

The Riches of the Psalms

By Malcolm H. Watts

Our Bible contains two Testaments, each of which is divided into three parts: the historic, concerned with the past (Genesis - Esther; Matthew - Acts); the didactic, concerned with the present (Job - Song of Solomon; Romans - Jude); and the prophetic, concerned with the future (Isaiah - Malachi; Revelation). The book of Psalms is in the didactic section and it affords us a 'summary of sacred learning'. It is really, of course, a collection of poems and the productions of many different authors, but these have one peculiar feature: for the first and only time in the Old Testament a man is represented throughout as speaking to God, whereas in all other books God is represented as speaking to Man. For this

reason, the Godly will appreciate, value and love this book. It is a manual of devotion to those who long for a personal relationship with God and who desire to know how to come and remain in the presence of the Most High. Here, then, is experimental religion and, significantly, this book is the central book of our English Bible, the middle chapter being Psalm 117, and the middle verse, Psalm 118:8 - 'It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in Man'.

1. The Nature of the Book

Both our Lord and His apostles called this book 'the book of Psalms' (Lk 20:42; Acts 1:20). Its Hebrew name is both simple and significant: 'Tehillim', 'Praises,' or, more fully, 'Sepher Tehillim', 'Book of

Praises', which title expresses its great and leading characteristic - the praising of Jehovah, the one living and true God.

We make the following observations:

- i. 'Praise' in the Bible relates to the adoring of the divine excellence: 'Because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee' (Ps 63:3). Other words generally relate, not to what God is (as 'praise' does), but to what He does ('blessing', Ps 28:6;68:35) and to what He gives ('thanksgiving', Ps 116:12-19).
- ii. This is a spiritual exercise: 'Praise ye the lord. Praise the lord, O my soul' (Ps 146:1). It will include belief, knowledge, esteem, longing and delight.
- iii. Only gracious hearts can have a real sense of His worth: 'My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise' (Ps 57:7). There must be a prepared heart, with a fixed purpose, if we are to praise God aright.
- iv. Our praise must be such as the Lord appoints and requires: 'My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation' (Ps 22:25). It may be translated 'from thee' as in the Hebrew it is a genitive of source, indicating that we must use the songs God has provided.

- v. We need to be stirred up to this work: 'Praise ye the lord: for it is good (most acceptable) to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant (full of refreshment); and praise is comely (most fitting for the Lord's people) (Ps 147:1).
- vi. Praise should be glorious, for our God is infinitely glorious: 'Sing forth the honour of His name: make His praise glorious' (Ps 66:2).
- vii. The end of it is God's glory and His people's good: 'Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me' (Ps 50:23); 'But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel' (Ps 22:3) - Observe from this latter verse that God dwells where He is praised.

Names for the praises in this book are, first of all, of course, 'psalms' - a general term for 'praise with musical instruments', from 'psallein', 'to strike the lyre', and 'hymns' - praises devoted to Almighty God, e.g. Ps 18, 145, and 'spiritual songs' - inspired poems, containing doctrine, history, or prophecy, e.g. Ps 45, 78, 102 (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). As William Sommerville remarks, 'They are all Psalms, as having been occasionally sung by instrumental music. They are all Hymns, because composed in honour of the Supreme Being. They are all Spiritual Songs, because poetical and composed by the direction of the Spirit.'

2. A Brief History of Psalmody

Songs were sung from ancient times, as is clear from Laban's remonstrance with Jacob, 'Wherefore didst thou flee secretly, and did not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth and songs, with tabret and with harp?' (Gen 31:27). However, Hebrew sacred song really began with Israel's birth as a nation, and it then continued for more than 1000 years. The earliest recorded composer of Psalms was Moses. His first was a solemn choral song, with musical accompaniment, sung after the crossing of the Red Sea. 'Then sang Moses and the children of Israel...' (Ex 15:1,20,21). He followed this up with other songs, some of which were made for particular occasions (Num 21:17; Deut 31:22,30; 32; Ps 90 - title).

In the time of the Judges, Deborah and Hannah received the prophetic gift for composing such sacred songs. We read, 'Then sang Deborah...Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel...'; 'And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord...' (Jdg 5:1ff. 1 Sam 2:1ff.). The former celebrates the redemption of God's people and the latter contains an early reference to 'his anointed' (1 Sam 2:10).

We have a song of victory in Exodus 15; we have a song of victory in Numbers 23,24; we have a song of victory in Deuteronomy 32; we have a song of victory in Judges 5; we have a song of victory in the 1 Samuel 2,...and all these

songs were preludes to the new song, the song of Moses and of the Lamb, which the saints of the church glorified, from all nations, will sing at the crystal sea, with the harps of god, when all the enemies of Christ and his Church will have been subdued, and their victory will be consummated for ever (Rev 14:1-3; 15:2-4). (Dr. Christopher Wordsworth)

Later, it seems, the art of sacred song was cultivated among 'the sons of the prophets' in those prophetic societies founded by Samuel. When Saul came to Gibeah, the hill of God, he was met by 'a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them...(1 Sam 10:5 cf. 2 Kgs 3:15, where music prepared Elisha's soul for revelation). A society, or college, was established at Ramah, where David may have received his first impulse to compose psalms: 'David fled, and escaped, and came to Samuel to Ramah... And Saul sent messengers to take David: and... they saw the company of the prophets prophesying and Samuel standing as appointed over them...' (1 Sam 19:18, 20).

David, whom the Spirit of God eminently qualified for the purpose, brought Israel's psalmody to its highest degree of perfection. He was 'the sweet psalmist of Israel', who said, 'the Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue' (2 Sam 23:1ff). After arranging

psalms for the bringing up of the Ark (1 Chron 15:16), he appointed psalm-singing, with its 'typical' musical accompaniment, for solemn worship (1 Chron 6:31; 16:4-8). This was evidently under divine direction and approved by various prophets, for we read that 'he set the Levites in the house of the lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the lord by his prophets (2 Chron 29:25).

'The sweet psalmist of Israel' is literally 'the lovely one in Israel's songs of praise.' Altogether 73 of the psalms in our psalm-book are ascribed to him, but it seems certain that he was the author of a number of others (e.g. Ps 2; Acts 4:25.) It is possible that he was responsible for more than half, perhaps even two-thirds, of the entire collection. Dr William Taylor offers the following comment on David's title: 'So sweet that as one listens he seems to hear for the time the melody of heaven, and all sorrows and anxiety are charmed away. His joyful odes bear aloft our praises, as on eagles' wings, to heights to which alone, and without his assistance, we had never soared.'

Some psalms are ascribed to others: for example, Asaph, the director and seer, composed twelve of them (1 Chron 6:39; 2 Chron 29:30); Heman, one (1 Chron 15:16-22); Ethan, one (1 Chron

15:16-22); the sons of Korah, eleven (1 Chron 9:19-33); and Solomon, two (1 Kgs 3:5; 9:2).

