

STUDIES IN PSALMS

the expense of the implacable enemies who are seeking his life; and it will be a vindication of God's faithfulness and a proof of His righteous government at which he cannot but rejoice"—Kp.

"The perfect tense" *hath rescued, hath looked*, "looks back from the hour of thanksgiving upon an answered prayer"—Kp. as also Per.; and therefore in the above rendering these clauses have been included in the quotation marks.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Give some possible explanation as to why psalm 53 and 14 are practically identical.
2. The paraphrase of 53:1 seems to suggest that the reason some deny God is because an admission of Him would interfere with the kind of life they want to live—is this a common cause for infidelity? Discuss.
3. Are we to understand from 53:2, 3 that among the aborigine races of the world that there is not one earnest sincere seeker after God among them? Discuss.
4. Verse 5 of the 53rd psalm is difficult of interpretation—it is different than the 5th verse of the 14th. Read the K.J. translation—How do you interpret it?
5. David was in a very real personal, physical perial at the hands of the Ziphites—is God to be called upon on such occasions or does He not feel we should use our own so called "common sense" and get out of such positions of peril? Discuss.
6. Here is a quote from an ecclesiastical commentary: "The church has taken a clear view in appointing this one of the Pslams (the 54th)in commemoration of the passion of Jesus. It is seen with greatest effect as a simple prophecy of Christ"—there surely is a danger in so interpreting this psalm or any other portion of scripture . What is the danger? Discuss.

PSALM 55

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Bitter Complaint of the Treachery of an Intimate Friend.

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE

ANALYSIS

(Of the Psalm as Reconstructed.)

Stanza I., vers. 1-7, Invocation of God under great Nervous Excitement, leading to a Desire to Escape like a Dove. Stanza II., vers. 8, 16-19, Refuge sought in Prayer for Personal Deliverance and for the Punishment of Traitors. Stanza III., vers. 12-14, 20, 21, Vivid Delineation of Treacherous Friend. Stanza IV., vers. 9-11, 15, 23a, b, Graphic Picture of Civic Disorders and Terrible Imprecations on the Authors of them. Stanza V., vers. 22, 23c, The Psalmist Admonishes Himself and Regains his Confidence in Jehovah.

(Lm.) An Instructive-psalm—By David.

- 1 Do give ear O God to my prayer—
and do not hide thyself from my supplication:
- 2 Do attend to me and answer me—
I may wander¹ in my murmuring² and may moan—
- 3 At the voice of an enemy—
because of the pressure³ of a lawless one;
For they keep dislodging⁴ on me trouble—⁵
and in anger bear me a grudge.
- 4 My heart continues writhing within me—
and terrors of death have fallen upon me:
- 5 Fear and trembling ever and anon enter me—
and there overwhelmeth me a shudder and I say:—
- 6 “Would that I had pinions like a dove—
I would fly away and settle down:
- 7 Lo! afar would I flee—
I would lodge in a wilderness.”
- 8 I would await a deliverer for me—⁶
from rushing wind from storm:
- 16 I unto God would cry—
and Jehovah should save me;
- 17 Evening and morning and noon—
would I murmur and moan:—⁷

1. Or: “shew restlessness.”

2. Or: “soliloquy.”

3. *Gt.*: “outcry.” O.G. 734 prefer “pressure.”

4. Or: “letting fall.”

5. Or: “iniquity.”

6. So Sep. On marginal notation of verses, see Exposition.

7. M.T. adds: “that he might hear my voice.”

STUDIES IN PSALMS

- 18 "Ransom thou in peace my soul—
that none may approach me;¹
for in multitudes have they come—
who are against me."
- 19 May GOD hear who aforetime sat enthroned,
and may he humble them² who have no reliefs—³
since they revere not God.
- 12 For it is not an enemy who keeps reproaching me—
or I might bear it;
Nor one who had been hating me who against me hath
magnified himself—
or I could hide myself from him;
- 13 But thou a man mine equal—
mine associate and mine intimate,—
- 14 So that together we were wont to find sweet counsel—
in the house of God used we to walk in the throng.
- 20 He hath thrust forth his hand against them who were wont
to salute him—
hath violated his covenant:
- 21 Smoother than curds was his face—⁴
yet war was in his heart;
Softer were his words than oil—
yet they were drawn swords!
- 9 Confuse Sovereign Lord divide their tongue,
for I have seen Violence and Strife in the city;
- 10 Day and night they go round on her walls,
and Trouble⁵ and Mischief are in her midst,—
- 11 Engulfing ruin is in her midst,
and there depart not from the broad place (within her gate⁶)
Oppression and Deceit.
- 15 Desolations⁷ on them! let them go down to hades alive⁸!
for wicked doings have their dwelling place within them.

