

Four Psalms XXIII. XXXVI. LII. CXXI. eBook

Four Psalms XXIII. XXXVI. LII. CXXI. by George Adam Smith

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GOD OUR SHEPHERD

The twenty-third Psalm seems to break in two at the end of the fourth verse. The first four verses clearly reflect a pastoral scene; the fifth appears to carry us off, without warning, to very different associations. This, however, is only in appearance. The last two verses are as pastoral as the first four. If these show us the shepherd with his sheep upon the pasture, those follow him, shepherd still, to where in his tent he dispenses the desert's hospitality to some poor fugitive from blood. The Psalm is thus a unity, even of metaphor. We shall see afterwards that it is also a spiritual unity; but at present let us summon up the landscape on which both of these features—the shepherd on his pasture and the shepherd in his tent—lie side by side, equal sacraments of the grace and shelter of our God.

A Syrian or an Arabian pasture is very different from the narrow meadows and fenced hill-sides with which we are familiar. It is vast, and often virtually boundless. By far the greater part of it is desert—that is, land not absolutely barren, but refreshed by rain for only a few months, and through the rest of the year abandoned to the pitiless sun that sucks all life from the soil. The landscape is nearly all glare: monotonous levels or low ranges of hillocks, with as little character upon them as the waves of the sea, and shimmering in mirage under a cloudless heaven. This bewildering monotony is broken by only two exceptions. Here and there the ground is cleft to a deep ravine, which gapes in black contrast to the glare, and by its sudden darkness blinds the men and sheep that enter it to the beasts of prey which have their lairs in the recesses. But there are also hollows as gentle and lovely as those ravines are terrible, where water bubbles up and runs quietly between grassy banks through the open shade of trees.

On such a wilderness, it is evident that the person and character of the shepherd must mean a great deal more to the sheep than they can possibly mean in this country. With us, sheep left to themselves may be seen any day—in a field or on a hill-side with a far-travelling fence to keep them from straying. But I do not remember ever to have seen in the East a flock of sheep without a shepherd.

On such a landscape as I have described he is obviously indispensable. When you meet him there, 'alone of all his reasoning kind,' armed, weather-beaten, and looking out with eyes of care upon his scattered flock, their sole provision and defence, your heart leaps up to ask: Is there in all the world so dear a sacrament of life and peace as he?

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There is, and very near himself. As prominent a feature in the wilderness as the shepherd is the shepherd's tent. To Western eyes a cluster of desert homes looks ugly enough—brown and black lumps, often cast down anyhow, with a few loutish men lolling on the trampled sand in front of the low doorways, that a man has to stoop uncomfortably to enter. But conceive coming to these a man who is fugitive—fugitive across such a wilderness. Conceive a man fleeing for his life as Sisera fled when he sought the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. To him that space of trampled sand, with the ragged black mouths above it, mean not only food and rest, but dear life itself. There, by the golden law of the desert's hospitality, he knows that he may eat in peace, that though his enemies come up to the very door, and his table be spread as it were in their presence, he need not flinch nor stint his heart of her security.

That was the landscape the Psalmist saw, and it seemed to him to reflect the mingled wildness and beauty of his own life. Human life was just this wilderness of terrible contrasts, where the light is so bright, but the shadows the darker and more treacherous; where the pasture is rich, but scattered in the wrinkles of vast deserts; where the paths are illusive, yet man's passion flies swift and straight to its revenge; where all is separation and disorder, yet law sweeps inexorable, and a man is hunted down to death by his blood-guiltiness. But not in anything is life more like the Wilderness than in this, that it is the presence and character of One, which make all the difference to us who are its silly sheep; that it is His grace and hospitality which alone avail us when we awaken to the fact that our lives cannot be fully figured by those of sheep, for men are fugitives in need of more than food—men are fugitives with the conscience and the habit of sin relentless on their track. This is the main lesson of the Psalm: the faith into which many generations of God's Church have sung an ever richer experience of His Guidance and His Grace. We may gather it up under these three heads—they cannot be too simple: I. The Lord is a Shepherd; II. The Lord is my Shepherd; and, III. if that be too feeble a figure to meet the fugitive and hunted life of man, the Lord is my Host and my Sanctuary for ever.

I. *The Lord is my Shepherd*: or—as the Greek, vibrating to the force of the original—*The Lord is shepherding me; I shall not want*. This is the theme of the first four verses.

Every one feels that the Psalm was written by a shepherd, and the first thing that is obvious is that he has made his God after his own image.

There are many in our day who sneer at that kind of theology—pretty, indeed, as the pearl or the tear, but like tear or pearl a natural and partly a morbid deposit—a mere human process which, according to them, pretty well explains all religion; the result of man's instinct to see himself reflected on the cloud that bounds his view; man's honest but deluded effort to put himself in charge of the best part of himself, filling the throne of an imaginary heaven with an impossible exaggeration of his own virtues.



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But it is far better to hold with Jesus Christ than with such reasoners. Jesus Christ tells us that a man cannot be wrong if he argues towards God from what he finds best in himself. *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him? What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? ... Likewise, I say unto you, There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.*

That is a true witness, and strikes Amen out of every chord of our hearts. The Power, so evident in nature that He needs no proof, the Being so far beyond us in wisdom and in might, must also be our great superior in every quality which is more excellent than might. With thoughts more sleepless than our thoughts, as the sun is more constant than our lamps; with a heart that steadfastly cares for us, as we fitfully care for one another; more kingly than our noblest king, more fatherly than our fondest fatherhood; of deeper, truer compassion than ever mother poured upon us; whom, when a man feels that he highest thing in life is to be a shepherd, he calls his Shepherd, and knows that, as the shepherd, *whose the sheep are*, shrinks not to seek one of his lost at risk of limb or life, so his God cannot be less in readiness of love or of self-sacrifice. Such is the faith of strong and unselfish men all down the ages. And its strength is this, that it is no mere conclusion of logic, but the inevitable and increasing result of duty done and love kept pure—of fatherhood and motherhood and friendship fulfilled. One remembers how Browning has put it in the mouth of David, when the latter has done all he can do for 'Saul,' and is helpless:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift, That I doubt His own love can compete with it? ... Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man; And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can? Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to enrich, To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would—knowing which I know that my service is perfect. Oh, speak through me now! Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!

Thus have felt and known the unselfish of all ages. It is not only from their depths, but from their topmost heights—heaven still how far!—that men cry out and say, *There is a rock higher than I!* God is stronger than their strength, more loving than their uttermost love, and in so far as they have loved and sacrificed themselves for others, they have obtained the infallible proof, that God too lives



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and loves and gives Himself away. Nothing can shake that faith, for it rests on the best instincts of our nature, and is the crown of all faithful life. He was no hireling herdsman who wrote these verses, but one whose heart was in his work, who did justly by it, magnifying his office, and who never scamped it, else had he not dared to call his God a shepherd. And so in every relation of our own lives. While insincerity and unfaithfulness to duty mean nothing less than the loss of the clearness and sureness of our faith in God; duty nobly done, love to the uttermost, are witnesses to God's love and ceaseless care, witnesses which grow more convincing every day.