It is evident that some of the later prophets also composed lyrical pieces (e.g. Isaiah 12; Jonah 2; Habakkuk 3) and some of their productions may have been included in the book of Psalms, albeit anonymously. Psalms were possibly being written right down to the exile (Ps 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down...') and even to the return (Ps 147: 'The lord doth build up Jerusalem: he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel'), although it should be said here that some conservative scholars believe that these psalms were David's, who was enabled to predict Israel's captivity and deliverance.

Certainly it is true to say that, 'In no other literature extending over centuries is so perfect a harmony to be found, and it would have been impossible in this, if the psalmists had not been men who spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost' (Dr. William Binnie).

From the very beginning, then, the prophets produced the psalms, and public praises were therefore always from inspired compositions. This is a vitally important point. Historically, God's people never sang anything other than divine songs, supernaturally given by the Holy Spirit.

The book of Psalms itself was intended to

be Israel's hymnbook, as is clear from its name - 'The Book of Praises', the various titles (e.g. 'To the Chief Musician', which occurs 55 times), and from various hints within the psalms themselves (e.g. Ps 116:19 - 'In the courts of the lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise ye the lord'). There is also ample historical evidence to show that the psalms were used for public worship: 'Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped' (2 Chron 29:30).

3. Collection and Arrangement

We may observe the following:

- i. The need for an authorised collection arose when David, under divine direction, made psalm-singing an essential element in worship: 'he appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, and to record, and to thank and praise the Lord God of Israel' (1 Chron 16:4).
- ii. The number of psalms rose by degrees, which was the case even with secular collections (Num 21:14 - 'Wherefore it is said in the book of the wars of the lord - a collection of national songs of

victory'); 2 Sam 1:17 - 'David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son: (Also he bade them teach the children of Judah the use of the bow: behold, it is written in the book of Jasher ['Jasher' - 'the upright one' - appears to have been the title of a book containing various songs about heroes])'.

- iii. Not all psalms were chosen for inclusion in the book of Psalms, though some omitted songs were placed by the Holy Spirit in other books of the Bible. (e.g. 2 Sam 1:19ff and 23; cf. 1 Kgs 4:32 - 'he [Solomon] spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five'). What then were the principles of selection?

a) Obviously, they had to be 'inspired' (2 Sam 23:2; cf. Matt 22:43 - 'How then doth David in spirit call him Lord...?'). And David's fellow psalmists, Asaph, and Heman, for example, were evidently 'seers' or 'prophets' (1 Chron 25:5; 2 Chron 29:30).

b) They had to be directly sacred.

c) They had to be 'suited to public worship' (cf. Is 38:20). It is true that many of the psalms are written in the first person, but the 'I' of the psalmist often represents the typical pious Israelite and even, in process of development, the entire nation of

Israel. In any case, these psalms contain material which the nation or church could easily appropriate to its spiritual need.

- iv. The psalms were then duly arranged. 'Not only are the psalms inspired, but the arrangement of them was not without the guidance of the Holy Ghost. The psalms have been well likened to pearls strung together in a beautiful necklace' (Dr. Christopher Wordsworth). There is nothing consistently chronological about the arrangement, but they are sometimes related to each other: their authorship (e.g. Ps 73-83 - psalms attributed to Asaph); superscription (e.g. Ps 52-55 - 'Maschil', or 'Instruction', appears in these titles); catch-words (e.g. 1 and 2 contain such words as 'blessed', 'meditate', 'way', 'perish'); particular seasons (e.g. Ps 3:5; 4:8 suggest morning and evening psalms); notes of thanksgiving (e.g. Ps 105-107 which all begin with 'O give thanks'); theme development (e.g. Ps 22, 23, 24 deal respectively with death, resurrection, and ascension); and subject (e.g. Ps 9-14 all deal with judgement).
- v. There is some evidence of editorial work (Ps 72:20). While dogmatism here must be avoided, it is suggested, with some probability, that collections were made in the

times of:

- a) David: hence, the first section of the Psalter is mainly Davidic;
- b) Solomon, for he was a prophet and poet who composed psalms: Psalms 72, 127, and possibly 128 and 132);
- c) Jehoshaphat (2 Chron 17-20).
- d) Hezekiah (2 Chron 29; cf. Prov 25:1)
- e) Ezra, he being a priest and 'ready scribe in the law of Moses' (Ezra 7:6).

4. Interior Divisions

The Hebrew Psalter is actually one volume in five parts. Its divisions can be easily identified, for each division ends with a doxology which, in the last, is a whole psalm:

1. Psalms 1-41: 'Blessed be the lord God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting. Amen, and Amen (Ps 41:13).
2. Psalms 42-72: 'Blessed be the lord God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things. And blessed be his glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with his glory; Amen, and Amen. The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended' (Ps 72:18-20).
3. Psalms 73-89: 'Blessed be the lord for evermore. Amen, and Amen' (Ps

89:52).

4. Psalms 90-106: 'Blessed be the lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting: and let all the people say, Amen. Praise ye the lord' (Ps 106:48).
5. Psalms 107-150: The last five are Hallelujah Psalms, each beginning with a 'Hallelujah', or 'Praise ye the lord'. The doxology at the close of this section is - 'Praise ye the lord. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power... Let every thing that hath breath praise the lord. Praise ye the lord' (Ps 150:1-6).

These sections have certain characteristics, sometimes by reason of authorship:

The first is mainly Davidic; the second is still mainly Davidic, but eight of the psalms are ascribed to sons of Korah; the third is Asaphic on the whole, opening with eleven 'psalms of Asaph', followed by four Korahite - 'A psalm for, or of (margin), the sons of Korah'; the fourth is chiefly anonymous, with the exception of Psalm 90 (Moses), and Psalms 101 and 103 (David); and the fifth is also generally anonymous, although 15 of the psalms here ascribed to David.

These sections have also been classified as follows:

- Book 1 (Psalms 1-41) - Doctrinal: God, His glorious name and wonderful works; and Man, his sin and his salvation.
- Book 2 (42-72) - Experimental: 25 psalms of failure, 16 of victory.
- Book 3 (73-89) - Historical: Dividing the Sea (Ps 74:13); the way in the Sea (Ps 77:19); cleaving of the rock in the wilderness (Ps 78:15); the vine from Egypt (Ps 80:8); the people given up (Ps 81:12); coalition against Israel (Ps 83:5); David's glorious kingdom (Ps 89).
- Book 4 (90-105) - Prophetical: The beginning of the Lord's reign (96-98).
- Book 5 (106-150) - Jubilant: Psalms full of praise.

The Jews were right to see in these five books (or divisions) some likeness to the Pentateuch, with its five books (Genesis to Deuteronomy). 'Moses gave the five books of the Law to the Israelites and, as a counterpart to them, David gave the psalms consisting of five books' (Hebrew Midrash on Psalm 1).

