

THE BEAUTY OF THE PSALMS.

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"Sing Psalms," James, v: 13.

The Psalms of the Bible are the rich lore of ancient times. They are the precious fruits that grow and ripened in the far-off ages. They sparkle with divine wisdom, that distilled upon the inspired poets, like dew upon the grass. They are majestic with the steepings of divine thought, and attractive with the impress of celestial beauty. They are a specimen of the poetry of heaven, and the droppings of the honey thoughts of the Holy Ghost upon the earth. Like the fields clothed with summer's verdure they are all covered with green pastures for the flock of God; and down deeper are the gold and silver and hidden treasures of wealth; and in places accounted barren and worthless are the rich diamond fields of mercy and truth. They contain the most brilliant flights of thought. Their sublime strains scale the heights of Heaven and call God from his cloudy pavilion, and accompany Him whilst He treads the trembling mountains. They keep pace with the Captain of Salvation, as He advances clothed with the habiliments of war, conquering the world, and planting it with the seed that shall grow and flourish, like the trees of Lebanon. They run before the chariot of that Prince, as He leads captivity captive, and wheels along the ascending pathway of glory, through the starry regions, and enters the uplifted gates, and is received on the throne, amidst seraphic acclamations of joy.

Some have thought that because the rushing wheels of time have carried the Psalms away far from their birth-place, and from the balmy days of their youth, that therefore these daughters of music have been brought low, that their melody has been hushed by the rushing of the ages, that their meaning has been exhausted on the offspring of Abraham, that their death warrant was written in the blood of Jesus, and nailed on the cross. But if they who discard the Biblical Psalmody, will at their leisure travel down through the grass-covered paths of church history, they will hear the uninterrupted melody of these songs of the Lord, all the way back to the Apostles, and perhaps the melody will be of a fuller flow than it ever was on the other side of the cross; and rising from more hearts, and spreading over more ages, since the Incarnation, than before it. These Psalms advance from the cross, unchecked by Pilate's verdict, undismayed by the executioner's hammer, unharmed by the earthquake, in which the Jewish Church toppled and fell; and they march down through the dark ages, among the ranks of the gospel soldiers of Jesus, and through the storms of tribulation, and over the billows of fiery persecution, being the martial songs and triumphant halleluiahs of the faithful in those days that tried men's souls. And they have reached us unscathed by the lightnings of the past, unimpaired by the desolations of time; perfect as when they left the hand of Ezra, their inspired compiler and editor. While the hymns have lived, and died, and revived; have appeared and disappeared, and reappeared, the Psalms carry their primitive beauty and vigor and excellence, without a blemish. While almost every generation gives birth to its own hymnal, the divine poetry of David's pen lives unchangeably in the heart of the Church. While few of the devotional songs of modern times can be traced back as far as the dawn of the reformation, the sweet strains of Zion's Psalmody swept across the desolations of the desert, as Israel marched towards the Land of Promise. And though they be the production of antiquity, their beauty is not impaired, nor their strength abated; their lustre is not dimmed, their freshness is like the morning sparkling with dew-drops. During the first centuries of the gospel church, when such men as Basil and Ambrose, Chrysostom and Athanasius carried the banner of the hosts of the Lord, the Psalms were sung. When the Church was advancing, and by her invincible, and invisible power was overturning the temples of idolatry, and spreading the curtains of her habitation through all the Roman empire, the Psalms were sung. And in the golden reign of Constantine, when the imperial edicts, as a rod of iron, dashed the idols into pieces; and the throne of the empire was enlisted in the interests of the Church, the Psalms were sung. And the Waldenses among the mountains and valleys of Switzerland and France, while troubled, and tortured, and massacred, by the enemies of the truth, sung Psalms. While protesting against the innovations, and superstitions, and abominable idolatries of Romanism, they sung the Psalms of David. While maintaining the ordinances in their purity, and sustaining the doctrines of Jesus, in their fullness, and defending the heritage of religion they received from the apostles, they sung the Psalms; and when the Reformers were toiling, and praying, and dying for the redemption of Scotland, they were singing Psalms. When by the power of God, and of the gospel, and of the covenants they were breaking the chains of slavery, and driving back the tyranny of papists and prelates, and bringing their country into the liberty of Christ they were singing Psalms. When they suffered at the stake, and in the cell, and on the scaffold, their praises ascended to God through the Psalms. And to-day the music of these sacred songs is wafted Heavenward from thousands upon thousands of voices. Old as they are, they have not lost their sense yet; they have not lost their beauty yet; they have not lost their music yet.