The second, third and fourth verses give the details. Each of them is taken directly from the shepherd's custom, and applied without interpretation to the care of man's soul by God. *He maketh me lie down*—the verb is to bring the flocks to fold or couch—*on pastures of green grass*—the young fresh grass of spring-time. *By waters of rest He refresheth me.*[1] This last verb is difficult to render in English; the original meaning was evidently to guide the flock to drink, from which it came to have the more general force of sustaining or nourishing. *My life He restoreth*—bringeth back again from death. *He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake*, not necessarily straight paths, but paths that fulfil the duty of paths and lead to somewhere, unlike most desert tracks which spring up, tempt your feet for a little, and then disappear. *Yea, though I walk in a valley of deep darkness, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.* *Thy rod and Thy staff* are not synonymous, for even the shepherd of to-day, though often armed with a gun, carries two instruments of wood, his great oak club, thick enough to brain a wild beast, and his staff to lean upon or to touch his sheep, while the ancient shepherd without firearms would surely still more require both. *They will comfort me*—a very beautiful verb, the literal meaning of which is to help another, choked with grief or fear, to breathe freely, and give his heart air.

[Footnote 1: The Greek reads: epi hudatos anapauseôs exethrepse me]

These simple figures of the conduct of the soul by God are their own interpretation. Who, from his experience, cannot read into them more than any other may help him to find? Only on two points is a word required. *Righteousness* has no theological meaning. The Psalmist, as the above exposition has stated, is thinking of such desert paths as have an end and goal, to which they faultlessly lead the traveller: and in God's care of man their analogy is not the experience of justification and forgiveness, but the wider assurance that he who follows the will of God walks not in vain, that in the end he arrives, for all God's paths lead onward and lead home. This thought is clinched with an expression which would not have the same force if righteousness

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were taken in a theological sense: *for His name's sake*. No being has the right to the name of guide or shepherd unless the paths by which he takes the flock do bring them to their pasture and rest. The other ambiguous phrase is the *vale of deep darkness*. As is well known, the letters of the word may be made to spell *shadow of death*; but the other way of taking them is the more probable. This, however, need not lead us away from the associations with which our old translation has invested them. It is not only darkness that the poet is describing, but the darkness where death lurks for the poor sheep,—the gorges, in whose deep shadows are the lairs of wild beasts, and the shepherd and his club are needed. It stands thus for every dismal and deadly passage through which the soul may pass, and, most of all, it is the Valley of the Shadow of Death. There God is with men no less than by the waters of repose, or along the successful paths of active life. Was He able to recover the soul from life's wayside weariness and hunger?—He will equally defend and keep it amid life's deadliest dangers.

II. But the Psalm is not only theology. It is personal religion. Whether the Psalmist sang it first of the Church of God as a whole, or of the individual, the Church herself has sung it, through all generations, of the individual. By the natural progress of religion from the universal to the particular; by the authority of the Lord Jesus, who calls men singly to the Father, and one by one assures them of God's Providence, Grace and Glory; by the millions who have taken Him at His word, and every man of them in the loneliness of temptation and duty and death proved His promise—we also in our turn dare to believe that this Psalm is a psalm for the individual. The Lord is *my* shepherd: He maketh *me* to lie down: He leadeth *me*: He restoreth *my* soul. Lay your attention upon the little word. Ask yourself, if since it was first put upon your lips you have ever used it with anything more than the lips: if you have any right to use it: if you have ever taken any steps towards winning the right to use it. To claim God for our own, to have and enjoy Him as ours, means, as Christ our Master said over and over again, that we give ourselves to Him, and take Him to our hearts. Sheep do not choose their shepherd, but man has to choose—else the peace and the fulness of life which are here figured remain a dream and become no experience for him.

Do not say that this talk of surrender to God is unreal to you. Happiness, contentment, the health and growth of the soul, depend, as men have proved over and over again, upon some simple issue, some single turning of the soul. Lives are changed by a moment's listening to conscience, by a single and quiet inclination of the mind. We must submit ourselves to God. We must bring our wills under His. Here and now we can do this by resolution and effort, in the strength



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of His Spirit, which is nearer us than we know. The thing is no mystery, and not at all vague. The mistake people make about it is to seek for it in some artificial and conventional form. We have it travestied to-day under many forms—under the form of throwing open the heart to excitement in an atmosphere removed from real life as far as possible: under the form of assent to a dogma: under the form of adherence to a church.

But do you summon up the most real things in your life—the duty that is a disgust: the sacrifice for others from which you shrink. Summon up your besetting sin—the temptation which, for all your present peace, you know will be upon you before twenty-four hours are past. Summon up these grim realities of your life,—and in face of them give yourself to God's will, put your weakness into the keeping of His grace. He is as real as they are, and the act of will by which you give yourself to Him and His Service will be as true and as solid an experience as the many acts of will by which you have so often yielded to them.

Otherwise this beautiful name, this name Shepherd, must remain to you the emptiest of metaphors: this Psalm only a fair song instead of the indestructible experience which both Name and Psalm become to him who gives himself to God.

Men and women, who in this Christian land have grown up with this Psalm in your hearts, in all the great crises of life that are ahead shall this Psalm revisit us. In perplexity and doubt, in temptation and sorrow, and in death, like our mother's face shall this Psalm she put upon our lips come back to us. Woe to us then, if we have done nothing to help us to believe it! As when one lies sick in a foreign land, and music that is dear comes down the street and swells by him, and lifts his thoughts a little from himself, but passes over and melts into the distance, and he lies colder and more forsaken than before—so shall it be with us and this Psalm.

But if we do give our hearts to God and His Will, if day by day of our strength we work and serve, live and suffer, with contented hearts—then I know what we shall say when the day of our darkness and loneliness comes down, whether it be of temptation, or of responsibility, or of death itself. In that day we shall lift our faces and say: *Yea, though I am walking in the Valley of the Shadow of Death I do fear no evil, for Thou art with me, and Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me!*

III. But some one may turn round upon all this and say: 'It is simple, it is ideal, but the real man cannot reach it out of real life. For he is not the mere sheep, turned easily by a touch of the staff. He is a man: his life is no mere search for grass, it is a being searched; it is not a following, it is a flight. Not from the future do we shrink, even though death be there. The past is on our track, and hunts us down. We need more than guidance: we need grace.'



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This is probably what the Psalmist himself felt when he did not close with the fourth verse, otherwise so natural a climax. He knew that weariness and death are not the last enemies of man. He knew that the future is never the true man's only fear. He remembered the inexorableness of the past; he remembered that blood-guiltiness, which sheep never feel, is worse to men than death. As perchance one day he lifted his eyes from his sheep and saw a fugitive from the avenger of blood crossing the plain, while his sheep scattered right and left before this wild intruder into their quiet world,—so he felt his fair and gentle thoughts within him scattered by the visitation of his past; so he felt how rudely law breaks through our pious fancies, and must be dealt with before their peace can be secure; so he felt, as every true man has felt with him, that the religion, however bright and brave, which takes no account of sin, is the religion which has not a last nor a highest word for life.

Consider this system of blood revenge. It was the one element of law in the lawless life of the desert. Everything else in the wilderness might swerve and stray. This alone persisted and was infallible. It crossed the world; it lasted through generations. The fear of it never died down in the heart of the hunted man, nor the duty of it in the heart of the hunter. The holiest sanctions confirmed it,—the safety of society, the honour of the family, love for the dead. And yet, from this endless process, which hunted a man like conscience, a shelter was found in the custom of Eastern hospitality—the 'golden piety of the wilderness,' as it has been called. Every wanderer, whatever his character or his past might be, was received as the; 'guest of God'—such is the beautiful name which they still give him,—furnished with food, and kept inviolate, his host becoming responsible for his safety.

That the Psalmist had this custom in view, when composing the last two verses of the Psalm, is plain from the phrase with which these open: *Thou spreadest before me a table in the very face of mine enemies*; and perhaps also from the unusual metaphor in verse 6: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow, or hunt, me all the days of my life*.