Dr. Delitzsch observes in his commentary: 'The Psalter is also a Pentateuch, the echo of the Mosaic Pentateuch from the heart of Israel; it is the five-fold book of the congregation to Jehovah, as the law is the five-fold book of Jehovah to the congregation.' And there are several

evident similarities: (1) In both cases we have five books; (2) each has Jehovistic and Elohist sections (Book 1 - Jehovah 272 x; Elohim 15 x; Book 2 - Jehovah 30 x; Elohim 164 x; Book 3 - both names; Book 4 - Jehovah 103 x; Elohim none; Book 5 - Jehovah 236 x; Elohim 7 x.; (3) there are twin themes throughout of life and death, blessing and cursing (Ps 1; Deut 20:19).

However, there is something more striking by far:

- Book 1 (Psalms 1-41): Psalm 1 corresponds to Genesis, telling of the blessedness of man when he walks not in wicked counsel but delights in the law of God. The 'tree' and the 'rivers' carry us back to Eden, where originally man was both holy and happy.
- Book 2 (Psalms 42-72): Psalm 42 corresponds to Exodus, telling of groaning affliction, under the simile of the hunted hart. 'Cast down', as under a burden, there is hope for the people, that God will command loving kindness in a day of deliverance.
- Book 3 (Psalms 73-89): Psalm 73 corresponds to Leviticus, stressing God's goodness to those ceremonially and morally clean. This striving for holiness may seem to be in vain, but in the 'sanctuary' (the

sacred courts) the psalmist found understanding and discovered that those who go after false gods would be cut off (Lev 20:5, cf. Ps 73:27).

- Book 4 (Psalms 90-106): Psalm 90 corresponds to Numbers, teaching that in the absence of a 'home' (for 40 years) God is His people's 'dwelling-place'. It tells of the generation which perished in the wilderness (Num 14:22-24) and teaches us also to 'number' our days (Ps 90:12).
- Book 5 (Psalms 107-150): Psalm 107 corresponds to Deuteronomy, reviewing God's dealings with his 'redeemed' whom He has brought to a place of 'habitation'. It also calls for praise (cf. Deut 32).

The Psalms were meant to be used in a variety of ways, including:

- Worship - 'To the Chief Musician' (mentioned 55 times), i.e. 'the Precentor', or 'Master of Song' (cf. Ps 118:15 - 'The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous');
- Teaching - 'Maschil' occurs 13 times and is derived from the verb 'to instruct'. (Ps 60[title] - 'Michtam of David, to teach' ; Ps 78:3-6 - By psalms, the divine Word was a means of instructing children); and
- Meditation - 'Higgaion' (Pss

9,16 [titles] cf. 19:14 - 'Meditation'.
The word actually indicates some interlude allowing time for thought.

5. Interpretation

Many great preachers have expounded the Psalms in series of sermons. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, made a life-long study of the Psalms and, over a number of years preached right through them. His sermons on the Psalms, published in the 19th century, filled six large volumes. Martin Luther, in his expositions to the students of Wittenberg University, began with the book of Psalms; and John Calvin, after his return to Geneva in 1541, expounded the Psalms on Lord's Day afternoons, with very little preparation, the complete absence of notes, and directly from his Hebrew Old Testament!

When approaching the Psalms with a view to preaching on them, there are three ways in which they may be studied:

- i. As a record of the inner heart-searching of David and of other psalmists. His experience - and especially the comfort he found in sorrow - are tonics for all weary hearts;
- ii. As a manual for our own devotional life, for it affords a complete view of religion in the soul and it instructs and nourishes us in true, believing

experience. The Psalms express our deepest selves - our longings for God, our penitential grief, and our irrepressible joy;

- iii. As a prophecy of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'We must not entertain a doubt, that these things which are written in the Psalms are to be understood by the light of the Gospel; and that by whomsoever the Holy Spirit there utters his words, they are to be referred to the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, his Incarnation, Passion, and Kingdom, and to the glory of our resurrection' (Hilary).

This is not generally appreciated. Many evangelicals only regard as 'Messianic' those which are, in the most obvious sense, predictions of Christ (e.g. Ps 2, 16, 22, 45, 72, 110). It is therefore vital for us to establish some principles for a more consistent interpretation:

- a. David was a prophet (Acts 2:30; cf. 2 Chron 29:30 - 'the words of David, and of Asaph the seer') and, as such, the Spirit of Christ was in him, testifying to 'the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow' (1 Pet 1:11). It was, then, the divine Son, through the Spirit, who foretold his own sufferings and glories in the Psalms (cf. Rev 19:10 - 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy', which means that the design of all

prophecy is to bear witness to Christ).

- b. The Psalms, with great propriety, may be called 'the word of Christ'. As a means of letting 'the word of Christ dwell in [them] richly in all wisdom', Paul directs believers to the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3:16). In the Psalms, therefore, we have the prophetic 'utterances' of Christ.
- c. Christ Himself declared that the Psalms applied to him: 'All things must be fulfilled, which were written ... in the psalms, concerning me' (Lk 24:44). And the apostles assumed that Christ was speaking in them: 'David speaketh concerning HIM ... thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption ... He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ' (Acts 2:25, 27, 31).
- d. The entire collection is known as 'the psalms of David', 'the Beloved'; and so, according to the principle of typology, the entire collection belongs to Christ because David is the prophetic name for Christ: 'They shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them' (Jer 30:9; see also: Ezek 34:23f, 37:24; Hos 3:5), and Christ, of course, is called in

various Scriptures 'the Beloved' (Matt 3:17; Eph 1:6; Col 1:13 margin).

- e. Christ was 'the Man' (Jn 19:5), who took of the substance of the Virgin Mary and became fully human, in body and in soul (Jn 1:14; Heb 2:16). As 'the Son of Man', he summed up humanity, gathering into himself all truly human experience (without, of course, personal sin). Hence he is 'the man' of the Psalms (Ps 1:1), and, as such, he was able to sing them while here upon the Earth.
- f. A union exists between Christ and His people, and they are so united as to be regarded as one: 'As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many are one body: so also is Christ' (1 Cor 12:12 Note: So closely united are they to him that they are called by the same name). As a result of this union, the same things apply to both, and so the Psalms express his thoughts, as well as ours.
- g. Our Lord's spiritual life was nourished by the Psalms. He was tempted by a quotation from the Psalms (Lk 4:9ff.); he cited Psalm 69:9 when cleansing the Temple; he used the wording of Psalm 62:12 in his warning of judgement (Matt 16:27); he answered a charge of blasphemy by appealing to Psalm 82:6 (Jn 10:34); he referred the

complaining Pharisees to Psalm 8:2 (Matt 21:17); he questioned the Scribes with Psalm 110:1 (Lk 20:42); he uttered solemn words of banishment from Psalm 6:8 (Matt 25:41); he explained Judas' defection by Psalm 41:9 (Jn 13:18); he mentioned Psalm 35:19 when referring to the world's hatred (Jn 15:25); and he alluded to Psalm 109:8 in reference to the betrayer (Jn 17:12). In fact, four out of the seven words from the cross either quote or fulfil verses in the Psalms: 'My God ... '(Ps 22:1); 'I thirst ...' (Ps 69:21); 'It is finished ...' (Ps 22:31); 'Into thy hands ...' (Ps 31:5). And as our Lord Jesus Christ joined in the worship of God's house, he used the words of the Psalms and they expressed his own inmost feelings. He sang them with His disciples (Matt 26:30).

