff), also implied is an understanding of what man, the crown of God's creation, might need in the world, hence the ordering of creation - earth, sun, moon and stars (6-9). Above all, the accompaniment of the refrain underlines very graphically that creation is an act of mercy, grace and love. The kindness of God toward man is seen in it, in that everything was right in every detail, with nothing left undone, before man was brought on the scene. This is the deepest truth about things God has made. 'They are the witnesses, as they are the result, of loving-kindness which endures forever'. In the next stanzas, 10-12, 13-15, 16-18, 19-22 - as in the previous Psalm - the celebration of the God of creation is followed by that of the God of history. It is a rehearsal of the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people. We need to remember that one constant point in recalling and recollecting these mighty acts is to realise that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Furthermore, all that is said in these verses is said against the background and in the context of the covenant. The judgment of Egypt was 'the other side', so to speak, of the fulfilling of the covenant grace to Israel; the pillar of cloud and fire, such a comfort and assurance to Israel, was a source of troubling to Egypt. This prompts the observation that God is One, and it is our attitude to Him, whether of obedience and submission, or rebellion and stubbornness, that determines how we find Him!

## 133)*Psalm 136*

The covenant idea is seen particularly in what is a remarkable allusion in 13, in the reference to the dividing of the Red Sea into parts. The word for 'dividing' means to hew in pieces or in two, while the word for 'parts' is a noun from the same root, and is found in Genesis 15:10, 17 to describe the two portions into which Abraham cut the carcasses in the ritual in which God made a covenant with him. This is what the Psalmist sees in that mighty event of the cleaving of the Red Sea - God going through between the two cleft pieces, and His people following His footsteps - the establishing of the covenant and the grateful response of His people accepting His grace. The use of these words must mean that that kind of significance was in the Psalmist's mind when he wrote them. Indeed, the whole Exodus and Passover operation was, in the thinking of the Old Testament saints, the instrument by which the covenant was established and Israel was constituted as the people of God and brought into fellowship and communion with Him. This is the real heart of the Psalm's message. If we have felt our sin, and realised how utterly it shuts us out from God and from heaven and from hope, and then experienced the covenant mercy, bringing forgiveness, cleansing and newness of life, then we know the wonder of God's covenant faithfulness, and realise in a new way that it is not something in us, but something in Him that has redeemed us. This is what the Psalmist exults in, the fact that in all the experiences through which Israel passed, in all the many vicissitudes of their chequered history, the God of the covenant remembered them (23ff) and delivered them, even in the lowest depths and extremities of their need. In 25 the range of the divine kindness extends to 'all flesh'. In a Psalm which extols covenant mercy to a chosen people, it is impressive to have this testimony to the fact that God's mercy is over all His works. This is, implicitly, an evangelistic thrust, as if to invite the 'stranger' into the blessings of the covenant.

## 134)*Psalm 137*

In many ways this Psalm is one of the most moving in the whole Psalter, standing in marked contrast to those that precede it. It is difficult to think of anything sweeter or sadder than this deeply felt picture of the exiles by the rivers of Babylon. But it is the conflicting emotions within its brief compass that move us most of all: 'The singer passes...from tender music breathing plaintive remembrance of the captive's lot, passionate devotion, and at last to an outburst of vehement imprecation, magnificent in its fiery rush, amply explicable by Israel's wrongs and Babylon's crimes...' (Maclaren). The Psalm evidently belongs to a time when the captivity in Babylon was passed, but only recently passed, with the bitter meaning of it still very vivid and still able to churn up the Psalmist's heart (Psalm126 also belongs to this period and its theme is the obverse of this one, and both need to be taken together to get the full flavour of the deliverance). The relation between the two Psalms can perhaps be illustrated in this way: in the Second World War, many men were held as prisoners of war, languishing for long weary years and pining for home, with many suffering untold horrors in concentration camps. When the allied armies liberated them, surely there must have been a dreamlike quality about their experience, in terms of Psalm 126, followed by rejoicing and glad exultation. But this also is true: for so many of them, there followed times when they recollected their imprisonment and all they suffered; and it is hardly possible for them even now to look back on these days without feeling moved and churned up all over again, in terms of Psalm 137. It is this latter experience that is reflected in these moving verses. There is ample evidence in Scripture to indicate what an appalling tragedy it was for Israel to be taken out of their land into captivity. This is one underlying reality in the deep emotion of the Psalm. But more: they wept when they remembered Zion because they realised now why they had been taken captive. It was their sin, and their having sat light to their privileges and their neglect of their calling to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and their remembering this when it was too late. In this regard, it is easy to see how what is said in 3 about singing the songs of Zion must have rubbed salt in their wounds. They must have felt they would never have the opportunity to sing to the Lord in their homeland and in their Temple ever again. This is the context in which we must seek to understand the message of the Psalm.

## 135)*Psalm 137*

Israel was in captivity, and in captivity because of sin; and the contemptuous amusement on the part of their captors in asking them to sing must have been very bitter for them, stinging them deeply, the more so since they were conscious of their sin. It was like being kicked when they were down. And the world that is hostile to God and the things of God is never slow to rub it in when His people have fallen and failed, and marred their testimony. It will pour its contempt upon us to compound our shame. But that very shame sends a new spirit into repentant Israel, and in 5, 6 we see a surge of passionate renewal of vows, a taking a stand, a committing of themselves to God. 'Remembering Jerusalem' is equivalent to 'remembering God', and to making Him the object of trust, consecration and devotion in a renewal of vows, and bringing themselves back into a true position and calling as His peculiar people. That is the upshot, the result, of this recollection. And, paradoxically, although they feel they cannot sing the Lord's song in a strange land, this experience through which they passed became one of the precious songs of Zion! The words 'If I forget Thee' (5) were being said after their return from exile; but they also truly reflect their attitude before the return, while still in captivity, the new attitude that the discipline of exile had produced in them, and now, back in the land, they see clearly the issues, and express the prayer and longing that they might never forget again!

## 136)*Psalm 137*

It is noteworthy that 5, 6 constitute a twofold imprecation or curse that the Psalmist calls down on himself for unfaithfulness and sin, before ever he calls down imprecation and vengeance upon Edom and Babylon in 7-9. He does not spare himself in these judgments. This should be borne in mind in considering those others to be visited on Israel's enemies. If he, the Psalmist, was to be counted worthy of judgment if he forgot Jerusalem or continued to think lightly of her, so also were Edom and Babylon worthy of judgment for continued impenitence. That is the first point we need to consider in these difficult verses. The second is this: the Psalmist's words echo Isaiah's in Isaiah 13:16-18. He is simply taking up what had already been said about Babylon in that prophecy, and making it his own. Thirdly, this is not an isolated utterance. There are others of the same ilk in the Psalter, as for example, the closing words in Psalm 139 (19ff) of which James Denney says, 'I cannot think that in a mind so great as that of the writer of this Psalm - and one might even say in a work of art so perfect - there should be an unprovoked and sudden lapse into mere inconsistency. There must be a connexion in thought between these passionate words and what precedes.' Denney goes on to add, 'Where the Psalmist is right, and where we must not fail beneath his insight, is in the clear perception that the reality of religion involves conflict - that what is going on among men in the world is a battle in which the cause of God is at stake - a battle, and not a sham fight. God is not in the same sense on both sides. It is not a game of draughts in which the same hand moves the blacks and the whites. It is a matter of life and death, and the Psalmist is in it for life and death, with his whole heart. So must everyone be who would prove what the presence of God in life means'. That is something worth thinking about, is it not?