The excellence of the Psalms lies in their adaptation to every change and condition in life. They give a portrait of every phase of the Christian character. Their wonderful strains sweep over the whole compass of human experience. They greet the weary pilgrims of Christ at every step in their journey to the Heavenly Canaan, and weave wreaths of gladness around their brows, so that

they reach Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads. The Psalms find the saints, and the saints can find the Psalms in every state and condition of life. Their words gather around the little babe, and adorn the helpless suckling with the genius of Divine glory. They meet the little child, and teach its lisping tongue to talk with God, and its tender soul to behave with quiet and mild spirit. They find the happy youth, buoyant with hope and surrounded with snares, and instruct him how to meet and conquer every temptation, and win a crown of triumph. They meet those who are in the prime of age, and in the pride of health; the sons of the mighty and exhort them to give glory to the Lord, and bow in the beauty of His holiness. They greet those that are matured in years and in grace, with a soft solemn melody, like the autumn music of the harps, that hang on the palm trees of the forest. And they lead those whose earthly house is falling under the pressure of time, into the house of God, to dwell there for evermore.

These Psalms carry you back to the bright dawn of creation, where you can stand and admire the mighty God, as his words, like dazzling scintillations, go out into the immense fields of space, and become grand, gorgeous suns, wheeling like globes of light around their orbits. And they carry you ahead to the end of the world, when the trumpet of God shall bring the dead out of the graves, and shall assemble all generations before Him and He shall mete out His judgments unto each one.

These Songs of the Lord lead you into the council chamber of eternity, where our Lord Jesus took upon himself the covenant obligations of redemption, and said to the Father, "To do Thy will I take delight." They lead you along his path of humiliation, down through the clouds, to the tabernacles of the sons of men, where His delights were placed. They lead you side by side with Him, through His sorrowful journey of life, as he was persecuted by foes, despised by associates, and betrayed by a table companion. They lead you to the cross, where the billows of wrath gathered, and dashed and broke over his head, as with a tornado's strength; and to the sepulcher, where His incorruptible body lay; and to the mount, where He ascended up on high, most gloriously, distributing His gifts with bountiful benedictions. They lead you back along His path of exultation, through the heaven of heavens, to the gates of His eternal city, to the open doors of His celestial home, and permit you to look upon the King in the midst of His Glory.

Yes, there is variety in the Psalms; variety that covers all the changes of life, all the variations of time, all the elevations and depressions of the soul. And these songs of praise, with their wonderful flights of poetry, and infinite variety of sentiment, are all true, the word of God, the pure doctrines of redemption. And as such, they are the only basis of union for the divided church of Christ, in the praise of God. At present almost every denomination has its hymn book; and their hymnals are generally in harmony with their forms of doctrine; so that the book of praise in one church is neither appropriate nor acceptable in another church. The Presbyterian sings of God's sovereign power and decrees, but the Methodist cannot swell the music of personal and eternal election, therefore he must keep silent. And when his turn comes, he can sing in vigorous strains of the indefinite atonement, according to his manual of praise; but the Presbyterian must here suppress his voice, for he believes not the sentiment. And the Baptist, waiting for his turn, rings out, with unflinching faith, the duty and beauty, and privilege of immersion; and here both Methodist and Presbyterian must hold their breath, for other songs of better taste and creed. And all this time the inflexible psalm-singer sits by himself, and sweeps the old harp of David with a hearty satisfaction. And if the church would unite, and each denomination would bring in her books of praise, and lay it on the altar of worship, what a motley group of sentiments, what a discord of hearts, what a jarring of music, what a mixture of incense, would arise from the same assembly. And the church must be united. The day is promised when the shepherds shall see eye to eye, and when the sheep shall all be of one fold. But whose songs shall be sung then? What book of praise shall be used then? The Baptist, or Calvinistic, or Methodist? None of them. If the prophecies be true, the sects must give up their sectarian songs. They must unite on one common basis of worship. And the book of praise that shall then be of universal acceptance, will be the book of sound theology, and of correct sentiment. And where will you find such a book, except the Biblical Psalmody. And when we ask other denominations to praise God in the Psalms, we are asking them to sing God's own sentiments, Christ's own theology, the Spirit's own poetry. When they ask us to sing the hymns in praise, they ask us to sing their sentiments, their theology, their poetry, which is the most liberal-spirited request? But as Reformed Presbyterians, we believe that the inspired psalms are the songs of the Church, designed for the praise of God in all ages, to be used exclusive of all human compositions; and we believe this so firmly that we are pledged by our profession, by our covenants, and by our sacramental oath, that we will sing the praises of our God, and of our Lord Jesus Christ in them, and in them alone, until our voices are trained for the song of Moses and the Lamb on Mount Zion. And in singing these Psalms of David, we are following the footsteps of the flock. Their melody enlivened the dreary march of the desert, and brightened the palmy days of Solomon, fell mournfully upon the streams of Babel, and arose solemnly at the last Feast of the Passover; resounded through the Valleys of Piedmont, and echoed amongst the mountains of Scotland; mingled with the winds that tossed the "Mayflower," and reverberated through the wild forests of America. And we will sing them, as they are not only the songs of our fathers, but the songs of our fathers' God.