

# Pilgrim Songs:

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*The Songs of Degrees.*

by E. Dennett.

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## Contents

Introduction.....	2
1 — Psalm 120.....	5
A Song of Degrees.....	5
Israel's Distress.....	5
2 — Psalm 121.....	7
A Song of Degrees.....	7
The Source of help.....	7
3 — Psalm 122.....	11
A Song of Degrees of David.....	11
The House of the Lord.....	11
4 — Psalms 123, 124.....	14
Songs of Degrees.....	14
The Cry and the Answer.....	14
5 — Psalm 125.....	17
A Song of Degrees.....	17
The Mountains round about Jerusalem.....	17
6 — Psalm 126.....	19
A Song of Degrees.....	19
Reaping in Joy.....	19
7 — Psalm 127.....	21
A Song of Degrees for Solomon.....	21

Rest for This Beloved. ....	21
8 — Psalm 128. ....	24
A Song of Degrees. ....	24
Blessing out of Zion. ....	24
9 — Psalm 129. ....	27
A Song of Degrees. ....	27
Israel's Retrospect. ....	27
10 — Psalm 130 ....	30
A Song of Degrees. ....	30
De Profundis; or, Out of Darkness into Light. ....	30
11 — Psalm 131. ....	33
A Song of Degrees for David. ....	33
A Weaned Spirit. ....	33
11 — Psalm 132. ....	36
A Song of Degrees. ....	36
Zion and God's Rest. ....	36
12 — Psalms 133, 134. ....	42
A Song of Degrees of David. ....	42
A Song of Degrees. ....	42
Unity and Praise. ....	42

## Introduction.

THE Psalms bearing this title are fifteen in number (Psalms 120-134), and, while diversified in their contents, are manifestly bound intimately together, and make progress towards a desired goal. They have afforded much interest and instruction to God's people in all ages, even if imperfectly understood and applied; and the interest and instruction will rather be deepened if their divine intent and object are apprehended. The significance of the title, which these Psalms bear, has been much discussed; but almost all the various opinions offered may be included in what undoubtedly is the true solution. For example, the word translated "degrees" is almost universally allowed to be that used of the recurring journeys of Israel up to Jerusalem for the several festivals, and some accordingly have maintained that these songs were sung by the godly at the various stages of their route. Others seeing references to a later period, to the turning

again of the captivity of Zion (Psalm 126), have concluded that they were used on the pilgrim journey from Babylon to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the temple. (Ezra 1-3.) Another class of interpreters assert that the whole of the fifteen Psalms were sung on "the fifteen steps between the court of the men and the court of the women," as the pilgrim bands were actually entering the precincts of the sacred building. Without discussing these several theories, it will suffice to point out that all alike coincide in making the temple the object, or goal, to which the faces of the pilgrims were turned; and secondly, that all alike fail to perceive the prophetic character of these Psalms. It is in the combination of these two points that the truth will be found.

To take the latter point first, it is easy from many allusions to prove that the Psalms are mainly prophetic. Reference has already been made to Psalm 126, where it is said, "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them," etc. (vv. 1, 2.) That the restoration from Babylon was a shadow of a larger fulfilment may be readily conceded; but to those who are acquainted with the predictions of the prophets concerning the establishment of the kingdom under the glorious Messiah, nothing short of the future deliverance and glory of Zion could be accepted as answering to this description. The last verse of the Psalm, indeed, will only find its complete fulfilment in Christ as King in Zion. Predictions, only to be realized after the Lord has restored His earthly people to blessing under His own sway, are as plainly found in Psalms 124, 125, 128, 130, 132-134.

The last three Psalms of the series undoubtedly justify the contention that the temple, the habitation of the Mighty One of Jacob, is the longed-for end, or consummation. If, however, the prophetic interpretation of these Psalms be allowed, the temple will not be that which Solomon, or Zerubbabel, built, but that which the Man, whose name is the BRANCH, will build, even He who shall bear the glory, and shall sit, and rule, a priest upon His throne; that is, Christ Himself. (See Zechariah 6: 12-15.)

Another point must be mentioned, viz., that it is clear from many parts of these Psalms that Israel is viewed as in the land, after their having been scattered, and yet not finally delivered from the power of their oppressors. The reader should notice the recurrence of the word Israel, as showing that it is not only the presence of the two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) in the land, but that also the ten tribes have been restored; that, moreover, they now once again form but one nation (see Ezekiel 37: 18-28), and that Zion and the temple form the centre, as the seat of government and blessing, for all. Still, as already said, they are not yet finally delivered from their adversaries. They thus cry, "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud." (Psalm 122: 3, 4; also Psalm 124.)

What we have, then, in these Songs of Degrees is the progress and experience of Israel, after their restoration, while waiting for the interposition of Jehovah to deliver them from all their enemies, and to establish them in security and blessing. It is not, therefore, Christianity or Christian experience which must be sought for in these Psalms; but, inasmuch as the principles of the divine life, or of the divine nature, in souls are the same in every dispensation, much instruction may be here gleaned by Christians. Two things are never found in the Psalms, nor,

indeed, in the Old Testament — the revelation of the Father, nor, consequently, the Spirit of adoption. These are only known after Pentecost, though our blessed Lord revealed the Father when with His disciples. (John 14: 9-11.) It was not possible, however, for them to apprehend the revelation made until they had received the gift of the Holy Ghost. Unless we bear in mind this distinction, when reading the Psalms, we are apt to lose sight of the heavenly calling, and the heavenly character of Christianity.

A few words may be added concerning the structure of this interesting group of Psalms. "All are grouped," says a pious expositor, "around Psalm 127, which was written by Solomon. . . . On both sides there stands a heptad (i.e., seven) of pilgrim songs, consisting of two Psalms written by David, and five others, which have no name attached. Both sevens are divided into four and three.\* Each heptad (seven) contains the name of Jehovah twenty-four times; each of the connected groups (Psalms 120-123, 124-126, 128-131, 132-134.) twelve times." Surely the facts here stated show the impress of a divine Hand, the Hand which guided and controlled those who have been thus used as vehicles both of a divine design, and of divine thoughts. To cite once again, "the unity (of these Psalms) is not one merely of form, it also refers to the thoughts," for while different servants were chosen to express them, the Author of all alike is the Spirit of God. These facts should furnish an additional incentive to the earnest and devout study of this portion of the Holy Scriptures.†

\*The reader may recall that this division is also found in the New Testament, as, for example, in the seven parables of Matthew 13, in the seven churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, etc., of the Apocalypse.

†We append one of the latest (perhaps *the* latest) descriptions of the character of the "Songs of Degrees" for the consideration of the reader. "We have now reached the so-called 'Songs of Degrees,' a clearly defined series of fifteen psalms, which, with two thanksgiving psalms appended, forms the third division of the Fifth Book. These songs of degrees are rather 'songs of the ascents,' which we are surely right in interpreting in the first place by reference to those ascents of the tribes thrice a year to the feasts at Jerusalem, which are spoken of in the third psalm of this very series. (Psalm 122: 4.) But this only furnishes a clue to the inner meaning this repeated call to the city of God being in view of those 'set times' of Leviticus 23, which speak of those gracious acts of God towards His people, which for all eternity will call them round Himself in praise. The 'ascents' are, therefore, above all else, ascents of the heart to Him because of His grace; and this is in fact what these songs are — a recounting in a five-fold series the Divine ways towards Israel, by which their blessing has been accomplished, and for which their hearts will endlessly praise Him. With this the 'climbing' movement of the psalms themselves, which Delitzsch adduces, after Gesenius, is in intimate sympathy — a feature which only shows how perfectly the form of these inspired songs is moulded by their spirit, while it by no means allows us to degrade them, as their materialistic interpretation would, by making the form the whole thing."

## 1 — Psalm 120.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### Israel's Distress.

- 1 In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me.
- 2 Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue.
- 3 What shall be given unto thee? or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue?
- 4 Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.
- 5 Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!
- 6 My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace.
- 7 I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.

AS is seen in many of the Psalms, the result of the exercises through which the soul has passed is first stated: "In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me"; and then the character of the distress is described. According to the interpretation of these Psalms already given, this distress is that through which Israel will have to pass after their restoration. He that scattered Israel will, in His infallible faithfulness, gather him (Jer. 31: 10); but there will be enemies still in existence at the commencement of the kingdom (see Jer. 51: 20-23), whereby Jehovah will test His people; and then He will manifest Himself to them as their Messiah and Deliverer, so that once again they will sing, "The Lord is my strength and song, and is become my salvation." (Psalm 118: 14; compare Exodus 15: 2.)

