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THE FIRST OF THE HALLEL PSALMS

PSALM CXIII

This is the first of the Hallel Psalms, six in number, extending from the 113th to the 118th. These form by themselves a select class of liturgy songs and were sung at the Jewish Festivals of the Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles and later at the feast of Dedication. They strike chords of pre-eminent truths recurring frequently in other Psalms, and by thus acting like an index to the lofty spiritual contents of the Psalter provide for us its quintessence. Intrinsically the series is distinctly Messianic in character. This has to be kept in mind in order to read them aright.

This first Hallel forms a preface or introduction to the other five, and is a praise Psalm beginning and ending with the same formula, "Praise ye Jah".

Its construction is simple. It consists of three equal stanzas of three verses and each of the nine verses has only two lines.

As the leading Ode of the six its apparent design is primarily to make known the Oneness, the Majesty, and the Glory of God, thus acting according to the principle, "In the beginning God". Hereby it lays the foundation of a sound theology.

The existence of a Supreme Being is without doubt the sublimest conception that can enter the human mind. It lies at the root of morality, virtue, and religion. It supports the social fabric and gives cohesion to all its parts. It involves the momentous question of immortality and responsibility to a supreme authority, and is inseparably connected with man's brightest hopes and highest enjoyments. It is indeed not only a fundamental truth but the grand central truth of all other truths.¹

In the Psalm God is mentioned first by His Name Jah, who is the Redeemer and Deliverer of all who trust in Him. Let it be told precisely then who He is by His revealed Word, and what He is by His mighty works of redemption and deliverance. Then shall men have a vision of His glorious saving beauty and cleave unto Him for life and salvation, when, consequently, they will delight to praise Him.

The first verse is, "Praise ye Jah. Praise, O ye servants of Jehovah; Praise the Name of Jehovah". With its threefold call to praise, and the mention thrice of God's Name it suggests a reference to the Trinity similar to the first three Psalms in the Psalter, to the first three Words or Commandments of the Decalogue, and to the first three phrases in the Lord's Prayer

¹ Cassels' *Bible Dictionary*.

which He taught His disciples, saying, "After this manner pray ye". The reason is that Jehovah is the Name by which God reveals Himself to man as his Divine Creator, Redeemer and Upholder. The call is in line with that of Psalm xxix. 1 f.: "Give unto Jehovah, O ye sons of the mighty, Give unto Jehovah glory and strength; Give unto Jehovah the glory due unto His Name."

The rendering of this joyful praise and acclamation of glory is essentially to worship the Triune God in the beauty of holiness (Psalm xxix. 2).

Verses 2 and 3 expatiate on this emphatic call for blessing and praise to Jehovah. It is incumbent upon His servants—all the people of God. Spontaneously and continuously it has to be offered now and for evermore from the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, for God is ever faithful and ever sure, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. He blesses all both high and low, at all times and in all places. God's claim to praise is universal. And praise is always the leading part in all true worship. He inhabits the praises of Israel. As our God, it is His revenue; as our Heavenly Father, it is His delight; as our Redeemer, He sees in it the fruit of the travail of His soul and is therewith satisfied.

The second stanza speaks of the ineffable greatness of Jehovah in His exaltation and condescension as forming the reason and incentive of His people's praise to Him. There can be no worthier object of worship and of adoration than Jehovah whose glory is above the heavens, and who has His seat on high. He is the Almighty, the only living and true God, the Creator and Sustainer of all. The greatness and majesty of His glorious Being the Psalmists never tire of extolling. His greatness is unsearchable; it is infinite. To Moses He revealed Himself as "I am that I am". And Moses, in his farewell exhortation to the people whom he led through the wilderness, said: "Your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty and terrible, who regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward. He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and the widow, and loveth the stranger by giving him food and raiment. Behold the heaven of heavens is Jehovah's thy God, the earth and all that therein is" (Deut. x. 17, 18, 14). To Isaiah He declared: "Thus saith the high and lofty One, I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the

contrite ones" (Isa. lvii. 15). And to the apostle John He said, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, who is and who was and is to come, the Almighty. . . . I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore, Amen: and have the keys of hell and of death" (Rev. i. 8, 18).

The Psalm now turns from speaking of the exaltation of God to focus attention on His marvellous condescension.

"Who is like unto Jehovah our God that hath His seat on high, that humbleth Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth? He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the needy from the dunghill that He may set him with princes, and with the princes of His people" (R.V.).

Notably the transcendent act of God's condescension was that of the Incarnation of His Eternal Son, when God became manifest in the flesh to be the Redeemer and Saviour of mankind. Without controversy great was the mystery, yet it was established by many infallible proofs.

An instance of His exaltation and humiliation is recorded for us in Isa. lii. 13 f.: "Behold my Servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee: his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men". This aspect of Christ's high estate and lowliness of mind St. Paul relates in 2 Cor. viii. 9 and in Phil. ii. 5-9. He vividly draws attention to these two extremes as astounding beyond degree.

O wonder of wonders! Astonished I gaze
To see in the manger the Ancient of Days,
The Angels proclaiming the Stranger forlorn,
And telling the shepherds that Jesus is born.