And even if those were right (which I do not admit) who interpret the enemies and pursuers as the mere foes and persecutors of the pious, it is plain that to us using the Psalm this interpretation will not suffice. How can we speak of this custom of blood-revenge and think only of our material foes? If we know ourselves, and if our conscience be quick, then of all our experiences there is but one which suits this figure of blood-revenge, when and wheresoever in the Old Testament it is applied to man's spiritual life. So only do the conscience and the habit of sin pursue a man. Our real enemies are not our opponents, our adversities, our cares and pains. These our enemies! Better comrades, better guides,



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better masters no man ever had. Our enemies are our evil deeds and their memories, our pride, our selfishness, our malice, our passions, which by conscience or by habit pursue us with a relentlessness past the power of figure to express. We know how they persist from youth unto the grave: *the sting of death is sin*. We know what they want: nothing less than our whole character and will. *Simon, Simon*, said Christ to a soul on the edge of a great temptation, *Satan hath asked you back again for himself*.

Yet it is the abounding message of the whole Bible, of which our twenty-third Psalm is but a small fragment, that for this conscience and this habit of sin God hath made provision, even as sure as those thoughts of His guidance which refresh us in the heat of life and comfort us amidst its shadows.

In Nature? Yes: for here too the goodness of God leadeth to repentance. There is nothing which the fifth verse so readily brings to mind as the grace of the Divine hospitality in nature. *Thou spreadest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies*. How these words contrast the fever and uncertain battle of our life with the calmness and surety of the Divine order! Through the cross currents of human strife, fretted and stained, the tides of nature keep their steady course, and rise to their invariable margins. The seasons come up undisturbed by crime and war. Spring creeps even into the beleaguered city; through the tents of the besiegers, across trench and scarp, among the wheels of the cannon, and over the graves of the dead, grass and wild flowers speed, spreading God's table. He sendeth His rain upon the just and the unjust. And even here the display is not merely natural, nor spread only in the sight of our physical enemies; but God's goodness leadeth to repentance, and Nature is equipped even for deliverance from sin. Who has come out upon a great landscape, who has looked across the sea, who has lifted his eyes to the hills and felt the winds of God blowing off their snows, who has heard earth's countless voices rising heavenwards, but has felt: What a wide place this world is for repentance! Man does find in Nature deliverance from himself, oblivion of his past, with peace and purity! And yet the provision, though real, is little more than temporary. The herdsmen of the desert are not obliged to furnish to their fugitive guest shelter for more than two nights with the day between. Little more than two nights with the day between is the respite from conscience and habit which Nature provides for the sinful heart. She is the million-fold opportunity of repentance; she is not the final or everlasting grace of God. And, therefore, whatever may have been the original intention of our Psalmist, the spiritual feeling of the Church has understood his last two verses to sing of that mercy and forgiveness of our God which were spoken to men by the prophets, but reached the fulness of their proclamation and proof in Jesus Christ.

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He who owned the simple trust of the first four verses, saying, 'Thou art right, I am the Good Shepherd,' so that since He walked on earth the name is no more a mere metaphor of God, but the dearest, strongest reality which has ever visited this world of shadows—He also has been proved by men as the Host and Defender of all who seek His aid from the memory and the pursuit of sin. So He received them in the days of His flesh, as they drifted upon Him across the wilderness of life, pressed by every evil with which it is possible for sin to harry men. To Him they were all 'guests of God,' welcomed for His sake, irrespective of what their past might have been. And so, being lifted up, He still draws us to Himself, and still proves Himself able to come between us and our past. Whatever we may flee from He keeps it away, so that, although to the last, for penitence, we may be reminded of our sins, and our enemies come again and again to the open door of memory, in Him we are secure. He is our defence, and our peace is impregnable.

PSALM XXXVI

THE GREATER REALISM

Like the twenty-third Psalm, the thirty-sixth seems to fall into two unconnected parts, but with this difference, that while both of the twenty-third are understood by us, and heartily enjoyed, of the thirty-sixth we appreciate only those verses, 5-10, which contain an adoration of God's mercy and righteousness. Verses 1-4, a study of sin, are unintelligible in our versions, and hardly ever sung, except in routine, by a Christian congregation. So sudden is the break between the two parts, and so opposite their contents, that they have been taken by some critics to be fragments of independent origin. This, however, would only raise the more difficult question: Why, being born apart, and apparently so unsympathetic, were they ever wedded? To a more careful reading the Psalm yields itself a unity. The sudden break from the close study of sin to the adoration of God's grace is designed, and from his rhapsody the Psalmist returns to pray, in verses 10-12, against that same evil with which he had opened his poem. Indeed, it is in this, its most admirable method, more than in details, that the Psalm is instructive and inspiring.

The problem of Israel's faith was the existence of evil in its most painful form of the successful and complacent sinner, the oppressor of good men. This problem our Psalm takes, not, like other Psalms, in its cruel bearing upon the people of God, but in its mysterious growth in the character of the wicked man. Through four verses of vivid realism we follow the progress of sin. Then, when eye and heart are full of the horror, the Psalmist steps suddenly back, and lifts his gaze beyond and above his study of evil to God's own world that stretches everywhere. The effect is to put the problem into a new perspective. The black bulk which had come between the Singer and



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his Sun shrinks from his new position to a point against that universal goodness of the Lord, and he conceives not only courage to pray against it, but the grace to feel it already beneath his feet. This is not an intellectual solution of the problem of evil: but it is a practical one. The Psalm is a study—if we can call anything so enthusiastic a study—in proportion; the reduction of the cruel facts of experience to their relation to other facts as real but of infinite comfort and glory; the expansion, in short, of the words of verse 9: *In Thy light we see light.*

The Psalmist's analysis of sin has been spoiled in translation. Take our Old Version, or the Revised one, and you will find no meaning in the first two verses, but take the rendering offered on the margin by the Revisers (and approved by most scholars), and you get a meaning intelligible, profound, and true to experience:

*Oracle of sin hath the wicked in the
midst of his heart;
There is no fear of God before his eyes.*

The word *oracle* means probably secret whisper, but is elsewhere used (except in one case) of God's word to His prophets. It is the instrument of revelation. The wicked man has in him something comparable to this. Sin seems as mysterious and as imperative as God's own voice to the heart of His servants. And to counteract this there is no awe of God Himself. Temptation in all its mystery, and with no religious awe to meet it—such is the beginning of sin.

The second verse is also obscure. It seems to describe the terrible power which sin has of making men believe that though they continue to do evil they may still keep their conscience. The verse translates most readily, though not without some doubt:

*For it flatters him, in his eyes,
That he will discover his guilt—that he will hate it.*

While sin takes from a man his healthy taste for what is good, and his power to loathe evil, it deludes him with the fancy that he still enjoys them. Temptation, when we yield, is succeeded by self-delusion.

The third and fourth verses follow clearly with the aggravated effects. Sin ceases to flatter, and the man's habits are openly upon him. Truth, common-sense and all virtue are left behind:

The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit, He has given up thinking sensibly and doing good.

So he becomes presumptuous and obstinate.



He devises iniquity upon his bed—which is but the Hebrew for 'planning evil in cold blood'—

*He takes up his post on a way that
is not good,
He abhors not evil.*

There we have the whole biography of sin from its first whisper in the centre of man's being, where it seems to speak with the mystery and power of God's own word, to the time when, through the corruption of every instinct and quality of virtue, it reaches the border of his being and destroys the last possibility of penitence. It is the horror of Evil in the four stages of its growth: Temptation, Delusion, Audacity, and Habit ending in Death.