Who the particular enemy alluded to here is, it may not be easy to decide. One of his characteristics is a deceitful tongue, combined with *lying* lips. Some have thought that it is a prophetic reference to the little horn of Daniel 8, that is, to the king of the north in the last days. A well-known writer thus says, "It does not seem to me to be the oppression of Antichrist, or the beast at Jerusalem, but to apply to those who, in the land, found themselves where the last hostile power which had pretended to favour them, and had led many to apostatize for quietness and prosperity, now showed himself as only a deceitful oppressor."\* In Daniel it says of this personage, that "he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand." (Dan. 8: 24, 25.) If this be the adversary in view, the Psalm goes back to a time anterior to the restoration of all Israel; but Israel, recounting the Lord's mercies in becoming their salvation, might well identify themselves with the sorrows which Judah had first undergone in the land. The people will, at this period, be once more united; and they will consequently claim the "distress" of any portion of the nation as their own.

\**Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, vol. 2.*

Some difficulty has been felt concerning the mention of Mesech and Kedar as the place of sojourn (v. 5), inasmuch as they would seem to have been widely sundered. Meshech is mentioned in connection with Gog (Ezekiel 39), whereas Kedar was a descendant of Ishmael (Gen. 25: 13), and he evidently became the founder of a well-known Arab tribe. (See also Canticles 1: 5.) They are probably moral expressions, indicative of the hostility of the enemies of God's people. The Christian can in measure enter into this sorrow, for he is hated by the world, and is also the object of Satan's enmity; but he has the consolation of knowing that Christ has overcome the world (John 16: 33); and that since Satan is a defeated enemy, he will ever flee if resisted in the power of the Holy Ghost. (James 4: 7.)

It is interesting to notice that there are, in this short Psalm, the three forms of the flesh which are developed in the epistle to the Colossians. In Genesis 6 two of these are found, corruption and violence (v. 11), and Satan having been exposed as a liar and the father of lies (John 8: 44), the third form, falsehood, is added. [See Colossians 3: 5 (corruption), 8 (violence), and 9 (falsehood).] So in our Psalm we have lying, and deceit, which is moral corruption, in verse 2, and violence in verse 7.

Such were the circumstances of this pious soul who is taken up by the Spirit of Christ and made the mouthpiece — the vessel — of the sorrows of His earthly people in a later day. And thus surrounded by these various forms of evil, and having long dwelt with him that hated peace, what was his consolation? In what way was he sustained? By the assurance that Jehovah had heard his cry. He had the sense that God had heard his cry, and this pacified his alarms; for, as the apostle John has written, "If we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." (1 John 5: 15.) Hence it is that the Psalmist anticipates with certainty deliverance through divine judgment upon the enemy. "What," he cries, "shall be given unto thee? or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue? Sharp arrows of the mighty" — the arrows of the King, which will soon pierce through the hearts of His enemies (Psalm 45: 5), and these, combined "with coals of juniper,"\* coals kindled with the fires of holiness, wherewith Jehovah will search and judge all the workers of iniquity.

\*"Juniper" would seem to be a mistaken translation. It is said to be a shrub called "Genista," the roots of which were famed as making the best charcoal. The figure, therefore, will denote the intensity of the fire of judgment.

The last two verses sum up briefly, but very graphically, the whole position:

6 My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace.

7 I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.

What a description of the adversary of God and of His people — hating peace! It could not be otherwise, because the carnal mind — and it is here seen in its full expression — is enmity against God. The presence, therefore, of God's people, when walking before Him, must provoke the enemy's violent opposition. Hence it is the Psalmist adds, "I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war." It is thus utterly useless to attempt to conciliate the enemy; and, as for Israel in the future, so now, it must be through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom.

In conclusion, it may be noted that, while it is not the circumstances of the Christian which are here presented, the resource of God's people in all dispensations is in God Himself, and in His interposition, with delivering power, on their behalf.

## 2 — Psalm 121.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### The Source of help.

IN the preceding Psalm distress and conflict mark the condition of God's people: whereas here, while the pressure is still upon them, we are permitted to see what the Lord is on their behalf in their special circumstances. The greater the sense of need, the greater the discovery of what God is for us; and hence it is that, like these saints of a future day, we are often put to the test, in order that, learning our own helplessness, we may realize that our help and succour are to be found alone in God. This will explain the connection between these two Psalms. In the last verse of the foregoing, the Psalmist cries, "I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war." What, then, is his resource? The answer is found in the first two verses of Psalm 121:

1 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my

help.

2 My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

The beauty of the connection will be more fully seen if a slight rectification is made in the rendering of the first verse. Many read as follows: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills: from whence shall my help come?" And then the second verse is taken as the answer to this question.\* Adopting this change, it will be perceived that faith is in activity; for no sooner does the soul cry in its sorrow, "From whence shall my help come?" than the answer springs forth, "My help cometh from the Lord," etc. This part illustrates a principle found everywhere in the Scriptures. If God works for the succour and deliverance of His people, He acts in connection with, and in response to, their faith. For example, when Peter writes of the inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for believers, he adds, "Who are kept by the power of God *through faith* unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1: 4, 5.) Truly, faith itself is produced and sustained in the soul by divine power, but none the less is it the living link between the soul and God, and that which secures His intervention, brings Him in, for our aid and deliverance. (See Mark 9: 23; Hebrews 11, etc.)

\*See the *Revised Version* of the Old Testament, also J. N. D.'s French Bible, in which he gives the above as an alternative rendering.

It is to be remarked, as pointed out in the last paper, that God is here known as Jehovah, the covenant name of God as in relationship with Israel; and also that the words, "which made heaven and earth," are appended, for this was according to the revelation God made of Himself

to His earthly people. So Jonah confessed to the mariners, "I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord (Jehovah), the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1: 9.) Of this creation, Jehovah revealed Himself to His ancient people as the Creator, although He discovered much more than this to Moses (Exodus 34: 5-7), when He announced the sovereignty of His grace and mercy as the foundation on which He could spare His guilty people after the sin of the golden calf. The Christian is in the light as God is in the light, for God is now fully revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ; and the believer is, moreover, in accordance with God's counsels, brought, through association with Christ, into His own place and relationship. We know God, therefore, in a far more intimate manner, inasmuch as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our God and Father. (John 20: 17; Ephesians 1: 3-5.) This difference must ever be borne in mind when reading the Old Testament Scriptures.

Passing now to verse 3, we have the divine response, through the Spirit, to the faith expressed in the second verse. Turning in the confidence of faith to Jehovah, who made heaven and earth, the soul is assured of the support and protection of its Omnipotent Keeper.

3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Two things are brought before us in this assurance; first, that whatever the dangers, or the slippery character of the path, the Lord will not suffer the foot of one trusting in Him to be moved, or, perhaps, to "slide"; and, secondly, that there is never a moment when the eyes of the Lord are not upon His people, when He does not maintain unceasing and constant vigilance on their behalf. The night may be never so dark round about us, but for Him the night shineth as the day, and even as Jesus saw from the mountain-top His disciples toiling in the rowing, so God withdraweth not His eyes from the righteous, but ever beholdeth them in all their circumstances of trial and sorrow. And, let it be observed, that He who thus watches over His saints is their Keeper, the One who guards, keeps safe, preserves — for such is the force of the word here used. What encouragement is thus ministered to God's tried and suffering people! And what an invitation to unwavering repose in Himself in the midst of surrounding trials and agitations!

The next verse seems to proceed from another speaker, is verse 5 resumes the address to the individual soul, though he is undoubtedly the representative of the people. Still, verse 4 appears as all emphatic endorsement of the assurance of verse 3, and, at the same time, gives it a wider application. In the structure of the Psalm, it may be a chorus breaking forth at this point, all the people uniting in the song:

4 Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

It is not, therefore, merely that Jehovah will preserve His people in their special difficulties, but He is introduced as Israel's Keeper. It is a characteristic relationship; and, consequently, additional force is given to Jehovah's not slumbering by the words "nor sleep"; that is, He is ever wakeful; He never at any moment forgets His own; and there is, therefore, no intermission in His watchful care and keeping. Nor should the shadowing forth of the unity of God's people be overlooked. He is not only the Keeper of the believer, but He is also the Keeper of Israel. There are many touching illustrations of this unity in the Old Testament, showing how even the people themselves rose sometimes almost to the level of God's thoughts, and were thus

enabled to embrace their oneness as the chosen nation. Much more should this be the case with us, who have been taught the blessed truth of union with Christ, and, consequently, with all the members of His body. Not that the individual aspects of blessing are to be forgotten, but rather that we should be in communion with the mind of Christ as to all His own, who together, corporately, form His body, and will be His bride. It is when we enter into this, in the power of the Holy Ghost, that the affections of Christ for His people are reproduced in us, if but feebly, and we behold them with His own vision, as robed in, His own beauty and excellencies.