1. Cp. O.G. 897b.

2. So nearly—Gn. and Dr. (note).

3. Or: "changes."

4. So Br. after Sep.

5. "Naughtiness"—Dr.

6. Where the court of justice usually sat, and where Justice and Truth should have been conspicuous.

7. Or (dividing one word into two): "May death pounce on them." Then, as if recalling that wish to make it stronger: "Let them go down," etc.

8. Cp. Num. 16:30, 33.

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE

- 23 But thou O God! bring them down to the well of the pit:
men of bloodshed and deceit let them not live out half their
days!
- 22 Cast on Jehovah thy lot, and he will sustain thee:
he will not suffer to the ages that a righteous man be shaken.
I therefore will trust in thee O Jehovah!¹

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician.

(CMm.) For the dove of the distant terebinths.²

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 55

Listen to my prayer, O God; don't hide Yourself when I cry
to You!

2 Hear me, Lord! Listen to me! For I groan and weep
beneath my woe.

3 My enemies shout against me and threaten me with death.
They surround me with terror and plot to kill me. Their fury
and hatred rise to engulf me.

4 My heart is in anguish within me. Stark fear overpowers
me.

5 Trembling and horror overwhelm me.

6 Oh, for wings like a dove, to fly away and rest!

7 I would fly to the far off deserts and stay there.

8 I would flee to some refuge from all this storm.

9 O Lord, make these enemies begin to quarrel among them-
selves—destroy them with their own violence and strife.³

10 Though they patrol their walls night and day against
invaders, their real problem is internal—wickedness and dis-
honesty are entrenched in the heart of the city.

11 There is murder and robbery there, and cheating in the
markets and everywhere one looks.

* * * * *

12 It was not an enemy who taunted me—then I could have
borne it; I could have hidden and escaped.

13 But it was you, a man like myself, my companion and
my friend.

1. In Sep.: "kyrie."

2. See Intro., Chap. I., Obs. 3, "Fourthly."

3. Literally, "for I have seen violence and strife in the city."

STUDIES IN PSALMS

14 What fellowship we had, what wonderful discussions as we walked together to the Temple of the Lord on holy days.

* * * * *

15 Let death seize them and cut them down in their prime, for there is sin in their homes, and they are polluted to the depths of their souls.

16 But I will call upon the Lord to save me—and He will.

17 I will pray morning, noon and night pleading aloud with God; and He will hear and answer.

18 Though the tide of battle runs strongly against me, for so many are fighting me, yet He will rescue me.

19 God Himself—God from everlasting ages past—will answer them! For they refuse to fear Him or even honor His commands.

* * * * *

20 This friend of mine betrayed me—I who was at peace with him. He broke his promises.

21 His words were oily smooth, but in his heart was war. His words were sweet, but underneath were daggers.

* * * * *

22 Give your burdens to the Lord. He will carry them. He will not permit the godly to slip or fall.

23 He will send my enemies to the pit of destruction. Murderers and liars will not live out half their days. But I am trusting You to have me.

EXPOSITION

The abrupt transitions observable in this psalm seem to have been noticed by all expositors, by some of whom dislocation has been suspected and transpositions accordingly proposed. It is comparatively easy to *translate* fragments, though always with risks due to losing the thread; but, in the present case, as soon as a resolute attempt was made at continuous *interpretation*, the irresistible conclusion was brought home that some ACCIDENT must have happened in the early history of this psalm, as violent as that which may be expected to result from the tearing out of a leaf and its re-insertion in the wrong place. Such readers as cannot be induced to believe that such an accident might happen, can restore the psalm to its traditional form by following the marginal notation of verses; and by the same means open-minded critics can trace and test the endeavour here made to

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE

present the psalm in an intelligible and profitable shape. Perfect success is not claimed for the result; but it is hoped that the candid will at least benefit by the endeavour now made—an endeavour reluctantly begun and cautiously executed.