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To us sin has not become any less of a mystery or a pain. Temptation is as sudden and demonic. Into every soul, however purged and fenced, evil appears to have as much freedom of entrance as God Himself. It begins as early. In the heart of every little child God works, but they who next to God have most right there, the father and the mother, know that something else has had, with God, precedence of themselves. As the years go on, and the knowledge of good and evil grows, becoming ever more jealous and expert a sentinel, it still finds its watch and fence of the outside world mocked by the mysterious upburst of sin within. The whole mystery of temptation is to have sins suggested to us, and to be swept after them by a sudden enthusiasm, which sometimes feels as strong as the Spirit of God ever made in us the enthusiasm for virtue. 'There are moments when our passions speak and decide for us, and we seem to stand by and wonder. They carry in them an inspiration of crime, that in an instant does the work of long premeditation.' [2] 'An inspiration of crime,' that is the *oracle of sin*. From that come the panic and the despair of temptation. The heart, which has still left in it some loyalty to God, is horrified by the ease and the surprise of evil. Yet the greater horror is that this horror may be lost: that men and women do continually exchange it for a complacent and careless temper toward the besetting sin which they have once felt to be worse than death. From being panic-stricken at the rise and surge of temptation, they will (and there is no more marvellous change in all fickle man's experience) grow easy and scornful about it, time after time permitting it to overcome them, in the delusion that they may reassert themselves when they will, and put it beneath their feet. The rest is certain. Falsehood becomes natural to him who was born loyal, audacity to him who grew up timid and scrupulous. The impulsive lover of good, who has fallen through the very warmth of his nature, develops into the deliberate sensualist. Natures sensitive and enthusiastic grow absolutely empty of power to revolt against what is unjust or foul. A great writer once said of himself in middle life: 'I am proud and intellectual, but forced by the habits of years to like the base and dishonourable from which I formerly revolted.' Little children have the seeds of all this within them; men and women are born with the inspiration which starts these mysterious and direful changes; the fatal decadence takes place in countless lives.

[Footnote 2: George Eliot.]

Before facts so horrifying—they are *within* as well as everywhere around us—our real need is not an intellectual explanation of why they are permitted or whence this taint in the race arose. For, supposing that we were capable of understanding this, the probability is that we might become tolerant of the facts themselves, and, perceiving that cruelty and sin had a necessary place in the universe, lose

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the mind to fight them. Constituted as are the most of mankind, for them to discover a reason for a fact is, if not to conceive a respect for it, at least to feel a plausible excuse for their sluggishness and timidity in dealing with it. Nay, the very study of sin for the purpose of acquainting ourselves with its nature, too often either intoxicates the will, or paralyses it with despair; and it is in recoil from the whole subject that we most surely recover health to fight evil in ourselves and nerve to work for the deliverance from it of others. The practical solution of our problem is to remember how much else there is in the Universe, how much else that is utterly away from and opposed to sin. We must engross ourselves in that, we must exult in that. We must remember goodness, not only in the countless scattered instances about us, but in its infinite resource in the Power and Character of God Himself. We must feel that the Universe is pervaded by this: that it is the atmosphere of life, and that the whole visible framework of the world offers signals and sacraments of its real presence. We may not, we shall not, be able to reconcile this goodness with the cruel facts about us; but at least we shall have reduced these to a new proportion and perspective; we shall have disengaged our wills from the horrid influence of evil, and received a new temper for that contest, in which it is temper far more than any knowledge which overcomes.

This is what our Psalmist does. From the awful realism of Sin he sweeps, without pause or attempt at argument, into a vision of all the goodness of God. The Divine Attributes spread out before him, and it takes him the largest things in nature to describe them: the personal loving-kindness and righteousness of the Most High: the care of Providence: the tenderness of intimate fellowship with God: the security of faith: the satisfaction of worship. He makes no claim that everything is therefore clear: still *are Thy judgments the Great Deep*, fathomless, awful. But we receive new vigour of life as from a *fountain of life*, and the eyes, that had been strained and blinded, see *light*: light to work, light to fight, light to hope. Mark how the rapture breaks away with the name of God:

*LORD, to the heavens is Thy leal
love!
Thy faithfulness to the clouds!
Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God,
Thy judgments are the Great Deep.*

*Man and beast thou preservest, O LORD.
How precious is Thy leal love, O God!
And so the children of men put their
trust in the shadow of Thy wings.
They shall be satisfied with the fatness of Thy house;
And of the river of Thy pleasures
Thou shall give them to drink.*

*For with Thee is the fountain of life,
In Thy light we see light.*

The prayer follows, and closes with the assurance of victory as if already experienced:



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Continue Thy leal love unto them that know Thee, And Thy righteousness to the upright of heart. Let not the foot of pride come against me, Nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There are the workers of iniquity fallen, They are flung down and shall not be able to rise.

Two remarks remain.

A prevailing temper of our own literature makes the method of this Psalm invaluable to us. A large and influential number of our writers have lent themselves, with ability and earnestness, to such an analysis of sin as we find in the first four verses of the Psalm. The inmost lusts and passions of men's hearts are laid bare with a cool and audacious frankness, and the results are inexorably traced in all their revolting vividness of action and character. I suppose that there has not been a period, at least since the Reformation, which has had the real facts of sin so nakedly and fearfully laid before it. The authors of the process call it Realism. But it is not the sum of the Real, nor anything like it. Those studies of sin and wickedness, which our moral microscopes have laid bare, are but puddles in a Universe, and the Universe is not only Law and Order, but is pervaded by the character of its Maker. God's mercy still reaches to the heavens, and His faithfulness to the clouds. We must resolutely and with 'pious obstinacy' lift our hearts to that, else we perish. I think of one very flagrant tale, in which the selfishness, the lusts and the cruelties of modern men are described with the rarest of power, and so as to reduce the reader to despair, till he realises that the author has emptied the life of which he treats of everything else, except a fair background of nature which is introduced only to exhibit the evil facts in more horrid relief. The author studies sin in a vacuum, an impossible situation. God has been left out, and the conviction of His pardon. Left out are the power of man's heart to turn, the gift of penitence, the mysterious operations of the Spirit, and the sense of the trustfulness and patience of God with the worst souls of men. These are not less realities than the others; they are within the knowledge of, they bless, every stratum of life in our Christian land; they are the biggest realities in the world to-day. Let us then meet the so-called realism of our times with this Greater Realism. Let us tell men who exhibit sin and wickedness apart from God and from man's power of penitence, apart from love and from the realised holiness of our human race, that they are working in a vacuum, and their experiment is therefore the most un-real that can be imagined. We may not be able to eliminate the cruel facts of sin from our universe, but do not let us therefore eliminate the rest of the Universe from our study of sin. Let us be true to the Greater Realism.



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Again, the whole Psalm is on the famous keynote of the Epistle to the Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord*. This is after all the only safe temper for tempted men. By preachers of a theology as narrow as their experience, it is often said that our guilt and native vileness, our unquestioned peril and instability, are such that no man of us can afford to be exultant in this life. But surely, just because of these, we cannot afford to be anything else. Whether from the fascination or from the despair of sin, nothing saves like an ardent and enthusiastic belief in the goodness and the love of God. Let us strenuously lift the heart to that. Let us rejoice and exult in it, and so we shall be safe. But, withal, we must beware of taking a narrow or an abstract view of what that goodness is. The fault of many Christians is that they turn to some theological definition, or to some mystical refinement of it, and their hearts are starved. We must seek the loving-kindness of God in all the breadth and open-air of common life. *Lord, Thou preservest man and beast*. Or, as St. Paul put it in that same Epistle: *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things*. It is, once more, the Greater Realism. But behind Paul's crowd of glorious facts let us not miss the greatest Reality of all, God Himself. God's righteousness and love, His grace and patience toward us, become more and more of a wonder as we dwell upon them, and by force of their wonder the most real facts of our experience. *How excellent is Thy loving-kindness, O God. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say unto you, Rejoice*.