The chorus having been sung, the address to the representative individual is resumed:

5 The Lord is thy Keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The first sentence, the reiteration of the truth at the close of verse 3, is the foundation on which are built up the following pledges of security. "The Lord is thy Keeper" means nothing less than that He is an absolute and perfect Keeper, and the subsequent details are but the consequences of this, or the application of the general truth. In itself, however, it is an immense thing to know that the Lord is our Keeper. In dangers, difficulties, and trials, it would calm our fears immediately, as well as dispel our anxieties, if this assurance were held in power. That it is true, whatever our state of soul, is undeniable, but it must be remembered that faith alone can avail itself of the blessedness of being kept by God, or can turn to Him for succour at the moment of need and pressure.

After the statement that "the Lord is thy Keeper," it is said, "the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand." "Shade" may be understood, from what follows, as protection, even as we read in Isaiah, "Thou hast been . . . a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall." The force of "at thy right hand" may, perhaps, be gathered from another Psalm, where we read, "Because He (Jehovah) is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." (Psalm 16: 8.) The expression would thus seem to signify that the Lord's protection is ever available, always, to use a common phrase, "at hand" for His people. This protection is manifestly spoken of in reference to what follows:

6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The rays, both of the one and of the other, would be necessarily obstructed by the "shadow of the Almighty," wherewith He surrounds His people, and under which they for ever safely abide. The "sun" and the "moon" are but emblems of the evil influences of the day and the night, of which these luminaries are the respective rulers. Both the scorching rays of the glaring day and the noxious evils of the night will be powerless to affect those who repose under Jehovah's overshadowing care. How fearless, therefore, God's people may be, and would be, if they did but realize how perfectly they are guarded on every hand! These promises, it will be remembered, are for the earthly, people in their primary application, but they are also available, in even a higher sense, for the Christian. Thus the apostle could say, "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom." (2 Timothy 4: 18.)

The last two verses do but amplify the assurance contained in verse 6.

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

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

The promise, "The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil," must not, we apprehend, be taken as applicable independently of the state of soul. As before remarked, the living link between the soul and God is faith, and God works through it to bless and protect the believer. Faith can thus take up, and repose upon, this word of consolation in the darkest days, when Satan's power is demonstrated on all sides. The believer, moreover, will remember that, when the Lord presented His own before the Father, He said, "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil." The apostle Paul also assures the Thessalonian saints that "the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil." (2 Thess. 3: 3.) All these scriptures show us God's care over His people, and how abhorrent the thought of evil is to Him who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. How solicitous we should be, therefore, to answer to His mind in this respect, and the more in that both His love and His power are engaged to keep us undefiled as we walk in His ways.

The next clause is, "He shall preserve thy soul." The word rendered "soul" is, as in Greek also, a little ambiguous. It is sometimes translated "life," and, inasmuch as preservation for blessings in Messiah's kingdom is a characteristic Jewish promise, it is possible that this is its significance in this place.

Lastly, Jehovah's overshadowing care includes the going out and the coming in of His people "from this time forth, and even for evermore," on through the thousand years, to the close of the millennial kingdom. Everything is thought of, and we are thus permitted to have a glimpse into the heart of God for His people, as expressed in the daily and unwearying watchfulness which He exercises over them for their preservation and blessing. It is well to ponder it, and to observe that the foundation of all our security lies in what God is for His people. We need to remember this at all times, for, in the wretched legality of our hearts, if we are not established in grace, we are tempted to think that something depends on ourselves. No! we are wholly cast upon God, upon what He is as revealed in Christ. "But must we not watch and pray, and the like?" Even for the power to watch and pray we are dependent on the Lord, and it is as we realize this that we repose quietly and peacefully upon Him, that faith is called forth into constant activity; and, consequently, understanding what God is for us, we can exclaim with the apostle, "If God be for us, who can be against us? . . . I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." May our eyes be ever kept upon Him from whom alone cometh our help!\*

\*To illustrate the difference between the Jewish believer and the Christian the following words of another are given: "We must note that the literal application of this Psalm is not now just. Christ has been reckoned among transgressors; and we have to go on not looking for absolute deliverance; yet we are to be assured that the hairs of our head are numbered. God

withdraws not His eyes from the righteous; but we do not look in result to be kept for earth, as the Jew rightly will in the path of faithfulness. Yet our God and Father does watch over us with unceasing vigilance. We may be at peace under the shadow of His wings. Our instruction is, in the midst of every evil, to look only to the Lord."

### **3 — Psalm 122.**

#### **A Song of Degrees of David.**

##### **The House of the Lord.**

TO know the Lord Himself is to be attracted to the place where He dwells. This is the connection between this and the previous Psalm. In that, in reply to the confidence of faith expressed in verse 2, came the blessed assurance that the Lord was all-sufficient for all His people's needs. Thus known in His tender grace and watchful care, the soul could now say, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord" (v. 1); for it was there He, who had become everything to the one who looked to Him, dwelt, and displayed His glory. Remark, also, that the moment the house of the Lord is mentioned, isolation ceases, and all God's people are introduced. It is, Let us go into the house of the Lord. It is the same now when the individual believer learns in any measure what the assembly is as God's habitation through the Spirit, or what it is to have the Lord Himself in the midst of those gathered unto His precious name.

The hearts of God's people being upon the Lord's house, they anticipate, in the energy of faith, their arrival within the holy city, and exclaim, "Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem." (v. 2.) Their pilgrimage was not yet ended, but, in the security which faith enjoyed, they could rest in perfect confidence that, as in Psalm 84, they would go from strength to strength, and that every one of them would appear in Zion before God. In like manner, as we look onward to the many mansions of the Father's house, into which the Lord Himself will conduct us, we know, without a single doubt or fear, that no difficulty and no foe will ever prevail to hinder the attainment of our blessed goal. For the One who is already there, and who has prepared the place for us, is able to save us through all the dangers of the wilderness, because He ever lives to make intercession for us. Blessed security, founded as it is upon what Christ is for us at the right hand of God.

These two verses contain the introduction to, and the subject of, the Psalm; the next three give a description of the city which is the object of the hopes of Israel; and the last four set forth, intimate relationship between the chosen people and the house of their God, and show that the peace of Jerusalem is bound up with the people's prosperity.

We have, then, now to consider the description of the city, and in a threefold way. First, it is the form, the beauty of the city itself which excites admiration: it is builded as a city that is compact together. It is the symmetry and completeness of the city which arrest the attention; the city, that is, which will be, in the future glories of the kingdom, however the splendour of Jerusalem during David's reign may have furnished its prophetic type. The Christian will at once recall the measurements of the new Jerusalem, with which the earthly city will be in direct

relationship: "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth; and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." This is finite perfection, represented by its being a cube, but finite perfection divinely bestowed. And of this the city in our Psalm is no indistinct shadow. And it is the contemplation of this beauty, albeit earthly, which awakens the admiration of the people, who own it is the place of the house of the Lord, and as the seat of their King.

Secondly, Jerusalem is portrayed as the gathering-point for all the people; it is the place "whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord." (v. 4.) Jerusalem, indeed, will be Israel's true centre in virtue of the house of the Lord, and hence the name of the city in that day will be Jehovah-shammah — the Lord is there. His presence there, as ever, will be the attraction for all His own. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that the tribes are called "the tribes of the Lord," for then their stiff-neckedness and rebellion will all have ceased, and they will manifestly belong to Him whose name they bear. In the Epistle to the Galatians the apostle speaks of Jerusalem above as being our mother.\*

\*Such is the true reading.

There is thus a striking correspondence between our present position, in view of the heavenly Jerusalem, and that of the tribes in this Psalm in their progress "out of sorrow, and through sorrow to the full blessing in Zion, which forms the crowning result, Jehovah being there." The next clause should rather be rendered: "A testimony for, or unto, Israel,"\*

\*See the *Revised Version*; and J. N. D.'s French Version gives "un témoignage à Israel."

