

Christ in the Psalms

Philip Henry Gosse

Philip Henry Gosse, the writer of this article, was born in Worcester in 1810. The son of a painter of miniatures, he travelled in North America from 1827 to 1838, returning to England in 1839. By this time he had become very poor and it was only by the publishing of his book, "The Canadian Naturalist", that he was rescued from extreme poverty. After a visit to Jamaica, in 1847, he became a respected writer and lecturer on natural history.

Between his visits to North America and Jamaica, Gosse associated for a while with the Methodists and then found fellowship with the Hackney group of Brethren. Some years after returning from Jamaica, however, he founded and pastored a small assembly of the Lord's people in St. Marychurch, near Torquay. Losing confidence in the Plymouth Brethren, he appears to have been an Independent for the last thirty years of his life.

This excellent article, published in 1884, shows that the key to a true and proper

understanding of all the Psalms is Jesus Christ, David's Lord and ours. MHW

There is no book of the Bible that is so often quoted in the New Testament as the Psalms. More than half of the whole number (82) are quoted; several of them many times. What does the inspiring Spirit propose by inserting this great collection of Poems in the ancient Scripture, and by his elaborate and manifold citations of them in the new?

What is the secret of the high honour which he attaches to this Book, to which the instinctive inner sense of the Christian, often deeper, higher, truer, and holier than any clearly defining mental power, so heartily responds? Is not the secret this? The Psalms are the experiences – if of David, only slightly,

superficially, unimportantly; often, not at all: but mainly of the great Son of David, the true "David," i.e. the Beloved; the Son of God and Son of Man; the Word become Flesh. It may seem rash even to suggest that experience written by David should ever be "not David's experience at all." Yet Peter, on the day of Pentecost, cites the words of Psalms 16 and 110, not as containing an underlying sense which might be applied to Messiah, but as absolutely not true of David; having no relation at all to David's personal circumstances; but uttered by him in his prophetic character, solely concerning his glorious Descendant and Anti-type, the Christ of God. And this exegesis the Apostle makes "with boldness", as if aware that some among his hearers might be stumbled by it. This oracle of the Holy Ghost, uttered at the very outset of his ministration in the Church, is of great value for determining the question now before us.

It would seem to be a principle of exposition, too self-evident to need formal argument, that, if we can satisfactorily identify a speaker (or a person addressed), in any part of a Psalm, the same speaker bears the same relation throughout that Psalm; unless a change of person is patent on the surface. Thus, if I can be sure that in Psalm 69, he who says (v. 9), "the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me" is the Lord Christ (Rom 15:3), I am sure that he who says (v 12), "I was the song

of the drunkards," must be the very same Person. And this not a whit the less because of any real or supposed difficulty in the identification.

Throughout the book we find certain broad salient features of character and circumstance, occurring again and again, delineated with such precision of individuality that, after a few observations, we cannot help recognizing the identity.

(1) Thus the Book opens (Ps 1) with the portrait of a Man whose delight is in the Law of Jehovah, who meditates therein day and night; whose righteous cause is sure ultimately to prosper. Presently (Ps 7) we find one appealing to Jehovah to judge him, "according to mine integrity that is in me"; avowing that his "defence is of God, who saveth the upright in heart." Then (Pss 15, 24) we hear authoritative challenges, demanding who, among men, can claim to ascend Jehovah's Holy Hill, of right, and to dwell there; and One accepts the challenge, on the ground of his sinless uprightness of walk, his cleanness of hands, and his purity of heart. And lo! We presently discover, as the everlasting doors open to receive this Righteous Man, this King of Glory, it is none other than Jehovah of

Hosts himself!

Now the portrait of this Man of spotless uprightness and lustrous holiness is of constant recurrence. Wherever we see the lineaments we may be sure that we have before us that "Lamb without blemish and without spot," who when he had just "convicted", in "their own conscience" (Jn 8:9), his rancorous foes, could fearlessly say (v 46), "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" This feature alone will identify Jesus in Psalms 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 35, 37, 38, 41; and many others.

