

THE TWENTY-FOURTH PSALM.

PSALM xxiv. 3 (part), 8 (part):

*“Who shall ascend into the hill of Jehovah? . . .  
Who is the King of glory?”*

Two striking questions, even apart from the context. Mountain scenery spoke not to the ancients with the same thrilling and inspiring voice with which it speaks to us; and yet many a fair eastern mountain had that to give for which the traveller gladly ascended its wooded heights. But here, says the psalmist, is a mountain still more difficult, on moral, not physical grounds, than snow-white Hermon; it is the hill where Jehovah dwells. Who can venture to climb it? And the other question is equally searching. What is the King of glory like? How shall His nature be best described? A God can give but that which He has. Is the King of glory like unto or different from the nature which He has given to man? Upon the solution of the problem the whole character of a religion depends. Nobly has Charles Wesley described the soul's struggle to obtain an adequate one. From that truly great hymn, “Come, O Thou Traveller unknown,” how can I help quoting a single verse?—

“Wilt Thou not yet to me reveal  
Thy new, unutterable name?  
Tell me, I still beseech Thee, tell;  
To know it now resolved I am;  
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,  
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.”

But I wish, not directly to assume the Christian vantage-ground in answering these questions, but to consider how the magnificent psalm in which they occur may, with due regard to the laws of the human mind, be interpreted. I wish that we may learn how to make the reading and the

singing of the psalms, more than it sometimes is, a sacrifice of the intellect. To understand the 24th Psalm we must take it in connexion with the 23rd. The Song of the Shepherd concludes with the hope of dwelling in the house of Jehovah for ever; and the psalm before us, putting aside the solemn overture in vers. 1, 2, begins with a question as to the qualifications of those who can ascend the mountain where Jehovah dwells. The hope of Jehovah's lamb is not merely to spend all his days in the temple, much as he loves the house where he has so often "seen God's power and glory,"<sup>1</sup> it is to feel that wherever he may be, there the tent of his Shepherd is stretched above him—there he may be, inwardly at least, safe from his enemies—there he may experience that "lovingkindness" which, as a kindred psalm expresses it, "is better than life itself."<sup>2</sup> And now each Israelite who covets this high privilege of seeing, though but in a shadow, the face of God is taught to question himself as to his ability to pass the Divine tests. The verses in which this lesson is conveyed (vers. 2-5) remind us of the 15th Psalm, and both have a certain affinity to the declaration which the soul of a deceased person pronounces before the divine judge Osiris, according to the religion of Egypt. "I am pure, am pure, am pure" (from each of the transgressions mentioned), the soul repeats; and then, if it has spoken the truth, becomes justified, and enters into Elysium—the land of sunshine and fruitful fields which is the Egyptian heaven.<sup>3</sup> But our psalm does not only, nor even primarily, refer to the great final examination of souls, nor yet to the awful judgment spoken of in the 1st Psalm, when the wicked—the false Israelites—shall be "like the chaff which the wind driveth away,"<sup>4</sup> and God's people upon earth shall be, as the prophet said, "all

<sup>1</sup> Ps. lxxiii. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. lxxiii. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Compare also the importance attached by Pindar to moral preparation for the future life.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. i. 4.

righteous.”<sup>1</sup> Permissible as it would be to expound this psalm sometimes of a judgment to come, it relates primarily, not to the future, but to the present. A judgment is continually going on. God is ever distributing rewards and punishments; and if we only took a more spiritual and a less earthly view of His providential assignments, we should say, “Surely God is gracious unto Israel, even unto the pure in heart,”<sup>2</sup> because to them He gives, not those seeming goods for which worldlings crave, but those which never pass away—“faith, hope, charity,” and above all, the inward vision of God. It is to this last that one of the greatest of the mystic psalmists refers, when he says—