This will mean that the universal gathering of the tribes, their common ascent to the house of the Lord, would go forth as a testimony to the whole nation. Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem itself, but of Jerusalem as the expression of the people, as the testimony in his address to her, "Arise, shine — for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee."

This is surpassingly beautiful. The light of Zion is the glory of the Lord, which after long ages of desolation has broken through the clouds of her sorrow, and illumined her with the light of the presence of her God. And it is with this light she is called upon to shine; the display through her of the glory of the Lord would in this way become her testimony. (Compare 2 Cor. 4: 6.) The object of the assembling of the tribes is "to give thanks unto the name of the Lord," unto Jehovah as revealed in the midst of Israel. One of the last acts of David was the appointment of the Levites "to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord, and likewise at even" (1 Chr. 23: 30); but at the time of which our Psalm speaks all the tribes will be united in this blessed service of thanksgiving and praise.

But not only will Jerusalem be the centre of the people's worship; it will also be the seat of the royal administration of justice, "for there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the, house of David." The Messiah is not only the promised Seed, as of Abraham, but He is also, as born into the world, the Son of David — indeed, both the root and the offspring of David, David's Son and David's Lord. The administration of the kingdom will therefore be His, as the rightful Heir to all the royal rights of David's house; and "He shall judge Thy people with

righteousness, and Thy poor with judgment. The mountains (seats of authority — subordinate thrones) shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness." (Psalm 72: 2, 3.) As also Isaiah says, His throne will be established "with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever."

In the last division of the Psalm we have the connection declared between the peace of Jerusalem and the prosperity of the people. First of all there is the invitation to pray for her peace. To do this would imply communion with Jehovah's mind, for Jerusalem is the city which He loved; "for the Lord hath chosen Zion; He hath desired it as His habitation. This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it." If, therefore, the hearts of His people are set upon the same place they cannot but pray for its peace. The Christian will understand this principle in its application to the assembly. The dearest thing on earth to the heart of Christ is the Church, that Church which He loved, and for which He gave Himself; and if we have communion with His own heart as to this, however feebly, we shall be constrained to pray for its peace and blessing.\*

\*For a beautiful illustration of this principle in respect of Zion, see Isaiah 62: 1, 6, 7.

Blessing, moreover, is promised for those who thus pray: "They shall prosper that love thee." Communion with the heart of Christ is the sure pathway of blessing. Christ loved, and loves the Church, and the saint to whom the Church is also dear will spiritually prosper. The prosperity here promised will be according to the position of the earthly people; but for the Christian, who is in fellowship with our blessed Lord concerning His people, it will be in spiritual progress and blessing.

The following verses, 7-9, contain the response to the exhortation. First, there is the expression of the desire that there may be peace within the walls of Jerusalem and prosperity within her palaces. From the last verse (9th) we learn that the ground of this desire is "the house of the Lord our God." Jerusalem, indeed, will derive all its importance, not so much from its being the chosen city of Messiah's kingdom, as from its containing God's dwelling-place. As we read in Isaiah, "The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I will make the place of My feet glorious." The pious heart, therefore, will desire that the whole city should share in the blessing of the habitation of God, and be in suited condition and meetness for its divine Inhabitant. The enjoyment of the presence of Him who will dwell in Zion will ensure the peace and prosperity desired.

Another ground for the longed-for peace is my brethren and companions' sake." (v. 8.) Nothing expands the heart of God's people like affection for the Lord and His dwelling-place. Whenever He is enshrined in the heart His affections, reproduced in the believer, will embrace every child of God. An exemplification of this truth is found in Revelation 22. When the Lord presents Himself as the root and offspring of David, [and] the bright and morning star, the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. The first thought is Christ Himself, and then every saint is remembered in what follows. And let him that heareth say, Come. So is it in the Psalm — peace is desired for the sake of the "tribes of the Lord." How fully some of God's people can enter into this in this day of confusion and scattering! Let us cry, then, day and night, as we think of the perils which

beset us on every hand, and the damage done to souls by incessant controversies, that the Lord may come in and heal our breaches and restore peace, for the sake of our brethren and companions.

The last verse, as before remarked, does but emphatically remind us of the energetic motive for seeking the good of Jerusalem; it is "because of the house of the Lord our God." Nehemiah is a striking illustration of this spirit. When he heard of the affliction and reproach of the remnant of the people, and that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down, and that her gates were burned with fire, he wept, mourned, and fasted, and prayed; and thenceforward, as led of the Spirit, his heart was set upon the good of Jerusalem because of the house of the Lord his God. May this spirit of devotedness to the glory of God in His habitation be increasingly exhibited amongst His beloved people in the present day, for His name's sake!

## **4 — Psalms 123, 124.**

### **Songs of Degrees.**

#### **The Cry and the Answer.**

FAITH had already reached her goal in Psalm 122. Many sorrows and trials might yet lie in the pilgrim pathway, but in spirit Israel were already enjoying the consummation of their hopes. Jerusalem, in all the beauty of her restoration as their centre of gathering, inasmuch as the house of the Lord their God was there, had become a reality in their souls; and they could thus rest in the assurance that their feet would one day stand within her gates. The believer who dwells in spirit in heaven is the best qualified for his journey through the wilderness. So is it here; for having anticipated the fruition of the promises, the Psalmist now returns to the actual, circumstances of the people, and to their one resource in the midst of their adversaries.

The first verse depicts their attitude of dependence in this simple language: "Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes, O Thou that dwellest in the heavens." All! how much is connected in the Scriptures with the lifting up the eyes or the hands to heaven! The Old Testament is full of instruction on this point; and we read of the blessed Lord Himself lifting up His eyes to heaven as He poured forth His heart's desires in John 17. (See also John 11: 41.) This action proclaims that God Himself is the confidence and succour of those that wait upon Him, that He is their only resource, and that no help is elsewhere to be found. Blessed is it for the soul that has learned this lesson. We have before seen that the last clause of verse 1 of Psalm 121 may be rendered, "From whence shall my help come?" The next verse contains the answer; and in accordance with this, the Psalm before us commences with this posture of expectation from Him who dwelleth in the heavens.

In verse 2 we have set forth the completeness and intensity of the expectation of faith: "Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that He have mercy upon us." This is supremely beautiful, telling, as it does, of unfaltering confidence, and of the perseverance of faith. These pious souls fix their eyes on the Lord their God, just as servants wait on their masters for the indication of their will by the motion of their hand. This is to be will-less

in the presence of God, and to be consequently in His absolute disposal. Suffering scorn and reproach, they will not be impatient, and will not retaliate; nor will they seek any alleviation of their trouble from any human sources, but they will just quietly wait on until the Lord, in the compassion of His heart, shall interpose on their behalf. Is there no lesson to us in our troubles from this exhibition of immovable trust in God as a known refuge? Many of us "lift up our eyes" to Him in our distresses, but we fail in waiting on until the succour comes. We do pray, tell out our griefs. but this unconquerable perseverance of faith is often lacking. Let this example afford us both guidance and encouragement.

Finally, we have the burden of their cry, together with its cause: "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud." (vv. 3, 4.) The repetition of the cry — "Have mercy upon us". — reveals the intensity of their sorrow, while its brevity shows their confidence in Him to whom it is addressed. They are conscious that His eye is upon them, and that He knows their need and the circumstances through which they are passing, and which are producing their affliction. Two classes are named as the cause of their trouble — those that are at ease, and the proud, characters which ever morally distinguish the enemies of the people of God. For the wicked often prosper in this world, and are not in trouble as other men; they are, moreover, compassed about with pride as a garment — "they speak loftily; they set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore His people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them." Who these enemies are will be considered in connection with the following Psalm.

As the reader may perceive, the two things from which God's people suffered were scorn and contempt. Both are strong words. The first is used "specially of those who mock at those in distress," and thus treat them with every kind of contumely and ignominy; the second means "to despise openly," and consequently to heap upon those so dealt with opprobrium and disdain. And that these things were meted out to the full is clear from the words, twice repeated, "exceedingly filled." In the language already cited, "waters of a full cup" were thus wrung out to God's chosen by their enemies. But the consolation was, however feebly they may have apprehended it, that He to whom they turned in the hour of their trial had Himself experienced the same treatment from His enemies when He passed through this scene. He, therefore, not only heard their cry, but He also knew their sorrows, and He could thus sympathise with them in their afflictions, while waiting for the right moment to come in and succour them out of their distresses.