The problems confronted by the exposition of this psalm on its merits, become absorbingly interesting in proportion as they are understood. It is possible that David wrote this psalm? and if he did, what light is thrown on the events of his reign, additional to that which is obtainable elsewhere? For some, indeed, the bare fact of the ascription of this psalm *To David* will be conclusive evidence that he wrote it. Others there are, who, while regarding that fact as presumptive evidence of the Davidic authorship, are not at all disinclined to the testing of such presumption by internal evidence; and at least are prepared to give a candid consideration to any difficulties which can be legitimately shewn to stand in the way of such conclusion. There seems to be a general consent that *if* David wrote the Psalm, then AHITHOPHEL, his counsellor, must have been the treacherous friend who is so vividly portrayed in it. But then it is said by some, that a king could never have so emphatically called his servant his *equal*. Surely those who raise this objection underestimate the generosity of David's nature; and assuming, as we must, that David's counsellor was an exceedingly able man, and believing, as we well may, that he had until lately readily promoted the public interests which he knew lay near his master's heart, it is easy to think that the more David's' kingly position put a distance between himself and many of his subjects, the more would his heart be drawn out to the gifted man whose counsels he had learned to prize. The difficulty then may be dismissed as imaginary. A far more plausible objection may be based on the unlikelihood that David could ever have written of Jerusalem in such terms as are here employed of the city in which the psalmist finds himself—especially considering David's undoubted responsibility for the condition of the city. "It is difficult to believe, says Kirkpatrick with great force, "that Jerusalem can have been such a hotbed of discord and disorder and iniquity as the psalm describes; and still more difficult to imagine that David should use the language of this psalm in regard to a state of things for which he was largely responsible." The great responsibility of David in such a case no one can question. Whether, *if* such a deplorable state of things existed, David would have been likely so frankly to confess it, is a

STUDIES IN PSALMS

psychological problem depending for its solution on the play of some of the most subtle capabilities of the human heart. If we can imagine, as we readily may, that the unhappy king was now in a state of mind predisposed to make a clean breast of everything, and at least to look the ugliest facts full in the face; then, even though he is not now consciously weighing his own responsibility, but rather inclining to dwell on the responsibility of others, we may credit him with the *rising courage* to abate nothing of the truth, and therefore to give frank expression to his convictions, however appalling. Besides, all that was noblest in David's ideals of what Jerusalem ought to be, and all that he had to be most proud of in his past endeavours to bring her up to those ideals, would now tend to make him—if otherwise in a likely state of mind—a severe critic of Jerusalem's present condition. So that the only serious question we have to confront is whether Jerusalem's moral condition was in *as bad a way* (or nearly as bad, allowing something for unconscious exaggeration, due to morbid apprehensions) as is so forcibly set forth in this psalm. Alas! it may. The evidence is growing upon us—that it may. The connected study of foregoing psalms has been gradually preparing us to perceive the alarming possibility—that it may. What are the principal factors of the situation? They are these. David has for years been the chief judge in Jerusalem; and he has now for a good long while been neglecting his judicial duties. His people have grown used vainly to look for him in the gate of the city. Grievances and wrongs have been unredressed. Justice delayed has been justice denied. Unvisited offences have fast begotten others, and worse. The chief judge absent, his subordinaes have grown remiss. Even Kirkpatrick admits that "David's administration of justice seems to have been lax or inadequate (2 Sam. 15:2ff.). A well-grounded admission! *How long* has this royal remissness been working out its consequences? We cannot exactly say; but we have several baleful influences to reckon with, for the play of which allowance must be made: the adultery—the murder—the impenitence: indisposing for attention to duty; the leper-stroke—the pain—the disfigurement—the shame, naturally and inevitably increasing and prolonging such indisposition. And then the habit of neglect would breed excuse for further neglect. All these influences would be additional to those absences from home on warlike expeditions, which would all tend indefinitely to prolong David's absence from his post as judge in Israel. So that it is a natural surmise, that David's

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE

neglect of his judicial functions in Jerusalem had extended to many months' complete absence from his post in the gate of the city; and that, during those weary months, civic disorders had been growing apace. He awakes at length to the stern realities of Jerusalem's internal condition; institutes inquiries, receives information, compares the notes of his informants; and this is what he sees; and, being a poet, this is the graphic picture drawn by his muse: *Violence, Strife, Trouble, Mischief, Engulfing Ruin, Oppression, Deceit*, walking abroad, stalking through the city, circumambulating her walls, by day, by night—causing a rapid and awful moral deterioration and even devastation. Alas! in the circumstances, it is not too bad to be true; but it is a terrible revelation. Instead, therefore, of being content, with Kirkpatrick, with a "negative conclusion," by saying we cannot tell who wrote this psalm, much rather are we entitled to revert to David's terrible fall, and to discover here, drawn by his own hand, this further effect of his sin.