The Messianic interpretation was long ago received by the Rabbis, and the Early Church Fathers treated the whole Psalter as Messianic. Augustine's method of expounding them was to interpret each psalm: (1) of Christ the Head; (2) of the Christian Church; and (3) of the private Christian.

Writers speak of the different kinds of Messianic psalms - prophetic, typical, typico-prophetic, indirectly eschatological, and eschatological Jehovic! However, all that is really necessary is to

see Christ in each and every one of them.

There is one view of Christ - and that not the least important to the tired and troubled believer - that can be discovered only in the book of Psalms - I mean his inward life. No eyewitness of the outward man - though an inspired evangelist - could penetrate the heart. But the Spirit "who searcheth the secret things of God" has, in the Psalms, laid open the inmost thoughts, sorrows and conflicts of our Lord. The evangelists faithfully and intelligently depict the sinless Man; the Psalms alone lay open the heart of "the Man of sorrows". (Dr. Henry Cooke)

Once we discern the Son of God in the Psalms, we shall be helped in our understanding of some of the more difficult passages, such as fall into the following two categories:

Category 1. Assertions of innocence

'Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to mine integrity that is in me' (Ps 7:8); 'The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me'(Ps 18:20). Such words can apply to God's people, in that they have righteousness imputed to them, they are given a new heart and a new spirit, they know honesty of intention and general uprightness of purpose, they live obedient lives (otherwise than the wicked), and they are

innocent of many of the faults laid to their charge (Ps 7:3; 18:21). But, of course, these words are uniquely true of Christ, the righteous One (Acts 3:14; 1 Jn 2:1).

Category 2. Terrible imprecations

'Let them be ashamed and confounded together that seek after my soul to destroy it; let them be driven backward and put to shame that wish me evil. Let them be desolate for a reward of their shame that say unto me, Aha, aha' (Ps 40:14-15). 'Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them ...' (Ps 69:22-24). This kind of language is not altogether inappropriate for the believer, since it declares God's verdict upon those who reject his mercy and who persecute his people and these imprecations are really the outpourings of a heart provoked by evil, righteously indignant, and zealous for righteousness (Rom 12:19; Eph 4:26).

Ought we not to denounce wrong? Undoubtedly. Our duty is to pray for the triumph of God's rule, even if it involves the destruction of those who persist in wickedness (Ps 7:12, cf. 104:35). Let it be remembered, however, that these denunciations may become impressive

warnings which, through God's mercy, might yet prove to be to the spiritual good of sinners (Acts 8:20). But if not, we know that the ultimate end of such indictments must be God's glory, the persons contemplated in them being hostile to God and opposed to his holy Law. Referring to such imprecatory psalms, Dr. William Binnie wrote, 'Certainly they ought never to be sung but with fear and trembling. Nevertheless at fit seasons they may and ought to find a place in our service of praise.'

True as this is, however, it is also true that if Christ is heard speaking in these psalms, the words are entirely appropriate, it being perfectly right for him as Judge to pronounce doom upon the wicked (Mk 3:5; Matt 11:20; 23:38 cf. Ps 69:25; Jn 2:17 cf. Ps 69:9).

Confessions of sin?

The Messianic interpretation does raise one problem: the confessions of sin in the Psalter: e.g. 'Innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me' (Ps 40:12) - and this confession is found in a psalm evidently Messianic - 40:6-8, cf. Heb 10:5-7.

Some theologians refuse to recognise

these as Christ's words, arguing 'Christ was one with us, sin apart' which, of course, is absolutely true (Heb 7:26), and it is also true to say that it is in the very nature of a type to be somewhat imperfect (Heb 7:19). However, to reject such verses as in any way 'Messianic' is not really satisfactory and inevitably leads to problems in interpretation. It is best to remember that our Lord's Representative Headship required that the sins of men were 'imputed' to him (Is 53:6; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24), so that there was a real sense in which he felt the burden of them upon his soul (Matt 26:37; Jn 1:29) and, of course, he suffered throughout his life the punishment due to them (Is 53:5; 1 Pet 3:18). Furthermore, as our great High Priest, a vital part of his ministry was to 'confess' his people's 'sins' in order to secure pardon for them (Lev 16:21; Is 53:12).

Examples of Messianic interpretation

A. Psalms obviously Messianic

- i. Psalm 2: The voice of God the Father (Ps 2:4-6); the voice of God the Son (Ps 2:7-9 - prophet, priest and king); the voice of God the Holy Spirit (Ps 2:10-12).
- ii. Psalm 16: Christ's contract (Ps 16:1-3); his service (Ps 16:4-8); his

reward (Ps 16:9-11).

- iii. Psalm 22: Sorrow (Ps 22:1-10); Petition (Ps 22:11-21); Thanksgiving (Ps 22:22-31).

B. Psalms not so obviously Messianic

- i. Psalm 5: His relationship with the Father (Ps 5:1-7); his relationship with the World (Ps 5:8-10); his relationship with the Church (Ps 5:11-12).
- ii. Psalm 7: Humiliation (Ps 7:1-5); Exaltation (Ps 7:6-17).
- iii. Psalm 14: He speaks of sin (Ps 14:1-3); he speaks of judgment (Ps 14:4-6); he speaks of salvation (Ps 14:7).

6. Groupings of Psalms

If we take account of the five-fold division of the Psalter, we shall find that there is a particular Messianic emphasis in each book:

- Book 1 (Psalms 1-41) - Christ's humiliation
- Book 2 (Psalms 42-72) - His exaltation
- Book 3 (Psalms 73-89) - The rejection of Israel and the establishment of the Christian Church
- Book 4 (Psalms 90-106) - His mediatorial reign

- Book 5 (Psalms 107-150) - Our Lord's heavenly glory

Also, when the Psalter is viewed Messianically, certain psalms will group together: e.g. Psalms 1-3 - life, death, resurrection; 22-24 - death, resurrection, and ascension; 108-110 - Seeking a people, he is neglected by Jews and accepted by Christian believers. Consider also the 'Passion Psalms': 22, 25, 41, 55, 69, 109; and the 'Royal Psalms': 2, 18, 20, 45, 61, 72, 110.

There are, however, other clear groupings in the Psalter:

- i. Alphabetical Psalms there are nine. Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145. The finest example is Psalm 119, formed of 22 stanzas, arranged acrostically according to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These psalms are mainly didactic and were probably composed in this form to aid the memory.
- ii. Penitential Psalms - there are seven. Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. They have been so called since Origen's time. Each expresses contrition and contains confession of sin. There are others, however, which have something of this character.
- iii. Imprecatory Psalms - there are four. Psalms 7, 35, 69, 109.

Other psalms contain imprecations (e.g. Ps 5:10, 55:9, 83:9-17 and 137), but these are characterised throughout by curses on enemies. They are useful when referring to judgement. Luther tells of a man driven by these denunciations to seek pardon and safety in Christ.