Passing now to the next Psalm, it will be at once remarked that it contains the record of the deliverance prayed for in the foregoing one. The mercy there sought has been bestowed, and Israel now, with hearts overflowing with gratitude, celebrate the intervention of their Deliverer. It is exceedingly beautiful to notice how they ascribe their salvation from the hands of their foes to the Lord alone. The first five verses set this out in very striking language:

- 1 If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say;
- 2 If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us:
- 3 Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us:

4 Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul:

5 Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.

Three things may be here noticed. First, it is evident that the contempt and scorning mentioned in the previous Psalm had passed over into even more violent enmity, which expressed itself in the attempt to compass the destruction of the whole people. It says, "When men rose up against us," and "when their wrath was kindled against us." Secondly, it is as unmistakable that Israel had been brought into great straits, that to all human appearances their destruction was imminent. The word "quick," that is, living, justifies this conclusion. It is a figure, as we understand it, to denote the enemy rushing with open jaws to "swallow up" Israel alive, as it were, and instantaneously. Lastly, the Lord manifestly is looked upon as interposing for the succour of His people when they were on the very eve of destruction, when the "proud waters" were flowing with apparently resistless violence to overwhelm them for ever. How often does the Lord thus wait until all human hopes have fled, until His people have accepted the sentence of death in themselves; and then He delights to intervene for their deliverance, that they may learn that when refuge fails them He is their refuge and their portion in the land of the living. "They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses."

Who, then, is the enemy who had so nearly, in his own eyes, secured the destruction of the elect nation? To help in answering this question, it must again be observed that Israel is in their land, not only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but all the tribes, "the tribes of the Lord." The deliverance here spoken of, therefore, could not be that described by Zechariah (Zech. 12-14), when all nations were gathered against Jerusalem to battle. This intervention of the Lord was for the salvation of His people, Judah, the house of David, etc., who had returned in unbelief, and were already in the land at the time of His appearing. It is not until after these events that Israel is restored. (See Ezekiel 20: 33-44.) This makes it tolerably certain that the enemy of our Psalm is the last enemy of Israel after the establishment of the kingdom. As a well-known writer has said, "All this I apprehend refers to the last inroad of the final power of Gog, or the last condition of the Assyrian, perhaps to Daniel 8 (only that that, gives its whole character, not merely its final one); also to the filial king of the north, who comes in after the wilful king in Daniel 11."\*

\*Those who desire to pursue the subject with more detail may profitably study Ezekiel 38, 39.

To return now to the course of the Psalm, we find that the One who had heard the cries of His people is now praised for the mercy He had vouchsafed. After narrating their deliverance, and fully owning His hand in it, they exclaim: "Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped." (vv. 6, 7.)

It is always a sign of the Spirit's activity when the soul that has received blessing turns immediately with praise to the Blessor. Too often the mercy or blessing received satisfies the soul for a moment. Our exercise over, the end reached, unless on our guard, we are often deluded

into forgetfulness of the hand which has been stretched out over us, or which has been ministering to our need. It was not so with Israel; and it is profitable to note how they rise up with thanksgiving to the source of their deliverance. They had trusted in Him, and they had not been confounded, and they magnify His name for it.

It is only a consequence of this state of heart that they estimate aright the character of their deliverance. They look back upon it in communion with their God. The snare had been woven round about them by Satan's fowlers; but the snare was broken — broken by the strong arm on which they had leaned — and they had escaped. Well might they cry, "Blessed be the Lord."

The last verse expresses not only a truth, but also their own experience, and the lesson they had learned through their sorrows, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Such is their blessed conclusion now that they are redeemed from the hand of all their adversaries. They may have believed it before, at least in measure; now they know it, and henceforth they put their trust alone in the name of their faithful and covenant-keeping Jehovah. They rise, moreover, in the exercise of their faith, confirmed and purified as it has been through their trials, to the full height of the revelation which Jehovah had made of Himself to Israel as the One who created heaven and earth. Jehovah, therefore, as known by His people, was the Omnipotent God. Thus the apostles, with the Pentecostal company of saints, still as to their feelings largely on Jewish ground, "lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is." (Acts 4: 24.) We know Him also as our God and Father, because the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ; but it is as happy for us, as for Israel, when we have come to the end of all human resources, and when we have learned that our help is alone in the name of our God.

## **5 — Psalm 125.**

### **A Song of Degrees.**

#### **The Mountains round about Jerusalem.**

AS following upon the deliverance of Israel from the power of the enemy described in Psalm 124, the stability of those who had found their help in the name of the Lord is declared: "They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth forever." Mount Zion, the seat of Messiah's glorious throne, will endure as long as the earth remains; and it is hence taken as a symbol of perpetual steadfastness. It "cannot be removed," and it "abideth for ever." So is it with those whose trust is in Jehovah. A similar thought is found in Isaiah: "Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord JEHOVAH is everlasting strength," or, as it is in the margin, the "Rock of Ages." Those, therefore, who trust in Him partake of the character of the foundation on which they rest, as, for example, the living stones in 1 Peter 2 derive their character from the Living Stone to which they have come. We are thus blessedly reminded that it is not our feebleness, but the Lord's strength which we have to consider; and that we may repose in unshaken confidence upon Him who cannot be moved, inasmuch as He is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.

If verse 1 gives the theme of the Psalm, the next two verses follow out the subject, and make a special application. A slight change may be made in the rendering of verse 2. Leaving out the first "so," which has been added, and changing the second into "and," it will read thus: "The mountains are round about Jerusalem, and the Lord is round about His people from henceforth even for ever." The sense remains the same, except that the change in the translation leaves the latter clause its full and unlimited force. Jehovah, as the foundation, so to speak, of His people's confidence, gives to them everlasting stability; and as "round about" them He sets them in inviolable security. The mountains round about Jerusalem are regarded as her natural defence, a wall of protection; and Jehovah is looked upon as surrounding Israel with His own omnipotent care to shield them from danger and assault. What pains the Lord takes to assure His people of their perfect safety when they are once under His sheltering care!

Next comes the special application: "For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity." (v. 3.) We call this a special application, in that we have in this verse a reason given for Jehovah's protection of His people, which is to preserve them from the power and dominion of the wicked in order that they might not be tempted into sin. By "rod" we understand "sceptre" or "rule," and by "lot" "portion" or inheritance. The meaning, therefore, is simply that never more should the righteous be brought under the sway of the wicked, as Israel had so often been in past ages through their sin. And observe the absoluteness of the statement, "The rod of the wicked *shall not* rest upon the lot of the righteous," and then the tenderness of Jehovah's care in His solicitude that His people might not again put forth their hands unto iniquity. A holy God loves, and must have, a holy people, and He will guard them on every hand to secure His desires on their behalf. He thus permits us to see the yearning of His heart and the object of His government, that His aims and desires may also be ours.

The next verse is a prayer founded upon the revelation of His protection and government of His people: "Do good, O Lord, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts." This is an abiding principle of God's government, and is fully stated in another Psalm: "With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful; with an upright man Thou wilt show Thyself upright; with the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; and with the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward." (Psalm 18: 25-26; compare Psalm 34: 12, 16.) It is very necessary to bear in mind this distinction between grace and government; for while it is blessedly true that God's attitude of grace towards His people is unchanging, determined as it is by what Christ is before Him, He yet never fails to chasten and to mark with His displeasure those among them whose walk and conduct bring dishonour upon His name. The condition, therefore, for the enjoyment of what He is in grace, for the manifestation of His favour, is a walk in His presence, as, for example, in the case of Enoch, who walked with God and had the testimony that he pleased God.

The first clause of verse 5 illustrates, on the other side, the same principle; for it is "such as turn aside unto their crooked ways," showing that they are amongst the people of God, and yet those whom the Lord will lead forth with the workers of iniquity. The face of the Lord must be against them that do evil wherever they are found. This is a solemn consideration for God's professing people, seeing that our God is a consuming fire. The conclusion is very beautiful. As will be observed, there are but two words — peace — Israel; and some interpret, "Let peace be

upon Israel," while others take it as a promise, as in our translation, "Peace *shall be* upon Israel." The difference is not great, for a divine desire is equivalent to a promise, and we may so regard it. The Israel specified is an Israel purified by judgment, as indicated in the previous verse, an Israel from whose midst have been purged out all such as had turned aside unto their crooked ways. It can scarcely be doubted that the apostle had this passage in his mind when he, as led of the Spirit, wrote, "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, — *and upon the Israel of God.*" (Gal. 6: 16.) Yea, God's Israel will ever have divine peace resting upon them in all the infinitude of its blessing. What a favour! And yet, great as it is, it will not compare with the peace of God which passeth all understanding, or the peace of Christ, which may now be enjoyed by every believer. This is only to say that heavenly blessings far transcend those which will be the portion of the earthly people. But whatever the dispensation, there can be no possession and enjoyment of the peculiar portion apart from a walk answering to the revelation which God has made of Himself to His people.