## 137)*Psalm 138*

There is considerable divergence of view as to the writer of this Psalm and the time in Old Testament history to which it refers, some following the ascription at the head of the Psalm and taking it as it claims to be - a Psalm of David - and others referring the deliverance mentioned in it to the restoration from the captivity, making it of a piece with the previous one. There is little doubt that the Psalm suits the latter interpretation, and one would have no great objection to this way of looking at it but for the fact that it has reference to David in its ascription. The application of a Psalm to one circumstance or another is very legitimate, but it is one thing so to do, and quite another to assert that this is why the Psalm was written. For our purposes, it will be sufficient to take it as a song in which the Psalmist praises the Lord for some unmentioned mercy that has been bestowed upon him. If we look at it at its simplest, we realise that there were different occasions when David could with real cause have sung the praises of this Psalm. We see, for example, from 3 that it was a time of trouble and stress, and we know from the historical record that David had his fill of these, especially in earlier days. But whatever the circumstance, it is clear that in it the Psalmist experienced a great deliverance that set his heart singing with joy and exultation. The phrase in 1 'before the gods' is a significant one, and has the force of 'in face of the false gods that abound'. It is as if he had said 'Even in an hostile and alien environment will I sing Thy praise', for God's deliverance had taken place in such a context for him (cf Romans 8:37, 'In all these things...more than conquerors').

## 138)*Psalm 138*

We must now consider the important statement in 2b, 'Thou hast magnified Thy word above all Thy Name'. What can this mean? The modern versions, particularly the RSV and NIV, have taken the liberty of amending the text to give a different rendering from the AV, but the AV certainly follows the Hebrew original, and should be followed here. In the literal sense, of course, as has been said, 'The name of God cannot be surpassed by any single act of His, since every single act is but a manifestation of that name'. But the Psalmist transcends the literal, for he has experienced something wonderful; and if 'word' here refers to the word of deliverance by which the Lord answered him (3), it is not surprising that that 'word' had surpassed anything that he had ever known of God up to that time. It is as if he were saying, 'I know that Thou art a great and wonderful God, but this - this is the biggest thing that has ever happened to me!' (for a similar attitude cf Psalm 55:1). As Maclaren puts it, 'A heart amazed by the greatness of recent blessings is ever apt to think that they, glittering in fresh beauty, are greater, as they are nearer and newer, than the mercies which it has only heard of as of old. Today brings growing revelations of Jehovah to the waiting heart'. One readily thinks of the wonderful statement in Acts 19:20, 'So mightily grew the Word of God and prevailed', the Word became a bigger and greater thing - something surely impossible in the literal sense, but wonderfully real in spiritual experience, just as real as the experience described in 3b, which has been rendered 'Thou didst embolden me with strength in my soul', and which we would in modern parlance interpret to mean 'made me walk ten-feet tall'. What a boost to one's spiritual morale!

## 139)*Psalm 138*

Maclaren says, of 3b, 'The consciousness of inbreathed strength welling up in his soul gave him lofty confidence to confront foes' - yes, and also equip him for what is described in 5-6, the bearing of the message to the world at large. This was Israel's true calling as the people of God, a light to lighten the Gentiles, not always or even often fulfilled, it is true; but it is significant that it was in the highest moments of praise, worship and exaltation that the truest realisation of what that calling was came home to David. But, as Kidner comments, 'The vision of 5-6 waits to be realised, and times are hard', as 7, 8 indicate. The Psalmist comes down to earth again in these verses, yes; but the previous verses are not a dream, they are reality even if only in the foretaste. And the fact that deliverance came on that particular occasion is an assurance to him that it will come on other occasions also. Past blessings, and the spirit of praise that is awakened by them, gives a great assurance in every kind of trouble. God's help is not exhausted in the deliverance wrought in 3: others, and even greater, are still to come. He controls all battles, all situations, and will not cease to be our Helper. Indeed, He 'will perfect that which concerneth' us. As the hymn says,

The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.

This is assurance indeed, and when this is given us we need never fear the ultimate outcome of any trial or pressure. As Paul puts it, 'He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6).

## 140)*Psalm 139*

On any estimate this is a truly wonderful Psalm, and one can appreciate Alexander Maclaren's view that it is 'the noblest utterance in the Psalter'. It comprises four regular stanzas, each of six verses: 1-6, God the all-seeing; 7-12, God the all-knowing; 13-18, God the all-creating; 19-25, God the all-holy. James Denney says of the first stanza: 'We are apt to speak in this connexion of God's omniscience, but there is nothing about omniscience in the Psalm. Omniscience is an abstract noun, and abstract nouns are unequal to the intense feeling of the passage. The important thing in religion is not the belief that God is omniscient but the experience that God knows me, and it is on this the Psalmist dwells...'. Maclaren echoes the same thought when he says that it is 'not mere omniscience, but a knowledge which knows him altogether, nor mere omnipresence, but a knowledge which he can nowhere escape, not mere creative power, but a power which shaped him, that fill and thrill the Psalmist's soul.' It is the kind of consciousness that touched the woman of Samaria at her conversion, as the unknown divine love broke in upon her - 'Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did' (John 4:29). To say 'God knows' is to say that He knows the worst about us - and still cares. It is wonderment here, not terror, that fills the soul in this awareness, and this is what the Psalmist expresses in the wonderful words with which the psalm opens. Well might he say in 6 that such knowledge is too wonderful for him. But, as we have sometimes said, what our minds cannot express our hearts may surely know, and this is exactly the message that the first stanza of the Psalm conveys.

## 141)*Psalm 139*

If one's first reaction to the message of the opening stanza of the Psalm is the wonder expressed in 6, the second may be the urge to escape, which appears to animate the thoughts expressed in 7-12. It might be asked why anyone could wish to flee from the Presence of such a God, but this question underlines one of the great paradoxes and mysteries of human experience, which is that in spite of ourselves there is an instinctive desire within us to hide from God our sins. The truth of the matter is that we are made for God (this is the theme of the third stanza, 13-18), and even in our revolt against Him in our sin, we do not cease to be destined for Him, and this means that our experience oscillates between a desire to escape from Him on the one hand, and a longing for His peace on the other. The Psalmist becomes aware, in such an experience (and it is an experience as old as the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve tried to hide from the presence of the Lord and discovered they could not), that there is no escape from this incredibly vital and vibrant Presence, not even in hell itself. Indeed, if there could be escape from Him there, hell would somehow be bearable. It is because even there there is no escape from Him that hell is hell, for the essence of sin is to want away from God, and it is unbearable not to be away from Him. But we should not forget the other side of the paradox in this, which is that there is no circumstance in which this Omnipresent God does not stand with us. As truly as His presence confronts us, that presence also reassures us. For as our Creator He has a responsibility for us. He does not abandon the things He has made. He cares for us, as the crown of His creation, and He makes it His concern to look after our interests. He does not abdicate responsibility for us. This has further important implications for us which we shall look at in the next Note.

## 142)*Psalm 139*

Not only does God as Creator not abdicate responsibility for us, He has 'thoughts unto us' (17), thoughts of peace, not of evil (Jeremiah 29:11). He has purposes of grace for us, taking us up and destining us to share His eternal glory. There is both comfort and challenge in this - comfort, in that His love will therefore never let us go, but also challenge in that there is a grim determination about the care of God for us. This is why we sometimes want to escape from Him, His care is too personal and inexorable, and His is a love that will not let us off, strong enough to resist pity for us until the divine discipline does its gracious work in us. He is too faithful to His own to 'let up', He refuses to allow us to be anything less and lower than He has destined us to be and sees we can be.