*“Thou makest known to me (not merely thou wilt make known) the path of life;*

*Near thy face is fulness of joys;*

*Pleasures are in thy right hand for evermore.”*<sup>3</sup>

The 24th Psalm, like that which precedes it, belongs to a group of very peculiar psalms—those which speak of being a guest in Jehovah’s house (Guest-psalms we may call them), the material house or sanctuary of Jehovah having almost become a grand metaphor for the spiritual presence-chamber discerned only by faith. Neither the Jewish Church, indeed, nor even its most advanced members, saw clearly whither the course of revelation was tending. The temple always held a place of special honour in their minds; it never quite became to any of them merely a symbol or material metaphor. But, as we shall see more and more, some of the psalmists were being guided to a view of forms which is almost Christian in its spirituality. They felt that, even when far from the temple, they could enjoy a very close communion with their God, not dissimilar in kind to that which they knew so well on Mount Zion. They could not have given a consistent and logical theory of their

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lx. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. lxxiii, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. xvi, 11.

experience, but the experience itself they recorded in their temple-songs, and they thus became true heralds of the gospel. How, in fact, could Jesus have won His disciples if Jeremiah and the psalmists had not first of all prepared the ground? The saying, "*Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God,*" presupposes a spiritual movement among the Jews, the impulse to which was given by these illuminated teachers. Do not suppose that I shall try to find the full gospel in the 24th Psalm. It does not contain as large an evangelical element as some others, because it lacks that sweet mysticism which endears to us the 16th, the 63rd, and the 73rd. It is meant perhaps for beginners in the spiritual life. It tells us virtually that the only sacrifice which is acceptable to God is that of moral obedience; but it does not tell us how that obedience is to be rendered, and gives a very meagre description of it compared, for instance, with our Lord's in the beatitudes of His first sermon. Yet it says quite enough to stimulate spiritual ambition. "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance."<sup>1</sup>

*"He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart;  
That hath not set his desire upon wickedness,  
And that hath not sworn deceitfully,—  
He shall receive a blessing from Jehovah,  
Even righteousness from the God of his salvation."*

Do you ask what blessing? I reply, one blessing to the worshipper as an individual, and another as a branch on the stem of God's Church; the blessing of the sense of God's love to him personally, and the blessing of "rejoicing" sooner or later "in the gladness of God's people, and giving thanks with his inheritance."<sup>2</sup> And the link between the two blessings is this, that without a spiritual movement in the individuals who form the nation, God's promise

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xiii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. cvi. 5 (Prayer-Book).

to the Church (which ideally is the nation) must remain unfruitful. And so to each of us the psalmist would say, Purity of heart and life is the one condition of all the best blessings. Each man must be in some sense his own John the Baptist before he can be admitted into the inner circle of the friends of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> If even a Jewish psalmist could say,

*“I wash mine hands in innocency,*

*And (so) would I compass thine altar, Jehovah,”*<sup>2</sup>

the sternest moral self-criticism cannot be too severe for those who would take part in the prayers, the praises, and the sacraments of the evangelical Church. Far from any of us be the spirit of the Pharisee! There is One who accompanies us in our self-criticism with eyes as keen as they are loving, and who breathes into us a holy discontent with any earthly attainments. From Him alone can we receive the purification which is better than that of hyssop, and without which no correction of the details of our life will be acceptable to God. For Christ is not only “the end of the Law,” but the “end” or consummation of the Psalter. When the psalmist says, “Only he that hath clean hands and a pure heart can dare to ascend Jehovah’s mountain,” we must expand it by those words of St. Peter,<sup>3</sup> “purifying their hearts (*i.e.* their consciences) by faith,” and again, “elect . . . unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” And yet we must not despise even the somewhat bare catechism of this temple-poet, remembering that no Scripture is without an educational value, even for us with our (as we hope) advanced knowledge. It is well to turn back sometimes, as Lessing long ago advised his too sceptical countrymen, to the first pages of our

<sup>1</sup> Theodoret illustrates a partly parallel passage (Ps. xxv. 12) by John the Baptist’s answer to the question, “What shall we do?”