The Psalmist's wonder at Jehovah's condescension and miracles of compassion on the poor and needy, called on all within him to tell out the good news that many also might exalt and extol His saving name. As an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient Jehovah no one lay outside His providential care. "He upholds all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down" (Psalm cxlv. 14).

Jesus by His word in the synagogue at Nazareth set His seal on the seventh verse of this Hallel: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor: He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to

the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord ” (Luke iv. 18, 19).

The metaphorical language of the seventh and eighth verses is borrowed from the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel the prophet, which she sang after her prayer at the altar of sacrifice which she made in the bitterness of her grief to Jehovah, and He granted her request. Compare then the words of her song, “ He raiseth up the poor out of the dust and lifteth up the beggar out of the dunghill to set them among princes ”, with those of the Psalm. How close the two are!

The *Magnificat* of the Virgin Mary follows the same line of thought and expression, though in plainer statement (Luke i. 46–55), so that Hannah’s song has been termed the *Magnificat* of the Old Testament.

The two verses are certainly most striking. The tender mercies of Jehovah are exceedingly great and arrestingly manifold in their pardoning, uplifting operations. Psalmists and prophets could not forget their remarkable power and beauty. In this Messianic Hallel these wonders of Jehovah’s saving grace point forward to the work of Christ, where it is learnt that the foulest, most hardened and neediest of sinners can, by the blood of the Cross and His resurrection, become purged of their guilt and made new creatures in Him. The transformation is revolutionary. The contrast in their lives is extreme. To as many as received Him as Lord and Saviour He gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name. What an honour and glory is the conferment. Alas! how often among men is it so little thought of. The Psalm does not quote Hannah’s words in full. Her song adds to them a finishing touch, “ to make them inherit the throne of glory ”. The apostle John draws attention to the dignity and honour of believers in Christ: “ Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not.”

The ninth and last verse of the Psalm intensifies the interest in the Lord’s compassionate care over the needy and the lowly. The verse is: “ He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be the joyful mother of children.” For a realistic commentary on the condition of unfortunate women one has to visit the East. There forsaken, unwanted, distressed and broken-hearted wives are frequently seen. Their state is often

more than pitiable. It is soul-rending. Especially is it so when birth-failure occurs. The treatment they suffer is a travesty of all their heaven-born instincts and aspirations. Instead of the oil of joy theirs is the garment of heaviness and frustration.

To such the declaration of the love of God brings intense comfort and pleasure. They are not forgotten; hope again enters into their existence. The promises of God who is ever compassionate are all promises of love. He is a refuge and strength to all who call upon Him. "When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up." A missionary once, on visiting an Eastern family, related the saying of Jesus: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The mother on hearing that this love included both male and female, high and low, exclaimed to her husband: "Did you, did you hear that God also loves us women?" Such news to her was inexpressibly grand. It ennobled womanhood with humane honour and household dignity. Moreover it conferred on her the remission of sin and the gift of eternal life. Though poor, she now felt wondrously rich. Here again extremes meet.

The ninth verse makes a very fitting close to this Psalm. It takes cognizance of the marriage relation, an appointment of God, and made expressly that mankind might learn the nature of love, divine and human. It was altruistically reciprocal. By love God had created man after His own image. It was not good for man to be alone, either without God or a fellow-partner. Hence his marital need, that husband and wife should be helpmeets to each other, sharing their needs and cares. "Duality was necessary for completeness."

On their conjugal relations the race depended for its propagation. This honour was graciously and divinely vouchsafed to them by their Maker. "Whoso therefore found a wife found a good thing, and obtained favour of the Lord." The Lord delighted in fruitfulness and could even cause a barren woman to keep house and be a joyful mother of children. Was not Hannah an example of this?

A wife always wields in the home a powerful influence, one way or another. It is ever the crucial factor in the welfare or otherwise of society. It either makes or mars a nation. When sanctified by the grace and righteousness of God how influential it is for good! Even before a child is born may not the mother

have some effect in the moulding of its temperament? How important it is that she be a godly woman! Did not Hannah convey to her son her own spiritual-mindedness? Truly she did. And did not the Lord make her a rejoicing mother of children? Then, as well as now, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world". The Creator intended that it be so. Of this the ninth verse bears proof. It makes us think of Jesus who said: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them" (Matt. xix. 14; Mark x. 16).

The integrity of the family institution God defended on Mount Sinai by the seventh commandment and engraved it on an imperishable tablet of stone. He chose it as that in which His own spiritual relation to ransomed Israel might become, as it were, visible: "Thy Maker is thine Husband." And when Christ came to make all things new, He expressly took the marriage union under His own protection, and certified it as an original Divine appointment of God to man; and gave it over to the Church that the apostles ever after delighted to call Him its Bridegroom, and His people the Bride prepared for His coming.¹

On the eve of His Passion, when with the disciples He sang this first Hallel Psalm, our Lord rejoiced in soul that He was about to set His seal on His mission of redemption to suffering mankind. The words of His singular prayer that night confirmed this: "Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son that Thy Son may glorify Thee. . . . I have glorified Thee on the earth. I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John xvii. 1, 4, 5).

Let us then remember that as He thus sang this Hallel Psalm so should we, with a like zeal, sing it, giving praise and blessing to Him "who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus ii. 14).

Edinburgh.

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¹ Rev. W. Arnot, *Laws from Heaven for Man on Earth*.