The final stanza seems at first glance to breathe a spirit so different from the exalted strains of what has gone before it that it is dismissed by some as unworthy of the noble sentiments of the previous verses, a regrettable and unseemly lapse into a savage and inhuman temper. But this is a facile and superficial estimate. Denney says: 'I cannot think that in a mind so great as that of the writer of this Psalm there should be an unprovoked and sudden lapse into mere inconsistency. There must be a connexion in thought between these passionate words and what precedes.... Where the Psalmist is right, and where we must not fall beneath his insight, is in the clear perception that the reality of religion involves conflict - that what is going on among men in the world is a battle in which the cause of God is at stake - a battle, and not a sham fight. God is not in the same sense on both sides. It is not a game of draughts in which the same hand moves the blacks and the whites. It is a matter of life and death, and the Psalmist is in it for life or death, with his whole heart.' This view is confirmed in the beauty of the closing prayer of the Psalm (23, 24), in which far from shrinking from God's all-seeing eye he welcomes its searching gaze. He realises that the divine love is a love to be utterly trusted. Do we see it this way?

### 143)*Psalm 140*

This is one of several Psalms, which echo a deep sense of need and helplessness, and utter a cry to God for His aid in time of extremity. It follows the familiar pattern we have seen in many earlier Psalms of the development of a great confidence in God through having poured out the heart to Him. Hence, in 7, the consciousness of timely help, and in 12, 13, the glad assurance that God will vindicate. Another common ground it shares with earlier Psalms is the reality of the enemies, bearing witness to the truth that in the spiritual life there can be no such thing as an easy road. There is a war on, and times are often difficult. The fact of enemies in the Psalter has a simple and categorical explanation: one cannot take a stand for God (as the psalmist did) without encountering opposition and enmity. The kingdom of God is a divisive force. The particular kind of enmity here may be open to question, but there does seem to be a marked similarity to Psalm 65, a Psalm which unfolds a situation of politico/religious strife with the Psalmist representing the orthodox party, upholding ancient tradition, and his enemies the innovators whose attitude was to sit light to the traditional values of the faith. This is something of wide relevance and application to the present day, both in the contemporary revolt against authority and traditional morality and also in the reaction against conservative theological positions and traditional orthodoxy. When one thinks of the opposition, and the ridicule expressed towards evangelical testimony over the years, in spite of all the evidences of its fruitfulness and effectiveness, one can readily see how practical an application the Psalmist's words have - and how wonderfully encouraging also, for the Psalm is in effect saying to us, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?'

### 144)*Psalm 140*

The imprecations in 8-11 follow a similar pattern to those in other Psalms, and it will suffice on this occasion to repeat what we have said at other times. For one thing, the Psalmist is simply stating what he believes God would do, rather than giving expression to something he himself will do, to his enemies. Furthermore, it needs to be recognised that at times injustice is so hardening and impervious to better influence that there is nothing left except judgment. Also, to consider such imprecations as heathen and sub-Christian conveniently ignores the fact that the New Testament itself contains many evidences of judgment that would have to be included in such a condemnation. What do such critics make of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, for example (Acts 5:1ff), or of the Pauline directives in 1 Corinthians 5:3ff and 1 Timothy 1:20 about delivering an unrepentant offender to Satan for the destruction of the flesh? Must they not be, to say the least, embarrassed by our Lord's words in Matthew 18:15ff about 'binding and loosing'? We should not ever lose sight of the fact that so often in the imprecatory Psalms the Psalmist is appealing to God, not taking the law into his own hands, in the confidence that since vengeance belongs to Him, He will repay.

## 145)*Psalm 140*

The great value of the Psalm for us is that it tells us what to do when under pressure. In this regard three things may be underlined. The first is: speaking to God (6) - 'I said unto The Lord...'. This is really an affirmation of faith: in an act of recollection the Psalmist realises afresh who he is. This is independent of any feelings he may have had at the time, and an exercise of faith and of will. Faith must fly in the face of all the dark denials our feelings may be making at the time. In the second place, in 7, the phrase 'Thou hast covered my head' represents a recollection of past deliverances. What God did once, He can do again, and the implication is: do it again, Lord. The actual imagery in the word 'covered' seems to be analogous to 'the helmet of salvation' (Ephesians 6:17), and if so it bears witness to the importance of right thinking about God. A mind constantly taken up with thoughts of our great salvation is a mind that will be kept safe from the onslaughts of the enemy. In the third place, in 12, the words 'I know' represent the end product of the assertion of faith. Faith grows with prayer and recollection - in the midst of the battle. For, of course, we must recognise that nothing is as yet changed in the Psalmist's situation: it is he who has changed, and the consciousness of dwelling in His presence is the one decisive reality for him.

In heavenly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid;
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?

## 146)*Psalm 141*

Here is another Psalm, which echoes a deep sense of need and utters a cry to God for His aid. There have been differing interpretations of it. Some consider it as a penitential Psalm, uttered by one deeply conscious of his own shortcomings, and take 3-5 as expressing or at least implying the nature of these shortcomings. Maclaren is nearer the mark, however, in suggesting it is a prayer for deliverance from temptation to sin in word or deed. 'The Psalmist is not suffering from the hostility of the workers of iniquity, but dreads becoming infected by their sin'. The temptation is, clearly, very real for him, and it is probably best to take the distress that is expressed as indicating, not so much falling into sin, as a very real temptation to do so. Perhaps what we should say is that this kind of sin (expressed in 3- 5) was a real fear for him, for he knew his weakness in that direction. This is indicated very graphically in 1, in the words 'make haste unto me'. Nor is this any meretricious cry, from someone suddenly caught out by temptation, living a superficial, complacent and low-level carnal life. Indeed, the very opposite is true, for we see in 2 that the Psalmist has got through to the inner reality of Temple worship. Not for him any mere outward religious observance, or the using of the ritual as an empty, even magical charm. Rather, he had got through to the very heart of Israel's religion. This is a truly spiritual man. The thought of prayer as incense is a very beautiful and moving one, and it conveys the idea that as a sweet smelling savour it gives pleasure to God, and is precious in His sight. We think far less of what our worship and praise mean to God than we ought - it is part of our 'earth-boundness' and man-centredness that we so often think of what it means, and does, for us.

### 147)*Psalm 141*

Kidner finely and perceptively points out that the request in 3ff flows naturally from what is said in 2: 'Out of the same mouth there must not flow blessing and cursing (cf 3 with James 3:9ff); and if the house of God needed its guards and doorkeepers, how much more the man of God!' This works both ways, for on the one hand, prayer as incense (i.e. true prayer) is something that will exercise a restraining influence on Christian character and make a man a certain kind of person, while on the other, if cursing flows from our lips, it will but prove that our prayer is empty, false and hypocritical. Kidner suggests that the prayer in 5 is similar in emphasis to the words in the Lord's Prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation', and thereby entrusts to God 'the first springs of thought and will'. There is something very important here. We sometimes quote the phrase - and surely rightly! - 'Resist beginnings'. This is the point at which resistance can be effective, for later on can be not only difficult but impossible. The reference to 'eating of their dainties' surely implies a degree of involvement that could be very dangerous for the believer, reminding one of Lot 'pitching his tent towards Sodom' and finally sitting in the gate. This is devastatingly relevant today in the kind of world we live in; it is precisely here that so many testimonies are lost and betrayed, and Christians hopelessly compromised. It is much safer (5) to be in the company of the righteous, even though this may well be uncomfortable and disturbing to our careless and compromising tendencies, for it will in the end bring a robustness to the spirit, like a walk on a crisp autumn day, with the wind blowing in your face and making you tingle. One commentator suggests that the implication in 5 seems to be that some godly friend has seen the danger the Psalmist is falling into, and bluntly challenges him about it. This is true to life: we resent home truths when they are unpleasant, but right people are prepared to take rebuke and correction. And when they do they are brought out into a large place, and become bigger people because of it.