PSALM LII

RELIGION THE OPEN AIR OF THE SOUL

With the thirty-sixth Psalm we may take the fifty-second, which attacks the same problem of evil in pretty much the same temper. It is peculiar in not being addressed, like others, to God or to the Psalmist's own soul, but to the wicked man himself. It is, at first at least, neither a prayer nor a meditation, but a challenge and an arraignment of character.

Some may be disposed to cavil at its bitterness, and to say that for Christians it is too full of threats and vengeance. Perhaps it is; nay, certainly it is. But there are two noble feelings in it, and two vivid pictures of character. The Psalm is inspired by a brave contempt for wickedness in high places, and by a most devout trust in the love of God. And in expressing these two noble tempers, the poet analyses two characters. He analyses the character which is ruled from within by the love of Self, and he gives his own experience of a character inspired from without by faith—by faith in the mercy of the Living God.

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We Christians too hastily dismiss from our own uses the so-called Cursing Psalms. It is unfortunate that the translators have so often tempted us to this by exaggerating the violence of the Hebrew at the expense of its insight, its discrimination, and its sometimes delicate satire. If only we had a version that produced the exact colours of the original, and if we ourselves had the quick conscience and the honest wit to carry over the ideas into terms suitable to our own day—in which the selfishness of the human heart is the same old thing it ever was, though it uses milder and more subtle means,—then we should feel the touch of a power not merely of dramatic interest but of moral conviction, where we have been too much accustomed to think that we were hearing only ancient rant. So treated, Psalms like the fifth, the tenth, the fourteenth, and the fifty-second, which we so often pass over, offended by their violence, become quick and powerful, the very word of God to our own times and hearts.

Let us take a more literal version of the Psalm before us:

*Why glory in evil, big man?
The leal love of God is all day long.
Thy tongue planneth mischiefs,
Like a razor sharp-whetted, thou worker of fraud.
Thou lovest evil more than good,
Lying than speaking the truth.
Thou lovest all words of voracity,
Tongue of deceit.
God also shall tear thee down, once for all,*

*Cut thee out, and pluck thee from the
tent,
And uproot thee from off the land
of the living.
That the righteous may see and fear,
And at him they shall laugh.*

*'Lo! the fellow who sets not God
for his stronghold,
But trusts in the mass of his
wealth,
Is strong in his mischief.'*

*But I like an olive-tree, green in God's
house,
I have trusted in God's leal love for
ever and aye.
I will praise Thee for ever, that Thou
hast done [this],*



*And I will wait on Thy name—for
'tis good—
In face of Thy saints.*

The character who is challenged is easily made out, and we may recognize how natural he is and how near to ourselves.

In the first verse he is called by a name expressing unusual strength or influence—a mighty man, a *hero*. The term may be used ironically, like our 'big fellow', 'big man.' But, whether this is irony or not, the man's bigness had material solidity. He was *rooted in the land of the living, he had abundance of riches*. Riches are no sin in themselves, as the exaggerated language of some people of the present day would lead us to imagine. Rich men are not always sent to hell, nor poor men always to heaven. As St. Augustine remarks with his usual cleverness: 'It was not his poverty but his piety which sent Lazarus in the parable to heaven, and when he got there, he found a rich man's bosom to rest

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in! Riches are no sin in themselves, but, like all forms of strength, a very great and dangerous temptation. This man had yielded. Prosperity was so unchanging with him that he had come to trust it, and did not feel the need of trusting anything else. He was strong enough to stand alone: so strong that he tried to stand without God. If he was like many self-centred men of our own time he probably did not admit this. But it is not profession which reveals where a man puts his trust. It is the practice and discipline of life, betraying us by a hundred commonplace ways, in spite of all the orthodoxy we boast. It is sorrow and duty and the call to self-denial. When this man's feelings got low, when he was visited by touches of melancholy—those chills sent forward from the grave to every mortal travelling thither,—when conscience made him weak and fearful, then *he made not God his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his riches*. With that audacity which the touch of property breeds in Us, he said, 'I am sure of to-morrow,' plunged into cruel plans, *gloried in his mischief*, and was himself again.

Trusting in riches—we all do it, when we seek to drive away uncomfortable fears and the visitations of conscience by self-indulgence; when, instead of saying *I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help?*—and seeking the steep and arduous consolations of duty, we look into our nearest friends' faces and whine for a sympathy that is often insincere, or lie down in some place of comfort that is stolen or unclean.

No man with such habits stops there. This big man *strengthened himself in his wickedness* and in all manner of guile and cruelty. It is a natural development. The heart which finds life in material wealth is usually certain to go farther and seek for more in the satisfaction of base and sullen appetites. We hear, it is true, a great deal about the softening influence of wealth, and moralists speak of luxury as if its bad effects were negative and it only enervated. But if riches and the habit of trusting to them, if the material comforts of life and complacency in them, only made men sleek and tame—if luxury did nothing but soften and emasculate—the world would have been far more stupid and far less cruel than it is to-day.

They are not negative tempers, but very positive and aggressive ones, which the Bible associates with a love of wealth, and we have but to remember history to know that the Bible is right. Luxury may have dulled the combative instincts in man, but it has often nursed the meanly cruel ones. The Romans with the rapid growth of their wealth loved the battlefield less; but the sight of the arena, with its struggling gladiators, and beasts tearing women and children, became more of a necessity to their appetites. Take two instances. Titus was a rough, hardened soldier; but he wept at the horrors which his siege obliged him to inflict on Jerusalem. Nero was



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an artist, and fiddled while Rome was burning. Coddle your boys; you may keep them from wishing to fight their equals, but you will not cure them of torturing animals. Idleness means not only sluggishness, but a morbid and criminal desire for sensation, which honest industry would have sweated out of the flesh. Money often renders those who have it unconsciously impatient with the slowness of poorer men, and unconsciously insolent about their defects. Everywhere, on the high places of history, and within our own humble experience, we perceive the same truth, that materialism, and the temper which trusts in wealth or in success, does not turn men into fat oxen, but into tigers. Hence the frequency with which the Old Testament, and especially the Psalms, connect an abundance of wealth with a strength of wickedness, and bracket for the same degree of doom the rich man and the violent one. Our Psalm is natural in adding to the clause, *trusting in the abundance of riches*, that other about *strengthening himself in wickedness*. This is the very temper of a prosperous and pampered life: which seeks lust or cruelty not to forget itself, as a stunted and tortured nature may be forgiven for doing, but in order to work off its superfluous blood.

Observe, too, how much sins of the tongue are mentioned, -, lying, backbiting and the love of swallowing men's reputations whole. *Thou lovest all words of voracity, thou tongue of deceit*. We are, too, apt to think that sins of speech most fiercely beset weak and puny characters: men that have no weapon but a sharp and nasty tongue. Yet none use their words more recklessly than the strong, who have not been sobered by the rebuffs and uncertainties of life. Power and position often make a man trifle with the truth. A big man's word carries far, and he knows it; till the temptation to be dogmatic or satirical, to snub and crush with a word, is as near to him as to a slave-driver is the fourteen-foot thong in his hand, with a line of bare black backs before him.

These things are written of ourselves. In his great book on 'Democracy in America,' De Tocqueville pointed out, more than fifty years ago, the dangers into which the religious middle classes fall by the spread of wealth and comfort. That danger has increased, till for the *rich* on whom Christ called woe, we might well substitute the *comfortable*. At a time when a very moderate income brings within our reach nearly all the resources of civilisation, which of us does not find day by day a dozen distractions that drown for him the voice of conscience: a crowd of men to lose himself in from God and his best friends: half a dozen base comforts, in the lap of which he forgets duty and dreams only of self? Comfort makes us all thoughtless, and thoughtlessness is the parent of every cruelty.