(2) But this holy One meets with little sympathy from men. He is "small and despised", hated without a cause, reproached for his very faithfulness; his love is met with the basest ingratitude; his steps are dogged, his words are distorted, by ever watchful enemies, numerous, lively, strong, unceasing, cruel, unmerciful, implacable, false. Very many Psalms are largely occupied by the godly Man's appeals to God's knowledge of the falsity of the charges brought against him, prayers for protection from their oppressive violence, and for deliverance from the snares which they are privily laying for his feet. It is the bitter hatred of the Scribes and Pharisees in the gospels (Matt 22:15, 46; Lk 19:47; 20:20; Jn 11:46); but depicted more vividly, in far fuller detail; and not merely as an historical incident, but as it told upon the wounded heart of the Blessed One

himself, and as it was spread before his Father in secret. For this, see Psalms 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 27, 28, 31, 35, 41, 71, 109, 118, 119, 129, 140, 141, 142, 143.

(3) It follows necessarily, from the blameless purity of this Man, and from his enemies' hatred of him on this account, that they must be the enemies and haters of God also. Yet this is a distinct aspect, and is distinctly treated. The zeal of the righteous One for God's honour produces revulsion of feeling against the proud doers, which is distinguished from the heartbreaking and "heaviness" of spirit (Ps 69:20), produced by their merciless reproaches of himself. He becomes overwhelmed with "horror" (Ps 119:53), because of the wicked's forsaking God's law. And this forms a frequent subject of complaint, in this holy One's conferences with his Heavenly Father. [The New Testament says "even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me." (Rom 15:3)]. Examples are Psalms 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 36, 37, 49, 73, etc.

(4) In Psalm 69 the same Speaker that is hated without a cause; whom the zeal of God's house hath eaten up; who has gall and vinegar given to him; is found sinking in deep mire where there is no standing; cries for deliverance because the waters are come in unto his soul, even deep waters whose floods are overflowing

him: he is weary of his crying; his eyes fail while he waits for his God: he says, "O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins [guiltiness, margin] are not hid from thee" Mark this attentively. The very same person who constantly pleads his perfect uprightness and innocence in the sight of God himself, says, "My foolishness and my guilt"! What an apparent contradiction is here! But we are certain that the speaker in the former passages is Jesus, on the Spirit's own testimony (Jn 15:25; 2:17; 19:29-30; Matt 27:34). Therefore it is over the holy head of Christ that the floods of God's wrath are flowing, and it is Christ who says, "My foolishness; my guilt"!

So in Psalm 22, the forsaken of God, who cries day and night but is not heard; who yet vindicates the holiness even of the Divine silence; the reproached and despised, who trusts in Jehovah that He will deliver him, and is laughed to scorn for his confidence; who beholds, at his feet – his pierced feet – his garments parted, his vesture gambled for: we are certain that this, too, is the same blessed Jesus (Matt 27:43, 46; Jn 19:23-24; 20:25). And we know how to reconcile the seeming contradiction: the mystery is an opened secret: for God "hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21).

A multitude of Psalms come into this category: the holy Lamb bruised under

the wrath of God for sin, which he made his own vicariously, but never committed: as 6, 18, 22, 25, 32, 38, 39, 40, 41, 69, 77, 88, 130, etc.

(5) Again there are certain descriptive phrases by which the same blessed One is designated, and which recur so often as to become characteristic, and almost conventional. So that if we can once with certitude determine the application of the phrase to the Lord Jesus, we may identify it again whenever it occurs. Thus in Psalm 40 – that grand unveiling of the Council held between the Father and the Son "before eternal times," – we find the Son, come down to his characteristic low estate, saying, "But I am poor and needy" (v 17). This poor man very frequently appears in the Psalms: the next Psalm, nay, the very next following verse to the word just cited, says, "Blessed is he that considereth the poor [man]." What poor man? Is it any beggar that solicits my alms? Surely no; but the definite "poor and needy one," who is on Jehovah's side, whose help and deliverer Jehovah is (Ps 70:5). Psalms 9, 10, 12, 14, 34, 35, 37, 40, 41, 70, 86, 107, 109, 113 and 140 afford this note of identification.