## 148)*Psalm 141*

The meaning in 6 seems to be that those led astray into opposition against the Psalmist will at last see the error of their opposition, when their 'leaders' ('judges', AV) are overthrown, and will now listen gladly to him. That is to say the stand of no compromise at last proves its point, and wins through to vindication. The final verses of the Psalm (7-10) speak of the triumph of faith. The reference to 'bones' in 7 calls to mind Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of dry bones and the miracle of their being brought to be by the power of God, and the message here is very similar. When one's eyes are upon the Lord (8), as the Psalmist's were, not even the total devastation described in 7 can be regarded as beyond help or hope. It is rather wonderful to see how this man's faith lays hold upon God in the midst of his troubles. The danger is not yet over for him, and the pressures of evil men were still very much to the fore, with gins and snares (9) still a hazard for him. But his trust is in God. The word translated here (8) as 'trust' conveys the idea of 'refuge'. This indicates that faith is something active: the Psalmist runs to his shelter, and this (10) is his means of escape, slipping through the enemy's net with the help of God. A good illustration of this is found in 1 Samuel 23:19-29 which describes one of David's dramatic escapes from the hand of Saul - how easy it was for God to deliver His servant as that story makes plain. He is more than able to render powerless the forces of evil arrayed against His people, and since this is so, these final verses of the Psalm must not so much be regarded as a despairing cry as an expression of confident hope in a God Who can do impossible things and turn the wrath of man to praise Him.

## 149)*Psalm 142*

Here is another in a series of Psalms full of urgent need and distress. It is brief in compass, but it has many lessons to teach us, particularly about the experience of feeling utterly helpless and alone in an alien world, with none to care, and none to hold out a helping hand. There are so many human circumstances through which we pass that can provide the framework for an understanding and appreciation of this Psalm and in which 'a cry for help' rings out - the 'being up against it', the 'inability to cope any longer', the 'overwhelming sense of desolation' that any number of different experiences bring upon us - heartbreak, sorrow, bereavement, loneliness, rejection, alienation - every verse contains its own particular anguish, expressing the extent of the psalmist's distress and need. There is a problem involved in determining the context of the psalm. Its title speaks of David 'being in the cave' - probably the cave of Adullam, his headquarters during the time when he was on the run from King Saul (cf Psalm 57, a companion piece). However, in 7, the Psalmist prays to be delivered out of prison. If, then, David is 'in the cave', the 'prison' must be a figurative expression. Some scholars however take 'prison' literally and refer the Psalm to a situation in which the Psalmist has been the victim of a slanderous accusation in which he had been wrongfully imprisoned, possibly in relation to party-strife. Kidner, while taking the reference to David's circumstances, recognises that taking it the other way is 'A useful reminder that the Psalms were (and are) for all to use and make their own'. And he adds, 'But in the first instance it is David who dares to visualize the day when he is no longer shunned or hunted, but thronged, or even crowned.'

## 150)*Psalm 142*

The speaking out loud of the cry of need and the prayer, in 1, 2, is significant, and commentators have been quick to underline this. One says 'the sound of one's own voice in prayer tends to realism and sincerity'; another says 'The outpouring of complaint is not meant to tell Jehovah what He does not know. It is for the complainer's relief, not for God's information'. But there is a psychological advantage of putting trouble into words: 'It then seems less threatening; we have its measure after we have stated it'. This is very true: as long as it is nameless, it is unidentified, and therefore frightening; once we call it something, it is at least finite. Maclaren says, 'Wonderful is the power of articulate utterance in defining, and often in diminishing, sorrow. Put into words, many a burden shrinks. Speaking his grief, many a man is calmed, and braced to endure'. There is a problem in 3, in that the two parts of the verse do not seem to belong together in thought. One suggestion is that the first phrase in 3 should be linked with 2b, i.e. 'I showed before Him my trouble when my spirit was overwhelmed within me'. The rest of the verse would then read 'but thou knewst my path, that in the way wherein I walked they laid a snare for me'. But even if we take it as it stands in the AV there is still the contrast, a very reassuring one, that although his enemies laid a snare for him, God knows all about it. This is probably the better way to take the verse, namely, that there is the sense of being utterly overwhelmed, but also the knowledge and realisation that God knew his path, not only at that moment, but what it would be, and where it would be, in the future, including all the snares his enemies could lay for him. The path ahead, therefore, can know no problems for God. As the old hymn puts it,

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

### 151)*Psalm 143*

The depth of the Psalmist's plight is underlined very graphically in 4. The words 'no man' are underlined twice, and this stands in contrast to what is said in the next verse (5) - no man - but there is God. No refuge in man, but He is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. The desolation, however, expressed in 4 is very deep and extreme, but it has two results: first of all, his utter helplessness makes him fling himself into the arms of God (5). Secondly, the prayer in 6 passes into calmness, even when he is fully conscious of the peril, and the power of his enemies. He gets hold of God, and - something more - he becomes conscious of 'the righteous'. This can only mean that the earlier sense of being utterly on his own was mistaken. How often this is the case! One recalls Elijah's words, 'I, even I only, am left...'. But Elijah was wrong, for there were the 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. So it is here: the Psalmist was not alone; there were the righteous who, all along, it may be, had had him on their hearts and in their prayers, and who would gather to him. It is appropriate in this connection to remember what is said in 1 Samuel 22:1, 2, which describe precisely such a gathering of the righteous to him: '...there were with him about four hundred men' and they were made into an army, that became the nucleus of his future kingdom. Well might Psalm 68:6 say, 'God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains'.

## 152)*Psalm 143*

Here is another Psalm similar in content and emphasis to the previous one, with common authorship and perhaps common experience. Interestingly enough, the word 'overwhelm' in 4 has been rendered 'wraps itself in gloom in me', or 'swathed in dark robes of melancholy'. This perhaps indicates the kind of dark experience referred to in the Psalm. There is one difference, however, from Psalm 142 - here (2, 3) the Psalmist knows that his affliction is deserved. 'His enemy could not have hunted and crushed him unless God had been thereby punishing him. His peril has forced home the penitent conviction of his sin, and therefore he must first have matters set right between him and God by divine forgiveness' (Maclaren). This is clearly borne out by the 'For' in 3: the enemies' acts were, to him, those of God's stern justice. And the 'dark robes of melancholy' need to be related to this - not only the fact of having sinned, but also, even when forgiveness has followed confession, the distress and darkness that continue to oppress, either from the difficulty of accepting the divine forgiveness, or from the continuing sense of shame and upset at having 'blotted one's copy book'. The Psalm divides clearly into two sections, with 1-6 voicing the Psalmist's complaint, and 7-12 his prayer and petition. In turn, each of the two sections is divided into two parts: 1-3, the Psalmist's peril; 5-6, the Psalmist's feelings. Then, in the second section, 7-9 gives the Psalmist's cry for deliverance, and 10-12 the prayer for enlightenment and rehabilitation. This is a convenient way to study the Psalm and we shall look at the various sub-sections in the Notes that follow.