- iv. Thanksgiving Psalms - there are six. Psalms 113-118 (the Hallel). These were used on festive occasions, especially the Passover when two were sung before partaking of the lamb and four afterwards (cf. Matt 26:30). They describe God's mercy (Ps 113); a greater redemption (Ps 114); the necessity of faith (Ps 115 - 'Trust thou in the Lord'); eternal life in possession (Ps 116); the universality of the Gospel call (Ps 117); and the Kingdom of Heaven open to every believer (Ps 118:19ff).
- v. Songs of Ascent - there are fifteen. Psalms 120-134. They were probably sung when making pilgrimage to Zion ('ascent' or 'going up' - 1 Sam 1:3; Ps 122:4; Zech 14:19). They are also sometimes called 'Pilgrim Psalms'.
- vi. Nature Psalms - there are four. Psalms 19, 29, 104, 147. Psalm 104 is based on the six days work of creation, beginning with the breaking forth of light on the first day, and concluding with a Sabbath

day's meditation on God's works.
'The first chapter of Genesis set to music' (Dr. Christopher Wordsworth).

- vii. Historical Psalms - there are six. Psalms 68, 78, 105, 106, 135, 136. They rest on the principle of the unity of the Church in all times, and the fact that we should identify ourselves with our forefathers. They are also acted 'parables' (Psalm 78:1-3, i.e. typical representations of spiritual truth.)
- viii. Judgement Psalms - there are six. Psalms 9-14. These are verses of judgement, finding consummation in Psalm 15, a vision of the eternal dwelling place of God and his people. 'He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead' (The Apostles' Creed).
- ix. Sovereignty Psalms - there are three. Psalms 93, 97, 99. They begin with 'The Lord reigneth', and they anticipate the day when all shall be placed under his feet (Rev 11:17;19:6).
- x. Hallelujah Psalms - there are ten. Psalms 106, 111, 112, 113, 135, 146-150. All commence with 'Praise ye the Lord', and they are ideal for teaching on worship. For

example, in Psalm 150: 'Praise God', or equivalents, occurs 12 times, representing perhaps all God's people (12 tribes/12 apostles).

Taking 'praise' as the theme of Psalm 150, we could develop this by asking a number of questions:

- a. What is praise? The main duty of life (Ps 150:1);
- b. Who? The great Jehovah (Ps 150:1);
- c. Where? In sanctuaries in earth and Heaven (Ps 150:1);
- d. Why? His mighty acts (Ps 150:2);
- e. How? With all our powers - sincerely, penitentially, joyfully, enthusiastically, wholeheartedly, beautifully, and devotedly (Ps 150:3-5);
- f. When? All life long - Let everything that hath breath...(Ps 150:6).

7. Titles and Inscriptions

Altogether, there are 116 psalms with titles or inscriptions: the other 44 are sometimes called 'orphan psalms'. These headings - about the precise meaning of which there is some uncertainty - appear to deal with such matters as:

- i. Authorship: e.g. 'A psalm of David' or 'of Asaph';
- ii. Nature: 'Maschil' - 'teaching' i.e. 'A

- teaching psalm', cf. Psalm 32:8 - a cognate, or kindred verb is 'to instruct' (e.g. Ps 32, 78, 142); 'Michtam', possibly from 'to cover', and therefore a psalm with a hidden meaning, or a psalm revealing some great mystery (Ps 16, 56-60);
- iii. Setting: e.g. Psalm 3 - 'A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son'; 'Upon Mahalath' - 'sickness' or 'disease' (cf. Ex 15:26) - possibly the spiritual condition, which suits the contents (cf. Is 1:5; Ps 53). Compare 'Upon Mahalath Leannoth' - 'sickness, or disease, in order to humble' (Ps 88);
- iv. Classification: 'A Song of degrees' or 'of ascents' (Ps 120-134), probably sung as pilgrims 'went up' to Jerusalem at the time of the annual festivals (cf. 1 Sam 1:3; Ps 122:4);
- v. Music: 'On Neginoth' - 'With music of stringed instruments' (Ps 4, 6, 54, 55, 67, 76); 'Upon Neginah' - 'With music of a stringed instrument'; and 'Upon Nehiloth', 'with music of wind instruments' (Ps 5). 'Upon Gittith', a feminine adjective of the Philistine town 'Gath', and so possibly an instrument (or tune?) which came from there (Ps 8,81,84);
- vi. Voice: 'Upon Alamoth' - literally, 'virgins' and therefore 'sung by sopranos' (Ps 46); 'Upon Sheminith' 'the eighth', perhaps an octave lower - tenor or, more probably, bass (Ps 6,12);
- vii. Tune: 'Shiggaion', derived from a verb 'to wander', possibly a tune with changing rhythm (Ps 7); 'Upon Muthlabben', 'the dying of the son', the name of a tune or the opening words of a song associated with a particular tune;
- viii. Subject: 'Upon Jonath-ehem-rohokim', could be the name of a tune called 'The silent dove afar off' (Ps 56) or it could describe the contents, the expression of how David felt when in Gath, far from the Sanctuary and silent as to public praise; 'Upon Aijelet Shahaar', again could be a tune, 'The hind of the morning', but it could also be (as Martin Luther thought) a reference to Christ, the innocent and lovely hind, who was hunted and driven to the ground, but who, before daybreak, rose up and leapt to the very heights; 'Upon Shoshannim', 'the lilies', and, since lilies were the emblem of sacred love (Song 2:1,2; cf. 1 Kings 7:19,32,36), this suggests a psalm concerning the excellence of our Lord's person, beauty and love (Ps 45,69; cf. 'Shoshannin Eduth' - 'Lilies, a testimony', Ps 80), and 'Shushan Eduth' - 'Lily of testimony', Ps 60);
- ix. Purpose: 'To bring to remembrance' (Ps 38, 70).

- x. Occasion: 'At the dedication of the house of David' (Ps 30); 'For the Sabbath day' (Ps 92) - Jewish authorities tell us there was a Psalm for each day in the worship of the Temple: Ps 24 for the first day, 48 for the second, 82 for the third, 94 for the fourth, 81 for the fifth, 93 for the sixth, and 92 for the seventh.

These titles should be taken seriously and included when the Psalms are read in public. There are solid grounds for believing that they are parts of the inspired text:

- a. An inscription of some kind would certainly be expected on lyrical compositions (Ex 15:1; Deut 33:1). This was the custom (Is 38:9).
- b. In the psalm of Habakkuk 3, a title appears as part of the scripture: 'To the Chief Musician, on my stringed instruments' (Hab 3:19).
- c. David's 18th Psalm also appears in 2 Samuel 22, but it is noteworthy that the descriptive heading is there incorporated as part of the actual chapter: 'David spake unto the lord the words of this song in the day that the lord had delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies, and out of the hand of Saul' (2 Sam 22:1).
- d. The psalmist, under the Holy Spirit's

direction, was in the habit of prefixing titles or superscriptions to his compositions, as, for example, in 2 Samuel 23:1 - 'Now these be the last words of David...' (cf. 2 Sam 1:17 - 'And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son...').