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The Psalm makes no attempt to turn this tyrant whom it challenges; it invokes the mercy of God, not to change him, but to show how vain his boasts are, and to give heart to those whom he oppresses. God's mercy endureth for ever; but he must pass away. The righteous shall see his end, and fear and laugh: their satire will have religion in it. But though the Psalm does not design this sinner's conversion, its very challenge contains an indication of the means by which he and all selfish people who are like him may be changed to nobler lives. In this respect it has a gospel for us all, which may be thus stated.

There are poor invalids who ought to get their health again by seeking the open air and sunshine, but who keep between their bed and their hearthrug, cowering over their fire with the blinds pulled down;—to whom comes the wise doctor, pulls up the blinds, shows them that it is day outside, with the sun shining and the trees growing, and men walking about, and tells them that the health they are trying to get inside, and thereby only making themselves worse invalids, they will get out there. This big man was such a moral invalid, seeking strength within his own riches and qualities. And so doing he had developed the nasty indoor tempers, till it seemed pleasant and satisfactory to him to be spiteful, slanderous and false. Meantime, outside the darkened windows of his selfishness, the mercy of God, in which other men gloried and grew strong, rose every day. With one sweep the Psalmist tears the curtains down and lets in the sunshine. *The leal love of God is every day.* There, in that commonplace daily light: in that love which is as near you as the open air and as free as the sunshine, are the life and exultation which you seek so vainly within yourself.

It was in the sunshine that the Psalmist felt himself growing:

*But I am like an olive-tree, green in God's house.
I trust in the leal love of God for ever and aye.*

This open-air figure suggests (though we have no confirmation of the fact) a tree growing in the high temple precincts, as trees to this day grow upon the Haram around the great mosque in Jerusalem, open to the sunshine and washed by the great rush of wind from the west. The Old Testament as much as the New haunts the open air for its figures of religion—a tree in full foliage, a tree planted by a river, a river brimming to its banks, the waves of a summer sea. Now this is not only because there is nothing else that will reflect the freedom of God's grace and the lavish joy it brings upon the world, but still more because the Bible feels the eternal truth, that to win this joy and freedom a man has got to go outside himself, outside his selfishness and other close tempers, outside his feelings and thoughts about himself, and receive the truths of religion as objective to him, taking the knowledge of God's pardon and peace as freely as he takes the sunshine of heaven, the



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calm of earth in summer, and the cool, strong winds from off the hills. To those old founders of our faith, religion was never man's feelings about religion: it was the love of God. God was not man's thoughts about God, but God Himself in His wonderful grace and truth, objective to our hearts. Therefore those ancient saints moved to the Spirit as the tree rustles to the wind, and as in summer she is green and glad in the sunshine that bathes her, so they rejoiced in the Lord, and in His goodness. *I will give thanks, for THOU hast done it.*

But this getting out of self does not only bring a man into the open air, and to gladness in a God who worketh for him. It gives him the company of all good and noble men. *I will wait on Thy name, for it is good, in the presence of Thy saints.* What a fellowship faith and unselfishness make a man aware of!

* * * * *

Let us turn back for a moment to the man, to whose close character this open air is offered as a contrast. Is it really difficult for us to imagine him? There is not one of us who has not tried this kind of thing again and again,—and has succeeded in it with far less substance than the great man had to come and go upon. He trusted in the abundance of his riches: he lost God for the multitude of his temptations. But for us there is no such excuse. There has been no pleasure too sordid, no comfort too selfish, no profit too mean, no honour too cheap and vulgar, but we have sometimes preferred it, in seeking for happiness, to the infinite and everlasting mercy of our God. We may not be big men, and deserve to have psalms written about us; but in our own little ways we exult in our selfishness and the tempers it breeds in us just as guiltily as he did, and just as foolishly, for God's great love is as near to us, and could as easily chase these vapours from our souls, if we would but open the windows to its air.

Take one or two commonplace cases that do not require the great capital which this fellow put into his business of sinning, but are quite within reach of your and my very ordinary means of selfishness.

You have been overreached in some business competition, or disappointed in getting a post, or foiled along some path of public service. You come home with a natural vexation in your heart: sore at being beaten and anxious about your legitimate interests. It is all right enough. But sit down at the fire for a little and brood over it. Shut God out as care and anger can. Forget that your Bible is at your elbow. Think only of your wrong, and it is wonderful how soon you will find spite rising, and envy and the cruellest hate. It is wonderful how quickly plans of revenge will form themselves in your usually slow mind, and how happy they will make you. Malice is like brandy to a man's brain, and will send him back with a beaming face to the work he left with scowls. Ah, *why boast*



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thyself in mischief, O man? God's leal love is all day long! The Bible is within reach of you. The lustre is as fresh on the promises as the rain-drops were under the glints of sun this morning. Walk there with God in His own garden: all God's steps are comfort and promise to the meek who will walk with Him. God is full of gentleness, and His gentleness shall make you great. *I will be as the dew unto Israel.* Or seek with the Master the crowds of men. Keep near Him in the dust and the crush: watch how He endures the contradiction of sinners, how patient He is with men, how forgiving. Watch most of all how He prays. Bow the knee like Him, and He shall lift thee up a sane and a happy man. To think of it—all that Divine fellowship and solace may be ours by opening the pages of a Book which lies on every table. *God's love is all the day.*

Let the other case be for young men and young women. For you the fresh air and sunshine are not yet shut out by the high walls of success or the thick ones of material prosperity. The dust of strife for you has not yet hidden heaven. But we all know that passion can build as solidly as wealth, and that a young heart may be as closely prisoned in a sudden temptation as an old one among the substantial accumulations of a lifetime. What is Temptation?

I turned to her: she built a house
And Thought was her swift architect,
And Falsehood let the curtains fall,
And Fancy all the tables deck'd.

And so we shut the world out,
Soul and Temptation face to face,
And perfumed air and music sweet,
And soft desire fill'd all the place.

O brothers, in such an hour, and it comes to every one of us, think upon the vast world outside, and the walls so magically built will as magically fall. God's sunshine is there, and God's fresh air, to think upon which, with the companies of men and women who walk up and down in it and are fair, is the most sovereign charm against temptation that I know. *Why glory in this evil?* Put that challenge to your heart in the crisis of every evil passion. *God's mercy is all day long.* Think of the love of the Father: of His patience with thee, of His trust of thee; think of the Love of the Redeemer, Who gave Himself for thy life; think of the great objective truths of religion—righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Ghost. Or if these seem unsubstantial thoughts, that flash and fade again like clouds on the western sky at evening, come out among the flesh-and-blood proofs of them which walk our own day. Frequent the pure, strong men and women who are in sight of us all, fair on every countryside, radiant in every city crowd. Harken to the greater spirits who by their songs and books come down and speak with the lowliest and most fallen. And do not forget the holy dead, nor doubt that though unseen they are with us still.



*I will wait on Thy name,
for 'tis good, in face of Thy
Saints.*



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PSALM CXXI

THE MINISTRY OF THE HILLS AND ALL GREAT THINGS

We catch the key-note of this Psalm if we read the words *whence cometh my help* not as a statement but as a question. Our older version takes them as a statement; it makes the Psalmist look to the hills, as if his help broke and shouted from them all like waterfalls. But with the Revised Version we ought to read: *I will lift mine eyes unto the mountains—from whence cometh my help?* The Psalmist looks up, not because his help is stored there, but because the sight of the hills stirs within him an intense hope. His heart is immediately full of the prayer, *Whence cometh my help?* and of the answer, *My help is from the Lord, that made heaven and earth.*

We need not wish to fix a locality or a date to this Psalm. It is enough that the singer had a mountain skyline in view, and that below in the shadows, so dark that we cannot make out their features, lay God's church and people. They were threatened, and there was neither help nor hope of help among themselves.