<sup>2</sup> Ps. xxvi. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Acts xv. 9; 1 Pet. i. 2. It is unimportant for our present purpose who actually wrote these words, which are in the fullest sense Scriptures.

primer, and learn to sympathise with the 24th Psalm, when it says (ver. 6),—

*“Such is the race of those that inquire after Jehovah,  
Of those that seek the face of Jacob’s God.”*

And now notice the connexion between vers. 1 and 2 and those which follow. If we prepare ourselves aright to “stand in God’s holy place,” how exceeding great is our reward! For into whose presence is it that we enter? and whose are the “hands stretched out to draw us near”? It is He to whom “the earth belongeth and the fulness thereof,” who “founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods,” and who will “make new heavens and a new earth,” and regenerate a people who shall be “all righteous.”<sup>1</sup> And now add the distinctively Christian thought that it is also He who “spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all,” and does not the reward of our evangelical self-discipline shine with a still deeper, softer brightness? I know that we all have a tincture of Christianity, but it is only the consistent follower of a holy Saviour who can “receive the blessing” of a strong and undoubting faith in his own and the world’s future. It is only he who can look around on this magnificent but mysterious universe, not merely (like Job) with reverential awe, laying his hand upon his mouth, but with trustful, filial love, and exclaim, “How great, and rich, and strong is our Father!” And if such an one turns his gaze to the hazards and perils of our national history, is not the reward of a disciplined Christian character equally great? Who are the most hopeful politicians? Those who both in thought and in practice are most earnestly Christian.

And the editor of the psalm (for I scruple not to press one of the surest critical theories into the service of edification) has provided for the wants of such religious patriots both in the Jewish and—may I not add?—in the English

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lx. 21.

Church. He had by him a fragment of an older psalm, too beautiful to be left to perish, and joined it on, in the manner common to Jewish with Assyrian and Indian editors of sacred hymns, to the short Guest-psalm which precedes. Listen to the words of this fragment, which must originally have belonged to a processional hymn of victory, a Jewish *Te Deum*.

*“Lift up your heads, O ye gates,  
Yea, lift yourselves up, ye everlasting doors,  
That the King of glory may come in.*

*‘Who, then, is the King of glory?’*

*‘Jehovah the Strong and Valiant,  
Jehovah the Valiant in battle.’*

*Lift up your heads, O ye gates,  
Yea, lift them up, ye everlasting doors,  
That the King of glory may come in.*

*‘Who is he then, the King of glory?’*

*‘Jehovah Sabáoth, he is the King of glory.’*

Can you not imagine the scene? A hero of mighty stature approaches, alone, and “marching,” as a prophet says, “in the greatness of his strength.”<sup>1</sup> As he stands before his palace, a loyal cry bursts from his people, “*Lift up your heads, O ye gates.*” They mean that no gate of man’s device is fit for so noble a king to enter by; just as the prophet whose work begins at Isaiah xl. would have the valleys exalted and the mountains and hills made low to prepare a highway for Jehovah.<sup>2</sup> For it is Jehovah, none else, who approaches. The gates, which the poet boldly endows with life, well know this; but for the pleasure of hearing His name, they ask, as if in surprise, “*Who is the King of glory?*” And again and again the answer echoes, “*Jehovah the Strong and Valiant, Jehovah the Valiant in battle, Jehovah Sabáoth is his name.*”

You may be sure that something more is meant by this

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lxiii. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. xl. 4.

than meets the ear. Throughout the post-exile period the temple was becoming more and more regarded as a symbol of the greater sanctuary not made with hands. The old popular notion of a territorial and local Deity had faded away, and the traditional names of God had received an ampler meaning. Jehovah was not merely the "God of the armies of Israel," but the God of all the hosts of heaven, the God of the stars and of the angels, and of all the forces of nature,—the God who needs not to descend from His throne, for at a word from Himself His will is done. The psalmist is therefore really thinking of the triumph of the omnipotent God in His heavenly sanctuary. This he figures as an ascent to the earthly temple, the gate of which is in his own time still called "the gate of Jehovah,"<sup>1</sup> and from which the poets and prophets still say that Jehovah issues forth to fight for His people.<sup>2</sup>