Further: it just like *him*,—not as though he were essentially a revengeful man, but as undoubtedly a passionately devoted lover of Zion and an inborn hater of perversity,—that, on surveying the picture his own hand has drawn, he should break out in terrible imprecations on those who had done so much to degrade the city of his love! *Desolations on them!*

But *is* it fully as much like him, to have—if not whined like a whipt cur—at least mournfully cooed like a timid, disconsolate *dove*? This too is life-like—under the circumstances, the peculiarities of which should not for a moment be forgotten. Months of suffering and shame have wrought havoc on his personal condition. He is fitful, moody, morbidly imaginative. He is so conscious of his disturbed mental condition, that, when he begins to compose this psalm, he anticipates he shall *wander*. *The voice of an enemy*, which he overhears, alas! is the voice of an old friend. He can perceive, acting on his old friends, *the pressure of a lawless one*, and enigmatic phrase, most apt and illuminating when understood as an allusion to the as yet absent Absalom,—whose name, we have before noted David's reluctance to mention. Ahithophel has set the ball of calumny rolling. One damaging fact after another has been whispered in conclave; so that, to David's heated imagination, his enemies are rolling down *boulders* upon him! No wonder, then, that for a few moments, he longs for the strong *pinions of a dove* in the vain

STUDIES IN PSALMS

hope of leaving all trouble behind him—at least till the *tempest* of rebellion has passed. For a few moments only! For although the timid spirit of the dove still lingers on him, after he has in his own imagination finished his flight far away, yet his *cooing* soon turns to *cursing*, especially when fired with dark memories of Ahithophel.

It has been too hastily concluded, from 2 Sam. 15:31, that David could not have known of his counsellor's treachery when he wrote this psalm. That, however, is not in evidence. He may have been well aware of that some time before Absalom's Insurrection had become an accomplished fact.

The suicide of Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23) comes into a most suggestive relation to ver. 23 of this psalm; and, on the whole, the ancient Jewish expositors seem to have had a truer insight into this relation than modern Christian interpreters. "The Talmud and Midrashim occasionally refer to him (Ahithophel). In the latter he is classed with Balaam as an instance of the ruin which overtakes wisdom that is not the gift of Heaven; and in the former (*Baba bathra*, b 7) the great lesson of his life is said to be, 'Be not in strife with the house of David, and break off from none of its rule'"—Hastings' "Bible Dictionary," Vol. I., p. 57.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The "abrupt transitions" of this psalm are worked out in the paraphrase—how does Rotherham account for such change of thought? Do you agree? Discuss.
2. Spurgeon interestingly remarks "The Spiritual eye ever and anon sees the Son of David and Judas, and the chief priests appearing and disappearing upon the glowing canvas of this psalm." See if you can exercise your spiritual eyes.
3. To what period in David's life is this psalm usually referred? (Read II Sam. 15-18) Who is David's close friend who became his bitter enemy?
4. In what area of rule was David evidently sadly remiss? How does this relate to the psalm?
5. David fled Jerusalem from Absalom with out resistance—why? If the conditions described here prevailed in Jerusalem who was at fault?
6. Rotherham becomes increasingly convinced that David did indeed write this psalm—what led him to this conclusion?

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE AND FIFTY-SIX

7. The psalmist longs to fly away "like a dove"—is this a healthy attitude? Discuss.
8. Why did Ahithophel commit suicide? How does this relate to the psalm? (Cf. vs. 23 and II Sam. 17:23)
9. Read verse 17 of this psalm and pause to ask yourself—"when did we lose the holy habit of regular private worship"? The early church practiced it—Discuss.
10. There is a marvelous provision and promise in verse 22—what is it?—how can we make it ours?

PSALM 56

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Song by David in Captivity.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, In a few words, David Describes his Captive Condition, and Composes a *Refrain* of Praise. Stanza II., vers. 5-11, After a Fuller Description of his Captors, the Prisoner prays for their Subjugation because of their Iniquities, Asks that His Own Sufferings may be recorded, Anticipates Future Victory over his Enemies, and Repeats and Enlarges his *Refrain*. Stanza III., vers. 12, 13, The Captive, Remembering his Vows, Promises to Fulfil them; and Anticipates Freedom for his Spared Life.

(Lm.) By David—A Tablet—

When the Philistines seized him in Gath.

- 1 Be gracious unto me O God, for mere man hath crushed me:
all the day a warrior keeps on oppressing me.
- 2 They who are watching me have crushed me all the day.
for multitudes are warring on me loftily.
- 3 What day I am afraid I unto thee will direct my trust.
- 4 In God will I boast as my theme,¹
In God do I trust without fear,—
What can flesh do unto me?

1. The M.T. and versions have "his" word or theme; but as the difference in Heb. is merely the length of a single fine stroke, "my" is preferred here, as better preparing for the omission of the pronoun in ver. 10.