Perhaps it was one of those frequent periods in the life of Israel, in which the religious institutions of the people were so abased that the Psalmist could see in them no pledge nor provocation of hope. Indeed, these institutions may have been altogether overthrown. There was no leader on whom God had set His seal, and the national life had nothing to raise the heart, but was full of base thoughts and paltry issues that dissipate faith, and render the interference of God an improbable thing. So the Psalmist lifted his thoughts to the sacraments which God has fixed in the framework of His world. He did not identify his help with the hills—no true Israelite could have done that,—but the sight of them started his hope and filled his heart with the desire to pray. This may have happened at sunrise, when, even more than at other hours, mountains fulfil the ministry of hope. Below them all was in darkness; it was still night, but the peaks saw the morning, and the signal of its coming fell swiftly down their flanks. In this case the Psalm is a matin-song, a character which the rest of the verses carry out. Or at any other hour of the day, it may simply have been the high, clear outline of the hills which inspired the Psalm—that firm step between heaven and earth, that margin of a world of possibility beyond. A prophet has said, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that bring good tidings!* But to our Psalmist the mountains spread a threshold for a Divine arrival. Up there God Himself may be felt to be afoot.



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Now to a pure heart and a hungry heart this is always what a mountain view effects. 'A hill-top,' says a recent writer, 'is a moral as well as a physical elevation.' He is right, or men would not have worshipped on hill-tops, nor high places have become synonymous with sacred ones. Whether we climb them or gaze at them, the mountains produce in us that mingling of moral and physical emotion in which the temper of true worship consists. They seclude us from trifles, and give the mind the fellowship of greatness. They inspire patience and peace; they speak of faithfulness and guardianship. But chiefly the mountains are sacraments of hope. That high, steadfast line—how it raises the spirits, and lifts the heart from care; how early it signals the day, how near it brings heaven! To men of old its margin excited thoughts of an enchanted world beyond; its clear step between heaven and earth made easy the imagination of God descending among men.

So it is here. At the sight of the hills our Psalmist's hope—instead of lying asleep in confidence of a help too far away to be vivid, or dying of starvation because that help is so long of coming—leaps to her feet, all watch and welcome for an instant arrival. *Whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, that made heaven and earth.* This is not fancy; it is an attitude of real life. This is not a poet with a happy phrase for his idea: it is a sentry at his difficult post, challenging the signal, and welcoming the arrival, of that help which makes all the difference to life.

But we may widen the application of the Psalmist's words far beyond the hills. This is a big thing to which he lifts his eyes to feed his hope. God is unseen; so he betakes himself to the biggest thing he can see. And therein is a lesson which we need all across our life. For it is just because, instead of lifting our eyes to the big things around us, we busy and engross ourselves with trifles, that the practical enthusiasm which beats through this Psalm is failing among us, and that we have so little faith in God's readiness to act, and to act speedily, within the circle of our own experience. Trifles, however innocent or dutiful they may be, do not move within us the fundamental pieties. They reveal no stage worthy for God to act upon. They give no help to the imagination to realise Him as near. A church which never lifts her eyes above her own denominational details, petty differences in doctrine or government, petty matters of ritual and posture, cannot continue to believe in the nearness of the living God. The strain on faith is too great to last. The reason recoils from admitting that God can help on such battle-fields as those on which the churches are often so busy, that He can come to help such causes as the sects, neglectful of the real interests of the world, too often stoop to champion. And so the churches insensibly get settled in far-off, abstract views of God, and are sapped of the primal and practical

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energies of religion. Whereas it is evident that in the religious communities which lift their eyes above their low hedges to the high hills of God—to the great simple outlines of His kingdom, to the ideals and destiny which God has set before mankind—in such churches faith in His nearness to the world and in His readiness to help must always abound. To men who have an eye for the big things of earth, God will always seem to be afoot upon it. They are conscious of an arena worthy for Him to descend upon, and of causes worthy for Him to interfere in. It is no shock to their reason, no undue strain upon their imagination, to feel the Almighty and the All-loving come down to earth, when earth has such horizons and such issues.

Turning to ourselves as individuals, we may ask why we have such distant notions of God, so shy a faith of His coming within the circle of our own life and work? Why are our prayers so formal, so empty of the expectation of an immediate and divine answer? Why is our attitude at our work so destitute of practical enthusiasm? Because we, too, are not lifting our eyes to the hills. We are looking for nothing but little things, and therefore we see nowhere any threshold or field worthy of God. How can the sense that the living God is near to our life, that He is interested in it and willing to help it, survive in us, if our life be full of petty things? Absorption in trifles, attention only to the meaner aspects of life, is killing more faith than is killed by aggressive unbelief. For if all a man sees of life be his own interests, if all he sees of home be its comforts, if all he sees of religion be the outlines of his own denomination, the complexion of his preacher's doctrine, the agreeableness and taste of his fellow-worshippers—to such a man God must always seem far away, for in those things there is no call upon either mind or heart to feel God near. But if, instead of limiting ourselves to trifles, we resolutely and 'with pious obstinacy' lift our eyes to the hills—whether to those great mountain-tops of history which the dawn of the new heavens has already touched, periods of faith and action that signal to our more forward but lower ages the promise of His coming; or to the great essentials of human experience that at sunrise, noon and evening remain the same through all ages; or to the ideals of truth and justice; to the possibilities of human nature about us; to the stature of the highest characters within our sight; to the bulk and sweep of the people's life; to the destinies of our own nation that still rise high above all party dust and strife—then we shall see thresholds prepared for a divine arrival, conditions upon which we can realise God acting. Our hope will spring, an eager sentinel, as if she already heard upon them all the footfalls of His coming.



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These lines may meet the eyes of some who have lost their faith, and are sorry and weary to have lost it. Whether the blame be outside yourselves, in the littleness of many of the prevailing aspects of religious life, and the crowding of our religious arenas with the pettiest of interests, or within yourselves, in your own mean and slovenly views of life, your indolence to extricate details and discriminate the large eternal issues among them—there is for you but one way back to faith. Lift your eyes to the hills. Let your attention haunt the spots where life rises most near to heaven, and your hearts will again become full of hopes and reasons for God being at work upon earth.

Let those who, still in their youth, have preserved their faith and fullness of hope, keep looking up. Amid all the cynicism and the belittling of life, strenuously take the highest views of life. Amid all the selfishness and impatience, which in our day consider life upon its lowest levels, and there break it up into short and selfish interests, strenuously lift your eyes and sweep with them the main outlines, summits and issues. May no man lose sight of the hills for want of looking up, till at the last he is laid upon his back,—and then must look up whether he has done so before or not—and in the evening clearness and evening quiet those great outlines stand forth before his eyes—stand forth but for a few moments and are lost for ever in the falling night.

Many men have bravely lifted their eyes to the hills, who have felt nothing come back upon them save a vague wonder and influence of purity. They have been struck with an awe to which they could give no name, with a health and energy which they could only ascribe to physical infection. But to this Psalmist the hope and worship which the hills excited were satisfied by the revelation of a Person. Above earth and her hills he saw a Character.