## 153)*Psalm 143*

The Psalmist makes the basis of his prayer God's faithfulness and righteousness (1). It is nothing in him, not even the urgency of his need, but something in God to which he appeals, and this is continued in 2 in the implicit cry for mercy. It is the doctrine of justification by grace alone that is in view, and this is graphically underlined in 3b, in which the Psalmist is in effect saying, 'I am already as good as dead'. This is the predicament for which the justifying mercy of God is the alone remedy. In 4-6 the words he uses to describe his feelings are graphic indeed. Scholars tell us that the word 'overwhelmed' translates a Hebrew word which contains the thought of 'dullness' and is used to describe the wick of a lamp which is but faintly glowing (cf 'the dimly burning flax' in Isaiah 42:3). It also has the force of 'indifference', or 'torpor' caused by exhaustion. Maclaren says that the Psalmist's heart was 'stunned or benumbed, so that it almost ceased to beat'. This is surely an experience very common in times of acute and extreme stress, especially the sense of numbness. The question arises: What does one do in such a situation? What the Psalmist did is described in 5, and this is one of the very important lessons of the Psalm. As Maclaren puts it 'He will compel his thoughts to take another direction, and call Memory in to fight Despair and feed Hope'. This speaks of a spiritual exercise of the highest quality, for in fact what tends to happen in such a situation is that one becomes very preoccupied with one's burdens and problems, so much so that mind and consciousness becomes clouded and almost totally submerged by them. We brood, turning inward, and tend to become incapable of lifting up our heads. And it is often a tremendous act of will simply to give one's mind another direction and turn it to other things, and specifically 'the days of old' - not, indeed, in the sense of fruitless nostalgia for other times and places but rather recollection of what God can do. Look what it did for the Psalmist in Psalm 77:5, 6, 10, when he remembered 'the years of the right hand of the Most High'. It is in this context that we must understand the longing expressed in 6, for it is a longing awakened by the remembrance of the 'days of old'.

## 154)*Psalm 143*

The second main section of the Psalm (7-12) unfolds the Psalmist's prayer, first for deliverance (7-9), then for enlightenment and rehabilitation (10-12). In 7-9 there are four petitions, the first for the shining of God's face (7) and the consciousness of His love and tender care for him, for without this it is really despair for him. Secondly, there is the longing for the dawn (8). There seems to be a play with words here, for his time of affliction has been like a dark night, and he longs for the morning to come to end it. One readily recalls the words in Psalm 30:5, 'Joy cometh in the morning' and Psalm 46:5, 'God shall help her, and that right early', where the latter phrase has been elsewhere translated 'when morning cometh'. Thirdly, there is the prayer for guidance (8b), and practical direction in the way he should go; and fourthly, he prays for deliverance (9). It is noteworthy that throughout these petitions there is the clear assertion of his faith - 'in Thee do I trust', 'I lift up my soul unto Thee', 'I flee unto Thee to hide me'. Next follows his prayer for enlightenment and rehabilitation (10-12) - 'teach me', 'lead me', 'quicken me'. Significantly, he is concerned not merely to know the divine will, but to do it. But the obedience involved is something that can be taught only by God (ff Philippians 2:13, 'Both to will and to do of His good pleasure'). The prayer for guidance is different in 10; here, it is for 'a level land' (land of uprightness, AV), one in which the Psalmist can walk freely, unhindered in doing God's will. The prayer for quickening (11) reminds us that without the imparting of divine life 'no teaching to do God's will can be assimilated, and no circumstances, however favourable, will conduce to doing it' (Maclaren). This, then, is what 'remembering' (5) has done for the Psalmist. He has 'remembered' to some purpose, and his soul has thereby been lifted to a higher plain. What a change, and what a desire now to cleave to the Lord!

## 155)*Psalm 144*

Many commentators maintain that the theme and subject-matter of the last verses of this Psalm (12-15) is so different from that of 1-11 that it has to be regarded as part of a completely different Psalm, which some editor of the Psalm has, for his own reasons, tagged on to the earlier part (1-11). Even Maclaren takes this view, saying of 12-15 'It is completely unlike the former part, inasmuch as there the speaker is a war-like king praying for victory, while in the latter the nation sings of the tranquil blessings of peaceful expansion'. But it is not necessary to suppose anything of the sort about this Psalm, for the connection between the picture in 12-15 of true prosperity, wellbeing and peace and what is said in 1-11 is a very real one, as we hope to show in these comments.

Most of the material in the first 11 verses is drawn from other Psalms, notably Psalm 18 (which see). And the point, both here and in Psalm 18, is that the Psalmist lifted up his voice to God in prayer for deliverance in his distress. His eyes were upon the Lord, and for him prayer was the all-important thing. This is the force of the 'quote' from Psalm 8 in 3, 4 about the 'nothingness' of man (cf also Psalm 39:5) - mere human effort is helpless in face of the dangers and hazards of life, with enemies threatening us and looming over us. But where Psalm18 is a thanksgiving for what God did for the Psalmist in answer to his prayer - a wonderful divine intervention - here, in Psalm 144, it is a prayer for divine intervention of the same sort to help him in his present distress and peril. As Kidner puts it, 'Recollection is now the springboard for intercession (5ff). Where Psalm 18 had looked back in wonder, this Psalm looks steadfastly up to heaven for a comparable act of rescue'. And this is surely the message of the Psalm for today: if we want a better world, safe for our children, and prosperous in the best sense, as described in 12-15, we need to look to God to bring it about.

### 156)*Psalm 144*

The central emphasis of the Psalm is that prayer does do things and change things, and brings real power down from on high. It is the paramountcy of prayer - crying to God - rather than the useless and futile alternatives that make their shrill and strident cries to our society today, alternatives that have little time for God or the things of God, and little interest in any real spiritual or even moral dimension, but want the kind of society spoken of in the last verses of the Psalm without the one essential reality - God! One well-known and perceptive journalist has written, 'Wars and weapons, even nuclear rockets, have their place in the providential scheme, and the way to confront them is not by protest, which is futile, but prayer'. We would be better served by crowds thronging the churches and cathedrals of the land wanting to pray and cry to God, than by making protests, whether at the Houses of Parliament or Greenham Common or in any public thoroughfare of our cities. It is not without significance that the clerics who are most involved in the protest movement of our time do not seem to be very interested in the power of prayer or in organising mass prayer meetings and crying to God for His help. One of the great and compelling lessons of the Psalter, and not only this particular Psalm, is the belief in prayer as a force in history, and the picture it gives of the church at prayer to the Lord of history.

### 157)*Psalm 144*

In relation to what was said at the end of the previous note it needs to be said that one of the greatest needs in the life of the Church is to repent of its failure - our failure - to be a praying force in the world and to cry to Him of whom it is said, 'By terrible things in righteousness wilt thou answer us, O God of our salvation' (Psalm 65:5). Prof. T.F. Torrance, in his book, 'The Apocalypse Today', commenting on Revelation 8:3-5, writes 'What are the real master-powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayer of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth. And so St John tells us he saw the angel take the censer which was filled with the prayers of the saints, kindle it with fire from God's altar, and then cast it upon the earth'. And he goes on to express the longing that the Church really understood the power of prayer like this, since it is through prayer that the Spirit of God comes upon the Church in tongues of fire. This, then, is how we must understand the final verses of the Psalm (12-15). The picture of true peace and prosperity is possible of fulfilment only in relation to what is referred to in 1-11 - the coming down of God in power. The most important thing we can do for our young generation, and those yet to come, is to pray for national renewal. And the recovery of a faith in the power of prayer must be a necessary first step. Lord, teach us to pray.