- e. References in the historical books confirm the truth of the titles. 1 Samuel 21:13 reads, 'And he (David) changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad', and the heading of Psalm 34 is as follows: 'A psalm of David when he changed his behaviour before Ahimelech...'.
 - f. The information in the titles often corresponds quite remarkably with the contents of the psalms to which they relate. Psalm 90, for example, has for a title, 'A prayer of Moses the man of God', and he is so described in Deuteronomy 33:1. Moreover, in that psalm there are allusions - if not actual citations - to Moses' own words recorded elsewhere in the scriptures - 'dwelling place' (Deut 33:27), 'all generations' (Deut 32:7), 'repent thee' (Deut 32:36), 'thy work' (Deut 32:4), and 'thy glory' (Deut 33:17).
 - g. Our Lord and his apostles treated them as scripture. Our Lord quotes from Psalm 110, entitled 'A Psalm of David', and says, 'How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying,

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool?' (Matt 22:43,44), and the apostles, when quoting Psalms 16 and 110, also make reference to the name given in those psalm titles (Acts 2:29-36; 13:34-37).

Scholars agree that the titles are ancient, existing when the Septuagint (the Greek Version of the Hebrew Old Testament) was written about 200 BC, but account should be taken of the following facts: (1) the information in these titles was not produced by process of deduction; (2) many of the psalms do not have any such superscription; and (3) pious Jews, though conscientious scribes, would never have added to what was written in the Holy Scriptures. We firmly believe therefore that these titles are vital parts of God's inspired Word. Many helpful truths can be gleaned from them:

I. 'To the Chief Musician' is prefixed to fifty five psalms, most of which are Davidic. 'There can be little doubt that the word...means the precentor, or conductor of the Temple choir, who trained the choir and led the music...' (Dr. A.F. Kirkpatrick). (a) The Lord Jesus Christ leads us in our worship (Heb 2:12); (b) all the people should unite in these sacred songs; (c) the most excellent of sacred praise should be offered to our God.

II. 'Neginoth', derived from 'to play on stringed instruments', which in the Temple were typical of the music of the heart (Eph 5:19 - literally, 'plucking the strings of your hearts to the Lord'). (a) Worshipers praise the Lord inwardly and sincerely; (b) they need to be in a right spiritual state, in tune; (c) the Holy Spirit must strike the cords of our affections.

III. 'Nehiloth', derived from 'to bore', hence a reference to wind instruments, which again were typical of great joy (Ps 89:15; 98:6). (a) Believers are God's workmanship (Eph 2:10); (b) they should be emptied of self and filled with the Holy Spirit; (c) in praise we should sound out the glories of the Lord.

IV. 'On Alamoth', 'virgins', sopranos; 'On Sheminith', 'eighth', bass. (a) Experiences vary and our singing should reflect this; (b) whatever our state our souls should turn to the Lord our God; (c) a rich diversity makes the melody of true worship.

V. 'Upon Aijeleth Shahar', 'the hind of the morning' (Ps 22). (a) The Son of God is distinguished by tender beauty and grace; (b) he had reason to complain of the Wicked who, like dogs, pursued him (Ps 22:16); (c) on the third day he comes forth from the shadows of a dark sepulchre before the dawning of the day.

- VI. 'Shoshannim', 'lilies', the symbol of sacred love (Ps 45,60,69,80). (a) Christ Jesus is the great Lover of our souls; (b) believers are joined to him in perfect love; (c) nothing is more beautiful than his love for us.
- VII. 'Jonath-elem-rechokim, 'the dove of silence among those afar off' (Ps 56). (a) The Lord, for our sakes, flew to the land of estrangement; (b) it was there that he offered himself a sacrifice for sin; (c) in the sorrows of death he held his peace.

Although *Selah* is not in any actual title, it is a word found 71 times in 39 psalms. This may be the best place to comment briefly upon it. '*Selah*' appears to be derived from a root word which means 'to elevate' or 'to raise', and it may therefore indicate a lifting up of hearts in a silent pause for meditation. Archibald G. Brown, in one of his sermons, said: 'The best interpretation of the word we have ever come across is this: "Think of that!"' He went on to say: 'Do you see what a glorious vein of gold we have? All Scripture is precious, but isn't it good to know what God would specially call our attention to? Isn't it unspeakably delightful to have certain passages marked by God, and concerning which God says: "Whatever else you may forget, be sure and remember this; whatever else you may overlook, pay particular attention to this." It is God's call to "Think of that."'

8. Studying the Psalms

When studying the Psalms, here are some directives which may prove helpful:

- i. Discern the theme of the psalm:
e.g. Psalm 7, the theme is Judgement. Reference is made to the accused (Ps 7:1), the defendant (Ps 7:10), and the free man (Ps 7:17).
- ii. Study any historical allusions:
e.g. Psalm 91 - Most High God and Almighty (Ps 91:1, Gen 17); refuge (Ps 91:3, Num 35; Deut 33:27); eagles' wings (Ps 91:4, Ex 19:4); plagues (Ps 91:5-8, Ex 8:20ff); howling wilderness, with beasts (Ps 91:11-13, Deut 32:10); distress (Ps 91:15, Ps 81:7); and length of days promised (Ps 91:16, Deut 11:21).
- iii. Observe significant repetitions:
e.g. Psalm 62:2, 6, 7 - rock; Ps 121:3, 4, 5, 7, 8 - keep; Ps 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34 - inherit; Ps 99:3, 5, 9 - holy; Ps 80:3, 7, 29 - turn us. Also note the refrains: Ps 42:5 and 11; 107 - 'O that men would praise the Lord...'; 92 - 'Jehovah', seven times.
- iv. Mark striking figures: e.g. Psalm 10:1, 12, 15 - God's power, mercy, and anger; cf. Ps 102:6-7 - loneliness: the pelican chooses it, the owl is made that way, and the sparrow is forced to be alone.
- v. Note significant contrasts: e.g. Psalm

92:7, 12-14, the Ungodly and the Godly seen respectively as grass and the palm-tree or the cedar. While the former looks fine, it is weak, unstable, short-lived and soon blasted and withered, mown down and cast into the oven of vengeance; but the latter rise up under the Sun's influences, they become tall and stately, they never lose the leaves of their profession, they bear the symbols of victory, and they send down their roots deep into the earth, so that they remain strong, majestic, and useful.

vi. Find impressive statements:
 e.g. Psalm 31:20 - 'the secret of thy presence' - a privilege and a responsibility; Ps 49:8 - 'the redemption of their soul is precious'; Ps 81:7 - 'the secret place of thunder' - mysterious, almighty, awe-inspiring, incredible, and peace-bringing (as thunder clears the air); Ps 59:10 - 'the God of my mercy shall prevent me [go before me]' - in grace, providence, and eternity; Ps 78:41 - 'they limited the Holy One of Israel' - thinking God too small, neglecting the ordinance of prayer, insisting that their needs could only be met one way, refusing to leave the burden with him, and yielding to depression, and even to despair.

vii. Always take account of the first and

last verse: e.g. Psalm 98:1 - a new song - by a new people, with fresh experience, uncommon in this world, enjoying recent spiritual blessing, and particularly precious; Ps 2:12 - Kiss the Son - the response of faith and of obedience. Such verses are often 'keys' to those particular psalms.