(6) Another such characteristic mark is the trusting in God. For though it might be said, this is a common property of all the godly and cannot be honestly used to identify the Man Christ Jesus, yet the Holy

Ghost does so isolate and appropriate the phrase. For in citing testimonies from Scripture that the Son came down to the level of God's elect, he says, quite nakedly and without comment, "And again, I will put my trust in him" (Heb 2:13). Strictly, it is, "I will be [habitually] trusting" – marking, not an act, but a characteristic habit. Now unless we charge the All-wise Spirit with citing a witness that was so vague as to be worthless, we must own this as an identifying mark of our Lord. And carefully noting its occurrence in the Psalms, we shall have no difficulty in tracing him, wherever the phrase is found: as in Psalms 7, 11, 16, 18, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 31, 34, 38, 40, 52, 61, 62, 71, 86, 141, 144, etc.

(7) Sometimes we are carried onward from the depth of humiliation of this needy trusting One to the triumph of his Resurrection: – as in Psalms 18, 21 (compared with 20), 22, 24, 30, 40, 68, 116, 118; etc. And sometimes to the everlasting Glories that shall follow: as in Psalms 2, 29, 45, 50, 72, 110, 149. He is sometimes seen as the Son of David and King of Israel, celebrating, by anticipation, the Restoration, Exaltation and eternal Establishment of the united Nation and his Throne in Zion: as in Psalms 9, 10, 14, 46, 47, 48, 67, 72, 75, 79-85, 144, and many others, particularly in the latter half of the Book. And sometimes he leads the high praises of his saints, not only of the earthly, but also of the heavenly Jerusalem: as in Psalms 22, 103, 104,

111, 145-150.

In some of these, there may be occasionally discerned, here and there, an allusion, more or less patent, to incidents in the private and personal life of David. But these are typical; and the interest which attaches to them in this book of Holy Scripture, is not on their own account, but on account of such aspects of our Lord as they represent. Thus in Psalms 41, 69 and 109, there is doubtless allusion to the ingratitude and treachery of Ahithophel (2 Sam 16); but in citations of these Psalms by the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Jn 13:18; Acts 1:20; Rom 11:9), Ahithophel and David become evanescent [fleeting; imperceptible]; and the wronged Jesus is seen bringing before the "righteous Father," for judgment, the case of the traitor Judas, the son of perdition, and that of the blinded nation, who shared his guilt, as well as his name.

Pursuing the clues thus indicated, the devout and diligent student may, without hesitation, find the Man Christ Jesus in (and therefore throughout, as shown above) a very large number of these Divine Odes. The sweet familiarity of love will, of course, very sensibly aid the recognition: we may easily pass by his features, if we value him but little. Then there remain a considerable number, in which there is so close an analogy with these, that though we may not see in them the specific marks of diagnosis, and so would not venture to cite them in

evidence, we may, if they contain nothing contrary, assume that they follow the general rule.

Such an exegesis of the Psalms was first suggested to me by the remarkable way in which the New Testament quotes them. For instance, Paul says, "For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me" (Rom 15:3). The words are from Psalm 69:9. But their relevancy entirely depends on the fact that Christ is the speaker there; and, indeed, on his readers' knowing that he is. For if they had been used to see David in that psalm, might they not reasonably have replied, "How does reproach falling on David prove that Christ pleased not himself?" But Paul takes no pains to show that Christ is the speaker: he makes no apology or explanation: but assumes it as without controversy; takes for granted that his readers will cordially assent to his reasoning. But this could not be, unless the principle herein maintained had been generally accepted.

If this interpretation is according to God, what an exceeding interest attaches to the Book of Psalms! Is it not like opening a new "Life of Jesus"? A Biography: quite distinct from either of the Gospels, unveiling a quite new aspect of Him; even his inner life: his heart and soul, laid open in unrestrained intercourse with the Father. We might almost say, an Autobiography: for here are the very

words in which he expresses his thoughts and feelings; words taken down, with infallible truth and precision, by an unerring Amanuensis, even the Holy Ghost. That Psalms 22 and 69 are no less than this, no instructed Christian would think of denying. It is but an extension of the principle to the whole Book that is contended for.

How valuable, how precious, would be a Diary of Jesus! Here is one. The Gospels are perfect as portraits of his outer life: his acts, and many of his words. But here are his very thoughts!