## 158)*Psalm 145*

This is an acrostic Psalm, that is, one with verses beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the exception of the letter 'nun', which does not appear in the standard Hebrew text but ancient translations, and now a text from Qumran, according to Kidner, supply the missing verse, and the RSV and NIV both include it in a new 13b, 'The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds'. The Psalm celebrates the glories of the character and works of God from the fourfold point of view - His greatness (1-6); His goodness (7-10); His kingdom (11-13); and the universality of His beneficence (14-21). It is noteworthy that the emphasis in the Psalm is all Godward: it looks up at Him, rather than in at the Psalmist. This is so much a characteristic of the Psalm, even in those verses which deal with the Psalmist's inner conflicts, distresses and longings, for even in these, he still looks up to God as his refuge and help. This is a salutary and healthy emphasis, objective rather than subjective, God-centred rather than man-centred. This is true worship indeed. In the next place, we see, in 1-6, how the Psalmist's personal praise mingles with that of all generations of men. This is very significant. Elsewhere, the Psalmist says 'O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together' (Psalm 34:3). It is surely the recognition that, while it is right and proper to offer to God our personal praise, it must never remain solitary, but join with that of others. The need for worship to be corporate - 'with all saints' (Ephesians 3:18) underlines the truth that God gives Himself without reserve to His people, and bestows His best and choicest blessings upon His Church, as distinct from individuals in that Church.

## 159)*Psalm 145*

The tone of the ascriptions of praise throughout the Psalm is reminiscent of the emphasis in so much of the New Testament in the words 'blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...'. In the Epistles, the word 'blessed' translates the Greek 'eulogetos' which means 'speak well of'. True praise and worship is ever 'speaking well of God'. It is surely one's delight and joy to speak well of someone you love (cf parents speaking of their children - sometimes this is inappropriate because it is excessive, but one understands the impulse and motive very well!). And if we love God, we shall want to speak well of Him and it will be our delight to do so. Nor shall we ever lack a basis on which to formulate our praise, for His mighty acts wrought for us in Christ must surely fill our hearts with gratitude and joy. In 7-10, it is the goodness of God that is celebrated, and this may well be linked with what has been said in 1-6, for His mighty acts in Christ are manifestations of His wonderful goodness. The Hebrew for 'goodness' is translated in the Greek LXX by the word which means the 'benignity' of God, of which Trench says that it is 'a beautiful word, as it is the expression of a beautiful grace...not a mere grace of word and countenance, but one pervading and penetrating the whole nature, mellowing there all which would have been harsh and austere; thus wine is 'chrestos', which has been mellowed with age (Luke 5:39); Christ's yoke is 'chrestos', as having nothing harsh or galling about it (Matthew 11:30)'. The nature and quality of that goodness is unfolded in 8, which is almost a verbatim quote from Exodus 34:6, which in turn follows upon the reference to the divine goodness in Exodus 33:19. What a picture of the God of the Old Testament this gives. Well might we think of Faber's words when we consider 9:

There's wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man's mind.

### 160)*Psalm 145*

The kingship and the kingdom of God are the theme in 11-13, and these verses parallel 1-6, with the majestic attributes of God in view - glory, power, mighty acts, everlasting dominion. How true Paul was to this concept in his preaching, in proclaiming 'another king, one Jesus' (Acts 17:7). Finally, in 14-21, it is the universality of His beneficence. Concerning this the Psalmist says four things: first of all, there is help for the inadequate - 'all that fall'. It is God's power to revive lost hope and failed abilities that is in view here. Maclaren says, 'The universality of man's weakness is pathetically testified by this verse. Those who are in the act of falling are upheld by Him; those who have fallen are helped to regain their footing. Universal sustaining and restoring grace are His'. Secondly, this God provides food for all His creatures (15, 16). As Kidner puts it, 'It is the Creator's generous joy in His world' that is underlined, and this is further confirmed in our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Take no thought...' (Matthew 5:45; 6:25ff). Thirdly, this God is a God Who answers prayer, but we should note the qualifications laid down in 18, 19 - 'all that call upon Him', and that call upon Him 'in truth', fulfilling the desire of 'them that fear Him'. True fear of God gives direction and limitation to prayer. But, given the true relationship to Him, He is really the Hearer of prayer. Finally, there is protection for God's people (20). 'Preserveth' here means 'watches over', and it is the guardian care of God that is in view (cf Psalm 121). How much, in the light of all this, is there to praise Him for, and to speak well of Him (21)!

## 161)*Psalm 146*

The last five Psalms of the Psalter are Psalms of praise, each beginning and ending with 'Hallelujah', 'Praise ye the Lord'. Kidner usefully comments, 'In this respect, as in many others, the Psalms are a miniature of our story as a whole, which will end in unbroken blessing and delight'. The emphasis in the first two verses is 'a life-time of praise'. These verses are undoubtedly the inspiration of Isaac Watts' great hymn, 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath', and it would be a blessing and benediction to read through that entire hymn as a commentary on the psalmist's words. In 3, 4 the warning not to trust in princes, coming at the outset of the Psalm, seems to have a specific reference - a specific action, perhaps, on the part of Jewish rulers, some fairly prominent programme in politics which the Psalmist deprecates and sees as being futile. It surely does not need much imagination on our part to apply this to our own situation today - one thinks of many initiatives, protest movements and the like, which proclaim that cause without any real reference to God, but rather leaning on the arm of flesh. This is the tragedy of our situation: man has no real and lasting help or solution to offer or give. These verses constitute a call by the Psalmist to refer the national situation to a spiritual dimension. The helplessness of mortal man stands in contrast to the reality of the help God gives, and this is unfolded in 5ff.

## 162)*Psalm 146*

We should note the juxtaposition of 'help' and 'hope' in 5. God can be our help only when we have made Him our hope, and such a hope will never be put to shame. He is the Creator God (6), the world is His. And that creative power 'necessarily implies care for that highest act of creation, man, and more especially for those among them who acknowledge Him as their Creator and are His worshippers' (Oesterley). There is another significant juxtaposition in 6b, 7a, in the words 'truth' and 'justice' (judgment, AV), and these express themselves as compassion and mercy for all who are in need. Nine divine acts are underlined in these verses, which invite trust in Him. These are divided into two parts, first four participial phrases, in 6 and 7 - 'Who made heaven and earth', 'Who keeps truth forever', 'Who executes judgment', 'Who gives food to the hungry': and these are followed by five statements about the Lord (7c-9): He 'looses the prisoners', 'opens the eyes of the blind', 'raises those that are bowed down', 'loves the righteous', 'preserves the strangers and relieves the fatherless and widow'. What a wonderful catalogue the Psalmist gives! Well might he say in 5, 'Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help'. This statement is so rich and glorious that we shall look at it in detail in the next Note.

## 163)*Psalm 146*

The wonderful words in 5, 'Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help' naturally prompt us to think of that patriarch and the remarkable story of his life as recorded in Genesis, and God's gracious dealings with him. First of all, we may say that the God of Jacob is the God of those who have failed. In many respects, Jacob's life was for long periods one of failure - failure to rise to his high calling, to his vows of loyalty to God. Yet, God never let him go, but patiently dealt with him until His sovereign purpose was fulfilled in him. He is the God Who says, 'Fear not, thou worm Jacob…behold I make thee...new' (Isaiah 41:14, 15). In the second place, the God of Jacob is the God of Bethel, the God of those who are up against it, lonely, cast down, tormented with anxious care, not knowing what the future might hold, the God of the darknesses and bleaknesses of life, the God of the open heavens, Who makes the darkest time of trial a house of God to the soul. Is Jacob's God our God? And will He fail us? It cannot be. In the third place, the God of Jacob is the God of the covenant, Who caught Jacob up into the grand purpose of redemption, giving him a place and a part in that wonderful enterprise, and saying to him, 'Behold, I am with thee...and will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of' (Genesis 28:15). And through his long pilgrimage how wonderfully that promise was fulfilled; God buffeted him, bruised him, rebuked him, humbled him, but He never let him go. And finally, the God of Jacob is a prayer-hearing God, a God Who allows Himself to be prevailed upon by the prayers of sinners. Jacob's intercession in Genesis 32:9ff stands for all time as the classic model of prayer, as he pleaded the covenant and the promises in his time of crisis and need: 'Lord, Thou saidst...'. He wrestled with God, and did battle with Him with a weapon which God Himself had put in his hand - the word of promise. The God of Jacob ever says 'Put Me in remembrance...claim the promises I have given you, and they will be honoured. Concerning the work of my hands command ye Me'. Well might the Psalmist say, 'Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help'!