What deliverance was originally commemorated is uncertain. The song could be applied to many a grand interposition of "him that keepeth Israel." It was well fitted to raise the confidence of such a worshipper as is described in ver. 4 to be told that his covenant-God was far more than a match for the mightiest kings of the earth. For the devout Israelite subordinated his own joys and griefs to those of his people, and between the return from the Exile and the Maccabæan insurrection Israel was literally a "poor and needy" people, the natural prey of its stronger neighbours. To sing this hymn was therefore a heroic act of faith. It was a prophecy that Jehovah would not "give Israel over unto death," but would overthrow its most powerful enemies, both without and within, till a "new song" should be sung by a regenerate people on the great judgment-day.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ps. cxviii. 19, 20. Note also the prominence in the requirement of righteousness from those who enter these gates.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. lxvi. 6; cf. Zech. xiv. 3, Ps. lxxviii. 35.



To persons of a mystic turn of mind, who felt the sweetness of the hidden life, and who had got far beyond the elementary teaching of vers. 3-6, we can hardly doubt that the latter part of the psalm (I mean the song, or fragment of a song, that was added on) supplied delightful material for pious meditation. In the synoptic gospels the prophetic summons in Isaiah xl. 3, 4, is interpreted metaphorically of the preparation of the heart.<sup>1</sup> And we have no reason to think that the symbolic interpretation of ancient phrases was altogether new in the time of the Evangelists. If the material temple had become virtually a symbol of the heart of the believing worshipper, who even "in a dry and weary land"<sup>2</sup> had immediate access to his God, may we not, in the spirit of the Evangelists and of their great copyist, John Bunyan, find a new and yet a true interpretation of these poetic words,

*"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, . . .*

*That the King of glory may come in"?*

It is indeed no mere rhetorical figure that the heart has gates, which may be closed even against the King of glory. The wise men of Israel were accustomed to the idea that the spirit is to a man what a fortified city is to a country. "He that ruleth his spirit," says one, "is better than he that taketh a city."<sup>3</sup> "He that hath no rule over his own spirit," says another, "is like a city that is broken down and without walls."<sup>4</sup> "Keep thy heart with all diligence," says a third; "for out of it are the issues of life."<sup>5</sup> In this last passage, we see that the parable has become an allegory, the figure and the meaning of the figure being fused together. We may explain it, "Guard thy heart as thy best possession, for all good and evil influences proceed from

<sup>1</sup> Matt. iii. 3, Mark i. 3, Luke iii. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. lxxiii. 1 (I hope to expound this psalm later).

<sup>3</sup> Prov. xvi. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Prov. xxv. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Prov. iv. 23.

it." But how *can* I guard my own heart? "Give me thy heart," is the reply of personified Wisdom; <sup>1</sup> anticipate the temptations of the world by early taking heed of her strict but wholesome precepts. And what is the Wisdom of Proverbs i.-ix. but God in so far as He reveals His all-wise purposes for man's present and future salvation? Jehovah Sabáoth was, to an Israelite in David's time, the God of battles; but He has become the God who conquers men by coming to them with moral and spiritual gifts, in order, by sharing their lowliness, to make them great: who does not remember the fine saying, "*Thy gentleness (or rather lowliness) made me great*"? <sup>2</sup> And so in the Second Isaiah we read, "*Thus saith the high and lofty One that abideth for ever, whose name is Holy One: I abide in the high and holy place, with him also that is contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.*" <sup>3</sup> Illustrate the latter part of this psalm by such passages, and it will point onwards to the sweet 51st psalm, which bids us pray,

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God;  
And renew within me a steadfast spirit."* <sup>4</sup>