## 6 — Psalm 126.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### Reaping in Joy.

THIS beautiful Psalm completes the first series of seven; and it celebrates in exquisite language Jehovah's sudden interposition for the rescue and deliverance of Zion from the power of the enemy. The connection is very intimate with the two foregoing Psalms. Thus in 124: 7 the remnant say, "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped." In the next the stability and security of those that trust in the Lord are declared; and now, in the Psalm before us, looking back upon what the Lord had wrought on behalf of His people, their hearts overflow with admiration and praise. The structure of the Psalm is very simple, being divided into two parts of three verses each. The first part gives their experiences in connection with Jehovah's intervention on behalf of the beloved city; the second contains a prayer for an enlarged deliverance, and the promise of the certain issue of an abundant harvest for those who sow in tears.

First, then, their thoughts are centred upon Zion, the captivity of which had been "turned again" by Jehovah's own right hand of power. It had been brought very low. As Isaiah wrote, "Thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust." (Isa. 29: 4.) And again, "The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters," that is, against Zion. The prophet Zechariah, moreover, describes the sorrow and distress of the chosen city when surrounded by her enemies, with seemingly no prospect of deliverance. But in her last extremity, when her case, to all outward appearance, will be hopeless, the Lord suddenly interposes for her succour. Hence it is that Isaiah says, speaking of the assembled nations, "God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. And behold at eveningtide trouble; and before the morning he is not." (Isa. 17: 13, 14; see also Isa. 29: 3-8; and Zechariah 14.) This is the event celebrated in our Psalm; and the remnant confess that Jehovah's intervention was so unlooked for and wonderful that "we were like them that dream." They could scarcely believe it at first; for though they had been crying to the Lord for this very thing (Psalm 123, 130) the

answer went so far beyond their expectation, as in the case of the saints praying for the deliverance of Peter, that they were smitten with astonishment.

But recovering themselves, when they embraced the reality and magnitude of Jehovah's succouring grace, their mouth was filled with laughter and their tongue with singing (v. 2); the uncontrollable joy of their hearts burst forth in a flood of ecstatic praise. And what wonder? It was the dawn of the summer morn they had long sighed for; and the contrast with the dark midnight through which they had passed was so overpowering that they could not but vent the emotions of their souls in songs of adoration. Even the surrounding nations, moreover, perceived that it was God's hand, and confessed that Jehovah had done great things for His people. Yea, happy Israel replies, endorsing the testimony of the heathen, "The Lord hath done great things for us; [whereof] we are glad." For once more in their history they will learn in this way that the Lord is their strength and song, and has become their salvation. (See Psalm 118: 14.)

Perceiving that Jehovah has commenced the redemption of His people from the hand of their enemies, their faith is strengthened, and they now pray for fuller blessing, "Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as streams in the south." This prayer embraces the full restoration and blessing of Israel, according to the language of Zacharias, "That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life." It is the return of the latter rain after the dry and arid season, and thus "as the streams in the south." Before the rains the beds of these streams are dry and rocky, but they are filled to overflowing with the fertilizing showers of heaven in their appointed times. So, Lord, Israel cries, turn again our captivity; let the mercy vouchsafed to Zion be but the earnest of the accomplishment of all Thy promises concerning Thy people.

The answer to their prayer was assured in the purposes of God and in His people's hearts, linked by faith as they were with the faithfulness of their covenant-keeping God. Thus it is said, "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." Truly this elect remnant of faithful souls, faithful through grace in a day of extremest pressure and persecution (see Matt. 24: 21, 22), will "sow" in tears. As we read in Daniel, "They that understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days." (Dan. 11: 33.) And again, "Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried." (Dan. 12: 10.) But the seed thus steeped in their tears and sown in sorrow will germinate in its own time, spring up, and bring forth an abundant harvest, when the sower and the reaper will rejoice together.

The last verse is an affirmation of the same principle, but in an especial manner. It is no longer *they* that sow in tears, but *he* that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." It is everywhere seen in Scripture that what should be true of the believer, or of the servant, is first illustrated in all its perfection in Christ. Now He, as He Himself has taught us, was the great Sower, and we are permitted to see Him weeping over the city wherein He had scattered much of His "precious seed." To the outward eye it might seem as if the seed thus sown had perished, that He had laboured in vain, and spent His strength for nought; but what does God say to His "Servant"? "It is a light thing that Thou shouldest be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation unto the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49: 4-6.) So in our Psalm — He shall doubtless, in

all certainty, come again with rejoicing, laden with the sheaves of His fruitful harvest. For whether concerning His heavenly or His earthly people, He will see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. It is at this harvest time that He will rejoice over His people with joy, that He will rest in His love, and that He will joy over them with singing. It is of that day that the Lord has said, "Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame. At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord." (Zeph. 3: 19, 20.) In the midst of all this realized blessing it is that Israel will cry, "The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."

## 7 — Psalm 127.

### A Song of Degrees for Solomon.

#### Rest for This Beloved.

THIS is the central Psalm of the whole series, there being seven before and seven after it. Each seven, as before pointed out, contains two by David; is divided, as is so often the case with the number seven in Scripture, into four and three; and contains the name of Jehovah twenty-four times. If these interesting details of structure may not lead us aside from the divine teaching of the Psalms, we may yet admire the symmetry and exactitude of the inspired Scriptures. The title of this Psalm reads in our Bibles, "A Song of degrees for Solomon"; but it is generally accepted that "of" should be substituted for "for," and, thus, that Solomon was the writer of the Psalm. This fact lends a peculiar interest to its subject, and shows us that the king commenced to build the house in real dependence on God. The first two and the last three verses go together, though there is an intimate connection between the two divisions; for the two fundamental ideas are the house and the family, whatever may be their prophetic import.

"Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain." (v. 1.) It is contended that it should be rendered a house, and not *the* house. If we accept the correction, the teaching will be all the more emphatic, as in the application it will include Solomon's own house, the temple which he had the privilege of building, and the house or temple which will yet be rebuilt, first by the Jews in unbelief after their restoration, and finally by the Lord Himself after the establishment of His kingdom. (See Zechariah 6: 12.)

We have, then, first of all, the general truth that all human undertakings are to no purpose unless the Lord is with us in them, guiding, controlling, and sustaining, unless, indeed, we are but carrying out His purposes and designs. It was well for Solomon to be deeply imbued with the conviction here expressed, seeing that one half of his reign (twenty years) was occupied in the erection of the house of the Lord and his own house. That he failed to remember the divine principle which he had been given to record is seen from the comment appended to the statement that he was seven years in building the Lord's house. "But Solomon was building his own house thirteen years," nearly twice seven. Alas! how often is it that we commence our own service in real dependence upon the Lord, with the full sense that we can do nothing apart from Him; and

then, from one cause or another, even from delight in the work itself sometimes, we are betrayed into dependence upon our own methods or our own energies, or into losing sight of God's object through being occupied with our own.

Remark, moreover, that our own houses often come into competition with the Lord's house. Very solemn instruction is given on this head by the prophet Haggai. "Ye looked for much," he says to the restored remnant, "and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of Mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house." (Haggai 1: 9.) We need, therefore, to ponder much upon this truth, that all our "building" is utterly in vain unless it is as accomplishing the Lord's work.