Some examples of psalm expositions:

- Psalm 1 - The Happy and Unhappy Man.
- Psalm 9 - Four Last Things: Death (Ps 9:1-6), Judgement (Ps 9:7-12), Heaven (Ps 9:13-16), and Hell (Ps 9:17-20).
- Psalm 15 - Questions and Answers.
- Psalm 19 - Nature, Law, and Gospel.
- Psalm 74 - The Present (Ps 74:1-11), the Past (Ps 74:12-17), and the Future (Ps 74:18-23).
- Psalm 86 - Prayer: Pleas drawn from his own Person (Ps 86:1-4), the Character of God (Ps 86:5-13), and the Problems Presently Faced (Ps 86:14-16).
- Psalm 87 - A Church Alive, Growing, and Thankful.
- Psalm 126 - Salvation, Holiness, and Service.

- Psalm 133 - Fellowship: Love, Unity, and Blessing.
- Psalm 139 - God: Omniscient (Ps 139:1-6), Omnipresent (Ps 139:7-12), and Omnipotent (Ps 139:13-16).

The Psalter soothes passion, dethrones weariness, chases away sadness. It is defence by night and discipline by day; a shield in fear, a festal banquet in holiness, the mirror of tranquillity and a pledge of peace and concord, expressing, like a lyre, one harmony from the various voices of its singers. The breaking of each day finds its response, and the setting of the Sun its echo, in a psalm. (Ambrose)

9. Our God-Given Praise Book

The Psalter has been appointed by God for use in his worship and no authority exists for the using of any other praises than those contained therein. This is our position and it rests upon clear scriptural principles, briefly stated here:

- The psalms are given by divine inspiration and are intended for the public worship of God. David, 'the sweet psalmist of Israel', said, 'The Spirit of the lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue' (2 Sam 23:1,2), and his psalms were delivered to the leaders of sacred song; 'David delivered first this

psalm to thank the lord into the hand of Asaph and his brethren' (1 Chron 16:7 cf. the words 'To the chief Musician (or Precentor)' prefixed to many of the psalms).

- This was by divine appointment and made known through the prophets: 'Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm...' (Ps 81:1,2); 'Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him' (Ps 105:2); 'And the chief of the Levites ... with their brethren over against them, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David, the man of God' (Neh 12:24).
- These were not in any way to be supplemented or paraphrased. The psalmists' actual words were to be sung: 'Moreover, Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer' (2 Chron 29:30).
- Anciently the people of God confined themselves to these praises, which, in consequence, are called 'the lord's song' and 'the songs of Zion' (Ps 137:3,4).
- It is clear that the psalms were intended for Christian times, for many of them appear to look back at events which are recorded in the Gospels: 'they pierced my hands and my

feet' (Ps 22:16); 'he asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever' (Ps 21:4); 'Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive' (Ps 68:18). And not only so, but they also anticipate the incorporation of the Gentiles into the Church and provide appropriate praise for when that takes place: 'Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands...' (Ps 66:1); 'O praise the lord all ye nations: praise him, all ye people' (Ps 117:1).

- vi. Christ never abrogated psalms, nor did he introduce a new formulary of praise. Indeed, he authorised what he chose to call 'the book of psalms' (Lk 24:44), he would have sung the psalms in the synagogues (cf. Lk 4:16) and certainly he sang them with his disciples after the institution of the Lord's Supper, for we read, 'and when they had sung an hymn (or, hymned), they went out into the mount of Olives' (Matt 26:30), and this would have been, as always at the close of the Passover Feast, the Second Part of the Hallel, that is, Psalms 115-118. Dr. John Lightfoot remarks, 'He who could have inspired every disciple to have been a David, sings the Psalms of David.'
- vii. The early Christians in their assemblies continued to use the psalms as the material for their

praise. To the Corinthians, the Apostle writes, 'I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also' and the verb translated here 'I will sing' is 'psallo', literally and properly, 'I will sing psalms' (1 Cor 14:15). A little later he writes, 'How is it then, brethren, When ye come together every one of you hath a psalm (one selected from the book of Psalms for the congregation to sing) ...' (1 Cor 14:26). These 'psalms', as always in the scriptures, are the inspired psalms, now contained within in the book of Psalms.

- viii. In two of his epistles, Paul urges his readers to sing 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). It would be a very serious mistake indeed to interpret these terms according to our modern usage. They are, in fact, three names for the biblical psalms: hence, (1) they are referred to as 'spiritual' (in the Greek, this word 'pneumatikos', which is equivalent to 'inspired', appears at the end of the clause - 'psalms and hymns and songs spiritual' - and therefore appears to relate to all three terms); (2) they are identified in the Colossian passage as 'the word of Christ' (which is true of the psalms in Scripture); and (3) in singing them believers are actually 'psalming' (the literal rendering of 'psallontes', translated here 'making melody'). Apart from arguments drawn from the passages themselves,

we know that the Psalms were sometimes called 'hymns' (Matt 26:30) and sometimes as 'songs' (Ps 45, 46, 67, 68, 75 etc. - titles), so the Apostle is clearly teaching here that, in public worship, Christian churches should make exclusive use of the Psalter.

- ix. James, in his epistle, writes, 'Is any merry, let him sing psalms' and once again the Greek word used is 'psalleto', rightly translated 'sing psalms' (James 5:13). If a believer has a merry heart, the Psalms will perfectly express his cheerfulness ('Praise ye the lord ... Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the lord his God', Ps 146:1&5).
- x. We are told in the epistle to the Hebrews that the Lord Jesus Christ now sings with his people: 'Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise to thee' (Heb 2:12). But what does he sing? This is, of course, a quotation from Psalm 22:22, where the immediate reference is to David singing the Psalms in the Church of the Old Testament. In singing the psalms, we therefore enjoy wonderful communion with our Lord Jesus Christ.

We conclude, then, that Christian

churches should not only use the Psalms but that they should confine themselves to these divine praises. 'What Augustine says is true, that no man can sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from himself ... We shall find no songs better or more suitable for our purpose than the Psalms of David' (John Calvin).

10. The Great Worth of the Inspired Psalms

I. Epitome of the Bible

The book of Psalms is a Bible within a Bible. Athanasius called it an 'epitome of the Bible', while Luther called it 'a little Bible, wherein everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended and compacted with an "enchiridion" or "manual".' It holds the middle place of Scripture, as the very heart of God's written revelation.