Hitherto we have studied the two parts of the psalm in the order in which they have been placed by the Jewish editor. The psalm thus treated becomes a fitting Christmas hymn. For what is the spiritual meaning of the nativity, but that our "meek and lowly" Saviour loves to humble Himself anew in the poor lodging of each human heart? To one who feels that he cannot even obey the smallest of Wisdom's precepts, can neither get "clean hands" nor a "pure heart" in his own strength, and whose longing often is rather that Wisdom may become his guest, than he Wisdom's, the order of the Jewish editor is the natural one. Such an one first examines himself in the light of the

<sup>1</sup> Prov. xxiii. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. xviii. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. lvii. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. li. 10.

question and answer in vers. 3-6, or that of their Christian equivalent the Beatitudes; and then with joyous but humble faith invites the Sinner's Friend to enter and purify his heart. For has not Wisdom said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me"?<sup>1</sup> But there are times when another order of the two parts of the psalm seems more natural. He who follows the life of Christ with even more sympathy than the lover of poetry follows some epic or dramatic strain, would gladly forget himself and live in the great deeds of his Master. Such an one thinks of the lowly Son of man raised to the highest heavens as the reward of His obedience unto death, and mentally transposes the parts of the psalm, thus obtaining an appropriate hymn for Easter and Ascensiontide. Far above that star-bright vault which perhaps originally suggested the title "Jehovah of hosts," he follows his Lord—the Lord of hosts—with the inner eye, and takes up, with as much fervour as the most uncritical reader of the psalms the glowing Ascension Ode of an old northern poet,<sup>2</sup> which is in part but the 24th psalm rewritten,—

"Now each ethereal gate  
     To Him hath opened been;  
 And Glory's King in state  
     His palace enters in:  
 Now come is this High Priest  
     In the most holy place,  
     Not without blood address,  
 With glory Heaven, the Earth to crown with grace?"

And seeing the "High Priest of our profession" seated in royal glory at God's right hand, he asks himself, not with shrinking awe, but with faith in the indwelling presence, "*Who shall ascend (like my Lord) into Jehovah's mount?*"

<sup>1</sup> Rev. iii. 20.

<sup>2</sup> William Drummond of Hawthornden.

and who shall rise up in his holy place?" And the answer is echoed from within: "He in whose heart Christ dwelleth by faith, and who seeketh those things which are above, he shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."<sup>1</sup>

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### THE DESIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE.

THERE are but two possible theories of what the Apocalypse was written for. It is either essentially *predictive* or purely *descriptive*. Its proper subject-matter is either *events* or *ideas*. In the one case, its purpose is to foreshadow the future fortunes of the Church, at successive epochs of its history; in the other case, to set forth, in symbolic scenes and dramatic movements, the great *principles* that have been struggling for the mastery in all ages and in different forms—light and darkness, good and evil, the so-called *World-Power*, whether Egypt or Babylon, pagan or Papal, in hostility to the kingdom of God.

What I propose in this paper is, to examine the claims of the non-predictive, or purely descriptive theory. And I

<sup>1</sup> I have ventured to apply the title *Κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων* to the Christian's Lord, whom St. Paul, alluding perhaps to our psalm, once calls "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. ii. 8), because I do not hold with Bishop Pearson that the *Κύριος* of the Seventy was meant as a full translation of *יהוה* (in which untranslatable name all the attributes of the Deity were held to be concentrated). I do not wish to bind myself to Bishop Pearson's view (*Exposition of the Creed*, 1676, p. 148), supported by the very poor authority of *Midrash Tillim* on Ps. xxi. and *Echa Rabati* on Lam. i. 6, that the name Jehovah properly belongs to the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Bishop Waterland's remarks on Ps. xxiv. (*Works*, ii., pp. 142, 143) seem equally to need revision to harmonize with a philological exegesis. Much as one may sympathise with Richard Baxter's words (*Preface to Version of the Psalms*, 1692), "There is no exercise that I had rather live and die in than singing praises to our Redeemer and Jehovah," it is permissible to correct "Jehovah" into "Immanuel," the only possible short name for the Christ from the point of view of Old Testament theology.