There have been revelations of God more rich and brilliant than this one. But its simplicity suits the Psalmist's point of view. He is looking to the hills. It is on that high line he sees his Helper appearing. Now we all know how a figure looks upon a skyline. We see just the outline of it—a silhouette, as it were: no details, expression, voice nor colour, but only an attitude. This is all the Psalmist sees of God on that high threshold against the light—His attitude. The attitude is that of a sentinel. The Lord is thy Keeper—thy watchman. The figure is familiar in Palestine, especially where the tents of the nomads lie. The camp or flock lies low among the tumbled hills, unable to see far, and subject, in the intricate land, to sudden surprise. But sentinels are posted on eminences round about, erect and watchful. This is the figure which the Psalmist sees his help assume upon the skyline to which he has lifted his eyes.



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Compared with other experiences of God, this outline of Him may seem bare. Yet if we feel the fact of it with freshness of heart and imagination, what may it not do for us? Life may be hallowed by no thought more powerfully than by this, that it is watched: nor peace secured by any stronger trust than that the Almighty assumes responsibility for it; nor has work ever been inspired by keener sense of honour than when we feel that God gives us freedom and safety for it. These are the fundamental pieties of the soul; and no elaborateness of doctrine can compensate for the loss of fresh convictions of their truth.

The Lord is thy Keeper. If men had only not left this article out of their creeds when they added all the rest, how changed the religious life of to-day would have been!—how simple, how strenuous, how possibly heroic!

The Lord is thy Keeper. What sense of proportion and what tact does the thought of those sleepless thoughts bring upon our life! How quickly it restores the instinct to discriminate between what is essential and what is not essential in faith and morals; that instinct, from the loss of which the religious world of to-day suffers so much. How hard does it make us with ourselves that His eyes are on us, yet how hopeful that He counts us worth protecting! When we realise, that not only many of the primal forces of character, but its true balance and proportion, are thus due to so simple a faith in God, we understand the insistence laid upon this by the prophets and by Christ. There is no truth which the prophets press more steadily upon Israel than that all their national life lies in the sight and on the care of God. The burden of many prophetic orations is no more than this—you are defended, you are understood, you are watched, by God. And in the Sermon on the Mount, and in that address to the disciples now given in the tenth of Matthew, there is no message more clear or frequent than that God cares for us, has to be reckoned with by all our enemies, is aware of everything that befalls us, and while He relieves us from responsibility in the things that are too great for us, makes us the more to feel our responsibility for things within our power—in short, that the Lord is our Keeper.

Of course we shall be able to realise this, according as we realise life. If we have a heart for the magnitudes of life, it will not seem vain to believe that God Himself should guard it.

If we keep looking to the hills, God shall be very clear upon them as our Keeper.

But this distant view of God upon the skyline, full as it is of discipline and of peace, does not satisfy the Psalmist. To him the Lord is not only Israel's Keeper or Sentinel, but the Lord is also *thy shade on thy right hand: the sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night*. The origin of these expressions is vague, but their application here is vivid enough. A sentinel is too far away, and is, physically, too narrow a figure to fulfil man's imagination of God. The Psalmist requires something near enough to express both intimacy and shelter. So he calls God the Comrade as well as the Sentinel of His



people; their Champion as well as their Watchman. The *shade upon thy right hand* is of course the shade upon the fighting or working arm, to preserve it from exposure, and in the full freedom of its power.



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Now it is never ideas about God, nor even aspirations after Him, which in the real battle of life keep us fresh and unexhausted. Ideas, and even aspirations, strain as much as they lift. They give the mind its direction, but by themselves they cannot carry it all the way. Nor is the influence of a Personality sufficient if that Personality remain far off. Reverence alone never saved any human soul in the storm of life. It is One by our side Whom we need. It is by the sense of trust, of sympathy, of comradeship, of fighting together in the ranks, that our strength is thrilled and our right hand preserved in freshness. Without all this between us and bare heaven, we must in the end weary and wither.

Twofold is the experience in which we especially need such compassion and fellowship—in the time of responsibility and in the time of temptation. These are the two great Lonelinesses of life—the Loneliness of the Height and the Loneliness of the Deep—in which the heart needs to be sure of more than being remembered and watched. The Loneliness of the Height, when God has led us to the duty of a great decision, or given us the charge of other lives, or sent us on the quest of some truth, or lifted us to a vision and ideal. The king, the father, the thinker, the artist, all know this loneliness of the height, which no human fellow can share, no human heart fully sympathise with. Then it is that, with another Psalmist, the heart, exposed to the bare heaven, cries out for something higher than itself to come between the heaven and it: *What time my heart is overwhelmed do Thou lead me unto the rock that is higher than I*; and God answers us by being Himself *a shade upon the right hand, and the sun shall not smite by day, nor the moon by night*. And there is the Loneliness of the Deep, when we are plunged into the pit of our hearts to fight with terrible temptations—a conflict no other man knows about or can help us in. Shall God, Who sees us fighting there, and falling under the sense of our helplessness, leave us to fight alone? The Lord is thy shade on thy right hand; thy Comrade, fighting with thee, His presence shall keep thy heart brave and thine arm fresh. It is a truth enforced through the whole of the Old Testament. God is not a God far away. He descends, He comes to our side: He battles for and suffers with His own.

These then are the main thoughts of this Psalm. What new authority and vividness have Jesus Christ and His Cross put into them? There are few of the Psalms which the early Christians more frequently employed of Christ. On the lintel of an ancient house in Hauran I once read the inscription: 'O Jesus Christ, be the shelter and defence of the home and of the whole family, and bless their incoming and outgoing.' How may we also sing this Psalm of Christ? By remembering the new pledges He has given us, that God's thoughts and God's heart are with us. By remembering the infinite degree, which the Cross has revealed,



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not only of the interest God takes in our life, but of the responsibility He Himself assumes for its eternal issues. The Cross was no new thing. The Cross was the putting of the Love of God, of the Blood of Christ, into the old fundamental pieties of the human heart, the realising by Jesus in Himself of the dearest truths about God. Look up, then, and sing this Psalm of Him. Can we lift our eyes to any of the hills without seeing His figure upon them? Is there a human ideal, duty or hope, with which Jesus is not inseparably and for ever identified? Is there a human experience—the struggle of the individual heart in temptation, the pity of the multitude, the warfare against the strongholds of wickedness—from which we can imagine Him absent? No; it is impossible for any high outline of morality or religion to break upon the eyes of our race, it is impossible for any field of righteous battle, any floor of suffering to unroll, without the vision of Christ upon it. He dominates our highest aspirations, and is felt by our side in our deepest sorrows. There is no loneliness, whether of height or of depth, which He does not enter by the side of His own.

Who has warned us like Christ? To this day He stands the great Sentinel of civilisation. If all within the camp do not acknowledge Him, no new thing starts up in its midst, no new thing comes upon it from outside, which He does not challenge. His judgment is still the highest, clearest, safest the world has ever known; and each new effort of service, each new movement of knowledge, is determined by its worth to His Kingdom.

Who has assumed responsibility for our life as Christ has? Who has taken upon himself the safety and the honour, not of the little tribe for whom this Psalm was first sung, but of the whole of the children of men! He called about Himself our weariness, He lifted our sorrow, He disposed of our sin—as only God can call or lift or dispose. Nothing exhausted His pity, or His confidence to deal with us; nothing ever betrayed a fault in His character, or belied the trust His people put in Him. *He suffers not thy foot to be moved; He neither slumbers nor sleeps.*

For all this we sing the Psalm of Christ. We know that so long as we have our conversation among the lofty things of life, His dominating Presence grows only the more clear; and so long as we are beset by things adverse and tempting, His sympathy and His prevailing grace become the more sure.

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil. He shall preserve thy soul.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth and for evermore.

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