Here, summarised for us, is the whole of sacred learning:

- God: Psalms 90, 102, including the Trinity, Psalms 146:1ff., 109:3,8,9 - 'holy' repeated three times and all the divine attributes, Psalms 86, 89, 96, 98.
- Revelation: general and special, Psalms 8, 19, 119.
- Decree: Psalms 33:11; 2:7; 148:5-6.

- Works: creation, providence and redemption, Psalms 104, 145, 40.
- Depravity: Psalms 12, 14, 58.
- Salvation: especially regeneration, justification, adoption, Psalms 87, 32, 103.
- Church: Psalms 46, 48, 87, 122, 132.
- Last things: resurrection, judgement, eternal life, Psalms 16, 1, 133.

II. Praise of the Divine Excellence

This book unveils God, in all his perfect and most excellent glories, and it provides an inspired response of praise: 'The lord is great and greatly to be praised...' (Ps 96:4; cf. 99:1). It shows us God, as only God can reveal himself, and it teaches us how to fear and adore his glorious Being. 'In the Psalms there is an all-sufficient treasury of praise. In the infinite wisdom of God they contain all that is necessary for the glory of God and the benefit of our souls' (George Laverty).

III. Insight into Human Condition

This book shows us ourselves, as we really are. John Calvin began his 'Institutes' with this tremendous sentence: 'Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of

ourselves.' And, in his Preface to the book of Psalms, he wrote: 'This book I am wont to style an anatomy of all parts of the soul, for no one will discover in himself a single feeling, whereof the image is not reflected in this mirror...'

The Psalms express our inmost feelings. e.g. in loneliness (Ps 102:7 - 'I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top'); oppression (Ps 129:1 - 'Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth...'); abandonment (Ps 68:5 - 'A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation'); uncertainty (Ps 77:7 - 'Will the lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more?'); depression (Ps 38:10: 'My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me').

IV. Repentance and Prayer

The Psalms teach penitence and prayer. They provide us with a most excellent pattern showing precisely how these things are experienced and expressed; and they inflame our hearts to greater sorrow for sin and desire for God. 'They address themselves to the simple instinctive feelings of the renewed soul...' (Edward Irving).

They sympathise with the souls of believers in all their feelings, agonies and ecstasies. Sometimes prayers pour forth (Ps 86:1-6; cf. 119:94 - 'I am thine, save me'), and sometimes praises (Ps 148:2ff - 'Praise ye him, all his hosts ... sun and

moon ... stars of light...').

V. The Way into God's Presence

The great value of the Psalm book is that it conducts us into the presence-chamber of the King and brings us before the throne of his glory (Ps 26:6 - 'I will wash mine hands in innocency; so will I compass thine altar, O lord'; Ps 43:3-5:

'O send thy light forth and thy truth;
let them be guides to me,
And bring me to thine holy hill,
e'en where thy dwellings be.
Then will I to god's altar go,
to God my chiefest joy:
Yea, God my God, thy name to praise
my harp I will employ'.

Whoever wrote these sacred poems, and under whatever circumstances they were written, they bring us into the presence of God. We stand at the portals of a sanctuary, and can hear the soul-subduing strains of heavenly music within. It is through the Psalms that we learn to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our life. (W.T. Davidson)

VI. The Nature of Communion

The Psalms describe the almost indescribable experience of communion with God. I like what one has said: 'The Psalter is the music of the soul's friendship with God.' But more excellent still, perhaps, is the language of another when he describes the Psalter as, 'the whole

music of the human heart, swept by the hand of its Maker' (William Gladstone). Psalm 63:3-4 - 'Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name'.

VII. An Agency to Stir Godliness

The Psalter creates in believers a strong affection for God's holy Law and a profound recognition of its higher and more deeply spiritual requirements: Ps 19:7-9 - 'The law of the lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the lord are true and righteous altogether'. cf. Ps 119, which J.J. Stewart Perowne suggests could be entitled: 'The Praise of the Law' - and the whole is a great stimulus to holy living.

The Law is of great use to believers, to show what Christ has done (Gal 4:4 & 8), to show what service and gratitude we owe (2 Cor 7:1), to show us our many deficiencies (Rom 7:24), to show us the rule of sanctification (1 Cor 9:21), and to show us the excellence of what one day we are to enjoy (Rev 21).

VIII. Voice of the Church

The Psalms introduce us to the

communion of saints. The Jews were able to recite the Psalms in a national way, so that the 'I' became the voice of the worshipping community. But even if we do not take that into account, the Psalter is still the book of the Church's song; 'Let the 150 psalms be distributed into two columns - the one containing those in which the personal element predominates, the other, those that are characteristically social, - and it will be found that the two columns are, as nearly as may be, of equal bulk' (Dr. William Binnie).

Examples are: Ps 51:18 - 'Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem...' - here we have confession of sin and prayer for revival. Ps 79:8 - 'O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low'. Ps 85:6f - 'Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee? Shew us thy mercy, O lord, and grant us thy salvation'. Reference is also made to the future extension and prosperity of the Church (Ps 2:7-8, 22:27-31; 110:1).

IX. A Book of Hope

This book is a book of hope. Arising from great stress and sorrow, there are chants of holy expectation: 'As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness' (Ps 17:15). Upon the eternity of God (Ps 90) the everlasting happiness of

his people is founded (Ps 102:25-28). God's covenant extends beyond the present, for our God is our portion for ever (Ps 73:26). The ends of the godly and ungodly are contrasted (Ps 49:15). The Godly are strangers in the earth (Ps 39:12; 119:19). The grave is no terminus for them (Ps 16:9-11). They are borne away to God (Ps 49:15; 73:24). The Psalter is, one has written, 'the book of resurrection, of the restitution of all things, of the doing away with the imperfect and the coming of the perfect' (A.R. Whitham).

X. The Psalms Speak of Christ

Finally, the book of Psalms brings our Saviour into view. 'David on the harp and ten-stringed lute, sings throughout of Christ...' (Jerome). Dr Pierson tells us of a Russian palace with a famous room in which are hung over 850 portraits of young women. These were painted by Count Rotari for Catherine the Second, the Russian Empress. It is said that the artist journeyed through 50 provinces to find his models. When the pictures are carefully examined, it is found that in each of them there is some hidden delicate reference to the Empress - a feature drawn, an attitude expressed, or some favourite fashion, jewel or flower. The result is that the walls are lined with tributes to her beauty. It seems to me that the book of Psalms is like that picture gallery: in each psalm there is some portrayal of the Saviour and the whole is full of tributes to

him. He alone explains the mystery of the Psalms.

The golden key of the Psalter lies in a Pierced Hand. (Dr. William Alexander, The Bampton Lecture, 1876)

May we be given grace to view Christ everywhere in this book, that our souls may be enriched, and also prepared for the sight of him in the glory of heaven.

'His name for ever shall endure;
last like the sun it shall:
Men shall be bless'd in him, and bless'd
all nations shall him call.
Now blessed be the Lord our God,
the God of Israel,
For he alone doth wondrous works,
in glory that excel.
And blessed be his glorious name,
to all eternity;
The whole earth let his glory fill.
Amen, so let it be'
(Psalm 72:17-19)