## 164)*Psalm 147*

This, the second of the 'Hallelujah' Psalms, opens with a word commending praise as something in itself good and wholesome (cf 135:3, and the note on page 130, and the alternative renderings of the phrase 'It is pleasant', which may refer not so much to the act of praise as the subject of praise, namely God and His great Name. The American Standard Bible has 'Sing praises to His Name, for it is lovely'). The Psalm naturally divides into three stanzas, 1-6, 7-11 and 12-20. In the first stanza the Psalmist celebrates God's mercy to Israel in His redeeming love. Commentators point out that the reference to God building up Jerusalem naturally points to the time of the return from exile, with the walls of the city and the Temple going up again after long years of ruin and desolation. It is the hymn of a restored people. This kind of circumstance gives a new dimension of meaning to these well-known and well-loved words. And how wonderful this is, in relation to the hopes and longings our generation has had for God's redeeming power to be made known in the land, with heads broken through mourning for the lost glories of Zion, and wounds made by the continuing barrenness and declension all around. This is how the Psalm first spoke its message to God's people in their desolation, and this is how it speaks today in relation to the work of God. God is a God Who does build up the waste and desolate places. Let us therefore claim the promise for our day and generation. For the God Who gathered the outcasts of Israel and restored them to a renewed Jerusalem can do it again today for He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is more than equal to the task!

### 165)*Psalm 147*

In the second stanza (7-11) the Psalmist magnifies God's goodness in the physical phenomena by which all lowly creatures are provided for. Kidner comments on 'the immense range of God's operations, equally wonderful for their vastness and their attention to detail', and adds 'this is divine care on a scale to evoke wonder and worship'. The point made in 10, 11 seems to be that the Bountiful Giver represented here looks for a humble response of faith and trust from those who receive His bounty - not demonstrations of prowess (cf Psalm 33:16ff), and Matthew 6:25ff, 'Take no thought for your life...'). Maclaren says 'The lesson is that reliance on one's own resources or might is sure to be smitten with confusion, while humble trust in God, which man alone of earth's creatures can exercise, is for him the condition of his receiving needed gifts. The beast gets its food, and it is enough that the young ravens should croak, but man has to 'fear Him' and to wait on His loving kindness'. Such are the qualities that all God's dealings with the sons of men are concerned to arouse in their hearts, and those who show such qualities and responses of faith and trust may look with every confidence for his help. The Lord loves to be trusted.

## 166)*Psalm 147*

The final stanza rehearses again the themes of the first two, but a stage further on. The fortifications of the restored city are now complete, and their strength gives security and peace to those within (13, 14). Security, spiritual help, concord and prosperity - these are the basic requisites of any people. But how are these communicated to men? The rest of the stanza underlines the answer, in a very graphic and significant way - it is through the Word of the Lord (15, 18, 19). The phrase in 15 'His word runneth very swiftly' is taken up by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, where the apostle asks for prayer for this very thing to happen (see RSV rendering). The description of the action of the Divine Word in nature in these verses is impressive, and it reminds us of the emphasis in the book of Revelation on the twofold action of that word in society, judging and saving. Here is the Word of the Lord that sends the snow and the ice, and it is that same Word that melts the ice and snow. It is awesome to think of the operation of the Word of the Lord in today's society, in the convulsions, turmoil, the disturbance and the anarchy all around us. But it is that same Word that can repair the situation. This seems to be the force and significance of the final verses of the Psalm (19-20) - that Word is given to God's people, both as a privilege and also a responsibility and a stewardship to be fulfilled, for we as God's people are to go forth and proclaim that Word in faith and love to a world that desperately needs it.

## 167)*Psalm 148*

This Psalm gives ample evidence of the truth that worship is what the universe is made for, and that the universe comes into its own when worship takes place. The call is to all creation to praise the Lord. There is a sense therefore in which this Psalm represents a consummation and it is well worth noting how this echoes - and is echoed by - the Apostle John's mighty words in Revelation 5:13 (which see). John's song was based on the fact that the Lamb was slain for our redemption, and the same thought is expressed here in 14, 'He hath exalted the horn of His people...a people near unto Him' (cf Luke 1:69). Maclaren finely says, 'It may be maintained that this psalm is only a highly emotional and imaginative rendering of the truth that all God's works praise Him, whether consciously or not, but its correspondence with a line of thought which runs through Scripture from its first page to its last - namely, that, as man's sin subjected the creatures to 'vanity', so his redemption shall be their glorifying - leads us to see prophetic anticipation, and not mere poetic rapture, in this summons pealed out to heights and depths, and all that lies between, to rejoice in what Jehovah has done for Israel'. This is surely the proper key with which to unlock the message of the Psalm, which clearly divides into two parts, the first invoking praise from the heavens (1-6), and the second invoking praise from the earth (7-14). This is how we shall study it in the Notes that follow.

## 168)*Psalm 148*

In the first stanza (1-6) the general call to praise given in 1 is followed in 2-4 by particular mention of the various heavenly beings and bodies involved in that praise. It has been suggested that the angels in 2 are the 'chorus-leaders' of the praise, and that the wonder of Israel's restoration (14) reveals to the angelic host new phases of the manifold wisdom of God. One readily thinks in this regard of Paul's words in Ephesians 3:10 and Peter's in 1 Peter 1:12 (which see). Also Paul's teaching in Romans 8:19ff about the creation being subject to vanity because of man's sin, and waiting for a manifestation of the children of God in order to be delivered from the bondage of corruption at man's final redemption, has relevance here, in that every deliverance foreshadowing that further redemption awakens praise in the inanimate creation, as well as in the heavenly hosts (cf also Job 38:7, 'When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy', and Luke 15:10, 'There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repented'). The reason for the praise of the heavens is given in 5, 6 - God's creative act, His sustaining power, and the 'law', the utterance of His will to which they conform. That is, they are called to praise God in the first instance simply by the fact of their existence, and by the fact that God has ordered their existence by His law, and set bounds upon them. Maclaren finely says, 'In these starry depths obedience reigns; it is only on earth that a being lives who can and will break the merciful barriers of Jehovah's law. Therefore, from that untroubled region of perfect service comes a purer song of praise, though it can never have the pathetic harmonies of that which issues from rebels brought back to allegiance.'

### 169)*Psalm 148*

In the second stanza (7-14) earth is called upon to re-echo the praise of heaven. Here, in contrast to the order in 1-6, the Psalmist begins with the lowest and meanest, and rises to the highest, man, and ultimately the people in covenant with God, namely Israel (and the Church). There is a parallelism between the two stanzas, with 5, 6 in the first corresponding with 13,14 in the second, each giving reasons for the praise being offered. In 7-10 the phenomena of nature are in view. The concept in 8b is very striking - the storms are God's servants, and when sent by Him they do His appointed work, in obedience to Him. Is it not a comfort to us to know that they are in His hands - they are His storms, as the Psalmist recognised also in Psalm 42:7 (which see). Maclaren has a fine comment on 11, 12: 'All men, without distinction of rank, age, or sex, have the same obligation and privilege of praise. Kings are most kingly when they cast their crowns before Him. Judges are wise when they sit as His vicegerents. The buoyant vigour of youth is purest when used with remembrance of the Creator; the maiden's voice is never so sweet as in hymns to Jehovah. The memories and feebleness of age are hallowed and strengthened by recognition of the God who can renew failing energy and soothe sad remembrances; and the child's opening powers are preserved from stain and distortion by drawing near to Him in whose praise the extremes of life find common ground.' In 13, 14 the reasons given for praise are important. Leopold finely says: 'The basic thought is this: the destiny of Israel is so important, and what God had recently done for His people in their Restoration is of such vital importance to all nations and creatures that, if they grasped what it involved, they would be glad to add their praises to Israel's praises. Thus the Psalm closes with a jubilant 'Alleluia'.'