The prophetic application is of great interest, and it contains much encouragement for the remnant of a future day. From other scriptures we learn that the Jews will be restored to their own land while in unbelief, and that, in the attempt to revive their national splendour, they will build the temple. (See Isaiah 66: 6; 2 Thess. 2: 4, etc.) This will be carried on before the eyes of the pious remnant, those who "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." But guided by the teaching of this Psalm, they will be comforted with the assurance that "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it"; and they will thus be kept from being deceived by the building and the establishment of the gorgeous rites of the national temple. And surely a solemn warning is conveyed by these words to Christian builders. As Paul writes, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon." (1 Cor. 3: 10.) The one that builds in wood, hay, or stubble does but labour in vain, except, alas! to secure his suffering loss in the future or his own destruction. Truly the day will declare the character of every man's work, whether of Jewish or Christian builders, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

In the next clause the same principle is applied to human vigilance: "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain." Jerusalem may yet be rebuilt and fortified so strongly as to be deemed impregnable; the watchful sentries may be constantly on the alert; every possible care may be taken to guard against any — and especially any nocturnal — assaults; but the most strenuous efforts of human strength and care will be utterly futile unless the Lord keep the city. Illustration after illustration of this truth might be easily drawn from historical records, and notably from the capture of Babylon by Cyrus — all alike proclaiming the impotence of man when acting apart from God. It is a lesson needing to be written upon the hearts of God's people in all ages, that they may repose alone upon His protection and care, and thus be able to sing in the darkest hour, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

The next verse does but continue, if in another aspect, the same lesson of dependence: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: [for] so He giveth His beloved sleep." A word or two may be first offered upon the translation of the last clause, as the meaning of the whole passage depends upon it. Many, taking sleep in its literal sense, render it, "He giveth His beloved *in* sleep"; but we cannot discover, in the language employed, any justification for this addition. This leads to the question whether actual sleep is intended. The manifest contrast is between securing, or obtaining, something by our own efforts, or looking for

and receiving it as God's gift. Now no one would ever think of purchasing sleep in the way here described, certainly not by eating the bread of sorrows; but it is the common way of man to seek to acquire the means of ease, retirement, and enjoyment through his own painful and unwearying labours. We conclude, therefore, that sleep must be taken in the symbolical sense of rest and repose of spirit. So taken all is plain. Quiet of mind and restful enjoyment can never be attained as the fruit of our own toil. God is the giver of all repose to His beloved; and, once accepting this simple truth, they cease from all carefulness, as also from anxious labour, and are kept in perfect peace, whatever the outlook, with their minds stayed upon Him. And how blessed for the soul to enter in any measure into this, surrounded as we are with so many dangers and causes of apprehension and anxiety! In perilous days, amid trials, tribulations, and sorrows, we may ever rest upon the breast of Him who giveth His beloved sleep. Sorely tried believers, whether from temporal or spiritual difficulties, will find much blessed food for meditation here, and will learn ever to look up to the Lord, and to remember that they are His beloved to whom He delights to minister "sleep."

The last three verses go together, and complete the subject of the Psalm. Thus we have the dwelling, taking now the house in its primary significance; then, guardian care with repose of spirit; and lastly, the family — the children. But if there be children, they also are God's gift — an heritage of (*from*) the Lord; and they are His gift as His recompense or reward, as the mark of His approval and blessing bestowed on those who fear Him and walk in obedience to His word, according to His promise to His earthly people. (See Deuteronomy 28: 11, and the next Psalm.) We see, therefore, that in every dispensation God will have His people learn that He is the source of all their blessings, that He is a GIVER, the God of all grace; and hence that the secret of a happy, restful life lies in realized dependence upon Himself. What anxieties and apprehensions we should be spared if this lesson were but more deeply graven upon our hearts! We then, indeed, might be careful for nothing, because we should only wait upon God, and have our expectation from Him, in the assurance that we could not obtain one single thing by our own efforts, however diligent, but that all must be received as God's gift. When we have once learned that God is a giver, we are content and happy to be receivers.

Children, moreover, are a means of defence (for enemies are still in the land, as before noticed): "As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth." As an illustration we read that "the sons of Ulam were mighty men of valour, archers, and had many sons, and sons' sons, an hundred and fifty." (1 Chr. 8: 40.) This will also explain the following verse: "Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate." As the gate was the place of authority and judgment, where matters in dispute were settled, and the place possibly of assault by external foes, the allusions of the Psalmist are easily comprehended. The man that "hath his quiver full of" such arrows, children, will have the means to defend his cause when unrighteously assailed, and thus will be able to present a bold front to his enemies. So we read of the Messiah in a future day, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power; from the womb of the morning Thou hast the dew of Thy youth." There cannot be a doubt that this verse should be punctuated as above; and the meaning of the last clause would seem to be that the youthful followers of Messiah in the day of His power will be as numerous as the dewdrops from the womb of the morning, or, as one has paraphrased it, "Thy youthful soldiery is like the dew in its beauty." Combining the two thoughts — number and beauty — we may indeed say that when Messiah comes forth He will

not be ashamed when He speaks with the enemies in the gate, as He surely will to their destruction. (See Zechariah 14: 3.)

Recalling, finally, what is said of Asher ("Let Asher be blessed with children"), and combining it with verse 6, we may surely remind ourselves that, in the preaching of the gospel for example, children are an heritage from the Lord. This will keep us free from all human methods to ensure success, from all appeals to nature and sentiment, and lead us to depend alone upon the omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit, and upon the favour and blessing of God. The Lord Himself open our hearts to receive the simple instruction of this Psalm.

## 8 — Psalm 128.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### Blessing out of Zion.

IF the preceding Psalm teaches that the Lord Himself is the source of all blessing and prosperity, and that without Him nothing can be accomplished or established, we have in this the character of those on whom His favour rests: "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in His ways." (v. 1.) The nature of the blessing thus enjoyed is afterward described.

A very wide door of blessing is thus divinely opened. It is really only restricted to those who possess the characteristics given — fearing the Lord and walking in His ways — and it will therefore correspond, for example, with the "whosoever" of John 3: 15, 16. Doubtless pious Israelites are in view, and even the whole of Israel, if verse 1 be taken as representative; but room is also made, in the very terms employed, for the inclusion of the stranger that might sojourn in the midst of Israel; for "one ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation, and also for the stranger that sojourneth with you, an ordinance for ever in your generations: *as ye are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord.*" (Num. 15: 15.) The heart of God thus always travelled out, in His ineffable grace, beyond His chosen people, to provide for the blessing of the "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." It is to this sovereignty of His grace that we ourselves are indebted for that wondrous place of nearness, and for the intimate relationship, into which we have been brought through the death and resurrection of Christ.

It should be also remarked that there is a governmental application in these words; that is, that God in His government of His people will make the reception and enjoyment of these blessings dependent upon their fearing Him and walking in His ways. For example, an Israelite might be restored to the land, but if he walked carelessly he would not be entitled to the promises here made. This principle — and it is a very important one — applies as much to the Christian as to the Jew; it is true, indeed, of the saints of all dispensations. For the enjoyment of the blessings of any period, there must be a walk in accordance with the revelation God has been pleased to make of Himself at that time. It is always true that God withholdeth no good thing from them that *walk uprightly*.

Two characteristics are given of the man who is blessed of the Lord — fearing the Lord, and walking in His ways. To avoid all misconception, let it be again pressed that these are not *mere* characteristics — they should be displayed in all God's people; but they are given here as indications of practical state or condition. "Fearing the Lord" describes a man who acts with a good conscience before Him; and hence it is that we read, "Happy is the man that feareth alway" (Proverbs 28: 14), the one, that is, who with holy fear seeks grace to avoid everything which would grieve the Spirit of God; and "walking in His ways" indicates the conduct consequent upon fearing the Lord, a walk which is formed and governed by the word of God. Altogether the practical state is the result of the truth held with divine power in the soul; and this is the only doorway, as already said, into the enjoyment of our true portion. As John says, this is the love of God, *that we keep His commandments*.

The blessings here described are distinctively Jewish, earthly and not heavenly blessings. Still, much instruction may be gleaned from what is promised, "For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table." (vv. 2, 3.) There was, then, to be blessing in labour, in one's own soul, and general prosperity, together with domestic and family felicity; but this may receive a little more consideration. First, the fruit of his own labour should be enjoyed. This is but the fulfilment of the promises which God made to His people on the condition that they observed and kept His commandments (see Deut. 28: 1-12); and the contrast is seen in that same chapter, where they are warned that, if they turned aside from God's statutes and laws, others should eat the fruit of their land and all their labours. (v. 33.) And let it not be forgotten that there is a sense in which this may be true now of the children of God. If they walk in disregard of His word, have themselves as their object, God will often come in and deal with them in their circumstances. How many there are who have determined to get on in the world; and they have laboured much and long to secure their ends, when, just as their goal was in view, all the fruit of their toil suddenly disappeared! May the Holy Spirit engrave the lesson deeply upon our hearts, that God's blessing can only rest upon the labours of those who fear Him and walk in His ways.