## 170)*Psalm 149*

This is a Psalm of celebration. In the first five verses we have a glorious picture of the church jubilant, singing to the Lord a new song (cf Psalms 96 and 98). Scholars think it is a Psalm of the restoration from captivity in Babylon. It is certainly celebrating the fact that God had come to deliver His people. As Kidner says 'A new song suggests a new situation, and this has all the marks of victory, including the time honoured way of celebrating it with dancing and timbrel.' It is the exuberance of the praise that stands out here, rejoicing in His creatorhood and in His Kingship alike. The words in 2 'Be joyful in their king' remind us of the words in the Shorter Catechism about man's chief end being to glorify God and 'enjoy Him forever', and of that remarkable expression in 1 Timothy 6:15 when he speaks of God as 'the blessed - or, happy - and only Potentate'. Here is an excerpt from a note on these words: To read 'happy Potentate' here at first sounds out of place, if not irreverent, but if we pause to think for a moment, we find ourselves thinking, 'Why should it be strange to think of Him as a happy God?' The reason why we do not is that He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures as so grimly in earnest dealing with sin that He has not had much time to laugh. But when sin is finally destroyed, as it will be, His true nature will surely become clear and evident, and His happiness will shine forth as the glorious and riotous thing it is. But there is something else also. Many of us can recall the grim and terrible days of the last world war when Britain stood alone against the might of Germany, when for long spells it was blood and toil, sweat and tears all the way. But even within that context, there were times when we could relax and smile. It is like this also in the war between God and evil. There are times, and they are very, very precious, when God takes time to relax with His people, times of sweet and happy fellowship when the tragedy of sin is left outside, and it is then that we have glimpses - that are also foretastes - of the happiness of God and the joy and delight that are in His holy heart.

## 171)*Psalm 149*

What was said in the latter part of the previous Note is underlined in the wonderful statement in 4 about the Lord taking pleasure in His people. This is beatitude beyond all our deserving or even understanding.

That Thou shouldst love a worm like me
And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But music to my heart.

In the Christmas festival we rejoice in the message of Emmanuel - God with us, and this verse underlines afresh the sheer wonder of that message, that He should want to be with us. The second part of the verse goes even further, for He touches nothing that He does not adorn, beautifying the meek with salvation. Here is beauty breaking through to touch our soiled lives. In this regard we may surely say that salvation is a beautiful thing. Well might the saints of God be joyful (5)! In 5b the phrase 'Sing aloud upon their beds' may have two ideas enshrined in it, one the fact of being able to lie down at night without fear and with a good conscience, in the enjoyment of the salvation of God, and the other, that of reclining at a festal meal. Both are surely authentic expressions of the experience of salvation. Is this what Christmas means to us?

## 172)*Psalm 149*

We should note well what follows in the last four verses of the Psalm (6-9). The Church jubilant (1-5) now becomes the Church militant (6-9). Here is the idea of the holy war. This was Israel's calling, to be the instrument of the divine purposes in bringing judgment upon the abandoned heathen nations. It is beside the point to criticise these verses as being less than Christian in spirit. The point is that, after the celebration of the victory of God, Israel was now fulfilling her calling, and doing what God wanted her to do. This is the effect of their rejoicing. Does our experience of the divine salvation lead us to this, to fulfilling our calling and engaging in our warfare for the King of kings? We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, and the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds - the weapons of prayer and the ministry of the Word - this is our two-edged sword, which brings into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. The Christian faith, truly understood, must lead to this, to engagement in the warfare of the gospel. And it remains true that those who are most committed to that warfare know most of the joy and sweetness of God's presence, and have most for which to praise Him. What the Psalmist says in 6 is the simple truth: Praise in the mouth and sword in the hand belong together.

## 173)*Psalm 150*

This is a very fitting Psalm to stand at the end of the Psalter. When we began the study of the last five Psalms, we quoted Kidner as saying that they, including this one, 'are a miniature of our story as a whole, which will end in unbroken blessing and delight'. Maclaren's comment is 'The Psalm is more than an artistic close of the Psalter; it is a prophecy of the last result of the devout life and, in its unclouded sunniness, as well as in its universality, it proclaims a certain end of the weary years for the individual and for the world'. Commentators also point out that the tenfold 'Praise Him' seems symbolic of completeness, and this is a good point to make, surely, in the final Psalm of the Psalter. We should also notice the significance of the prepositions used throughout -in the sanctuary, for his mighty acts, according to his greatness, with the sound of the trumpet, and everything that hath breath. This makes the praise very comprehensive, underlining where that praise is to take place, why it is to take place, how it is to take place and who is to participate in it. This is a useful and convenient way to study the Psalm, and we shall follow this outline in our final notes.

## 174)*Psalm 150*

We look first at where the praise is to take place (1): it is to be on earth (in His sanctuary) and in heaven (the firmament). It comes as a delightful surprise that this is the source of the hymn writer's words,

Let earth and heaven agree,
Angels and men be joined,
To celebrate with me
The Saviour of mankind.

This is the same note as is struck in the Book of Revelation, with heaven and earth joined together in praising the Lamb slain. As Kidner says, 'Earth and heaven can be utterly at one in this. His glory fills the universe; His praise must do no less.'

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts!
Heav'n and earth are full of Thee,
Heaven and earth are praising Thee,
O Lord most high!

As to why that praise is to take place (2), it is for what God is in Himself and what He has done for His people. These two things are always linked together, for it is because of what He is that He does what He does for us. It is because He is love that He gave Himself for our sins, and stretched out His hand to save us. We have already pointed out in the last four Psalms that God's deliverance from the captivity in Babylon has been in view, along with that previous deliverance in Israel's early history, from Egypt - and these were both occasions for the praise of Israel down the ages. But both alike simply foreshadow the still greater deliverance of divine redemption, which is the fundamental source of all praise and worship. Well might we sing in His praise,

For souls redeemed, for sins forgiven,
For means of grace and hopes of heaven,
Father, all praise to Thee be given,
Who givest all.

## 175)*Psalm 150*

The answer to the question as to how that praise is to be given is, as Kidner says, 'with everything you have'. Various sides of life are touched upon - great national and sacred occasions, joyful celebrations, simple music making - and, we should note, not only formal temple occasions but also everyday experiences:

Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God,
In every part with praise
Praise in the common things of life,
Its goings out and in.

How variegated was the praise of Israel is seen in the many different instruments employed. 'Organ' in the AV is a mistranslation and the word should be 'pipe' or 'flute'. We should bear in mind, however, that the usual church organ is designed to combine many instruments in one - reeds, horns, woodwinds, brass - all together in one harmonious whole. One wonders whether what is being suggested is that worship is a many-splendoured thing, needing many different expressions for its fulness, with no single instrument adequate in itself. At all events, we should realise that it is the spirit of the music, more than musical excellence that is in view (although, to be sure, when the spirit is right, the quality of the music will not be tawdry or unworthy).