Secondly, all such shall be happy, and it shall be well with them. When a soul is maintained in holiness before God the sense of His favour is enjoyed; and this is soon discovered to be the secret of all true happiness. It is to this the Psalmist alludes; and he adds, moreover, that it shall be well with thee. Thus Isaiah speaks, "Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him" as indeed Peter teaches in his first epistle, that God's government is in favour of His people. (See 1 Peter 3: 10-13.) So the pious Israelite is here taught that, even though there might yet be sorrows and trials to pass through, God's eye was upon him, and good would be the certain issue of God's government and ways.

Lastly, blessing should rest upon his own household and family. The reader will remember that verse 3 speaks of the blessing of the earthly people; and, calling this to mind, he will detect the incomparable beauty of the illustrations drawn from the vine and the olive; for it is the fruit of the vine which is said to cheer both the heart of God and man, and the fatness of the olive is used to set forth the blessing and privileges of God's people on the earth. It is indeed an exquisite picture of a happy family, and there are many saints of the present day who will appreciate it; for what greater joy have they on earth, outside of the assembly, than to behold the concord of their

families, having their children growing up around their table, no seat as yet vacant, and all giving the promise of the work of the Spirit of God in their souls? And let it be distinctly asserted that the Christian heads of households are entitled to look for the realization of the spiritual significance of this picture of domestic peace and blessing.

The last three verses, we judge, go together; that is to say, verse 4 is introductory to verses 5 and 6, rather than a summary of the first three. Its first word confirms this interpretation: "Behold," says the Psalmist, "that thus [in this manner] shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord"; and then he proceeds to explain the manner. First of all it is, "The Lord shall bless, thee out of Zion." All the blessing of Israel will in a future day be out of Zion, because it will be the seat of the Lord's earthly throne. Hence the apostle writes, "There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob." (Romans 11: 26.) The Psalms are full of this same truth, as, for example, in the expression, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined." (See Psalms 24, 47, 48, 87, 97-99, also Isaiah 51, 52, etc. etc.) To be blessed out of Zion would be, therefore, the consummation of all blessing for Israel, because it will be connected with the reign of Messiah, and thus be the fulfilment of the glowing predictions of the prophets. It would speak to their hearts of the establishment of the kingdom and the blessings therewith connected, for which they had so long sighed and waited in the days of their sorrow.

The next clause of the verse is in accordance with this: "And thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life." If Zion is in Scripture the seat of royal grace, of the throne (for it was there David placed the ark), Jerusalem, as the expression of the nation, yet still Jerusalem, is the earthly bride, and for her as such there is a glorious future. It is in view of this that God will set watchmen and remembrancers upon her walls who will give Him no rest until He establish, and until He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. Of that time it is written, "Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise"; and again, "Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellence, a joy of many generations." (Isaiah 60-62.) And when all this is accomplished, when Jerusalem has been restored, and reinstated in the favour of Jehovah, her blessing will continue. Israel will thus behold the good of Jerusalem "all the days of his life."

As seen in an earlier Psalm, God's people were exhorted to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and their prayer will be abundantly answered. But what should be remarked is, that we have here the true sign of a healthy piety, viz., communion with the heart of God. Jehovah's affections are set upon Jerusalem, and consequently everyone that fears Him, and that walks in His ways, will also love Jerusalem. The promise, therefore, that such an one should see the good of Jerusalem all the days of his life is a blessed response of Jehovah's heart to the desire of His people which He Himself had begotten. To understand this for ourselves we have only to substitute the Church for Jerusalem. The Church is the dearest object of the heart of Christ, for He loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; and hence, whatever activity or apparent zeal and devotedness there may be in any of us, we cannot be in communion with the heart of Christ unless the Church is also the supreme object of our affections. Let us not shrink from the searching nature of the test.

The promised blessing is still further enlarged: "Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children." The favour of God will thus rest upon the posterity of His people, as indeed He

covenanted at the giving of the law — "showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments." This is the conclusion, as we understand the Psalms, of the true Israelite's blessing. As will be noticed, the word "and," after "children" is inserted. Omitting this, we read, with many others, the last clause, "Peace be upon Israel." (Compare again Galatians 6: 16.) If this be accepted, it is very beautiful, for the Psalm commences with divine blessing and closes with divine peace. What an inlet is thus opened out for us into the heart of God! And if He desires that peace should rest upon His own (see John 14: 27), we also should pray and labour to this end. Yea, "pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee"; or, as Paul writes to the saints at Corinth, "Be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

## 9 — Psalm 129.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### Israel's Retrospect.

AS has been before pointed out, Psalm 127 is the central psalm of the whole group of the Songs of Degrees. there being seven preceding and seven following. Psalm 128 is thus introductory to the last seven; and, as is often seen in the prophetic writings, it gives the final issue of God's ways with His people and of their exercises, before detailing their pathway of sorrow and distress by which they reached the goal. It presents a beautiful picture of earthly blessing consequent upon Jehovah's dwelling in Zion. In the present Psalm Israel reviews the past, and the first four verses contain the account of their sorrowful afflictions as a nation, combined with their confession of God's unchanging faithfulness:

1 Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth, may Israel now say:

2 Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth yet they have not prevailed against me.

3 The plowers plowed upon my back: they made long their furrows.

4 The Lord is righteous: He hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked.

The expression "from my youth," found in the first two verses, will refer to Israel's earliest days, the beginning of their history in the land of Egypt; and, tracing their career all down the centuries, they have to confess that many a time they had been afflicted by their enemies. The record of their sorrows and chastenings from this source is found, indeed, in almost every historical book of the Old Testament. And wherefore had they thus been afflicted? Scripture after scripture proclaims that it was because of their disobedience and rebellion, their refusal to walk in subjection to Jehovah their Redeemer. "If ye walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them; then . . . I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be My people. . . . But if ye will not hearken unto Me, and will not do all these commandments . . . I will set My face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies:

they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you," etc. (Lev. 26.)

Such is the invariable condition of enjoyed favour and blessing in all dispensations. It is equally so with Christians as with Israel; for the principles of God's government of His people are the same in all ages. If Israel therefore, has to utter this sad lamentation, it is yet the confession of their obstinate and stiff-necked forgetfulness of God's claims upon them as His redeemed people. Here, however, they recall their sorrows rather to magnify the faithfulness of God; for they add, after speaking of the afflictions they had suffered from their adversaries, "Yet they have not prevailed against me." The prophets are full of this blessed truth — that while God allowed, and indeed sent, nation after nation to overcome and chastise His rebellious people, He never wholly gave them up; but, watching over them with infinite tenderness and yearning of heart, He interposed again and again for their succour for His own name's sake. For example, we read, "The Lord saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter: for there was not any shut up, nor any left, nor any helper for Israel. And the Lord said not that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven: but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash." (2 Kings 14: 26, 27.) It was thus owing to the tender mercy of the Lord, to His covenanted faithfulness, that Israel could say, in looking back upon the oppressions of their enemies, "Yet they have not prevailed against me."

The illustration in the next verse does but intensify the character of their past sufferings. The *plowers* are named in verse 3, because, as the plough the earth, so the whip tears up the back. Long furrows will thus mean long stripes and wounds, A striking comment upon this description may be cited from Isaiah: "Why should ye be stricken any more? . . . from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores." (Isa. 1: 5, 6.)

But if Israel has endured these bitter sorrows under the rod of their enemies, they now confess that the Lord is righteous. In one word they justify God for all His past dealings with them, owning in this very expression that they had only received their deserts. As Nehemiah said, "Howbeit Thou art just [righteous] in all that is brought upon us; for Thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly," so now Israel owns that God has been righteous in all His ways; and this is surely the place of all blessing both for sinners and believers. When the awakened soul, like the dying malefactor, justifies God and condemns himself, he is on the eve of forgiveness and blessing; and when the believer under chastisement justifies God the end is reached; for he has "heard" the rod and who has appointed it. When Israel, therefore, says that the Lord is righteous it tells us that the object of God's past visitations in judgment has been attained, that His name has been magnified in His people's deliverance and blessing.

It is also possible that Israel celebrates Jehovah's righteousness, not only in His past dealings with them, but also in their present deliverance, for they add, "He hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked." The same double application of God's righteousness is seen in the Epistle to the Romans: it is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, and it is exemplified in the justification of those who believe in Jesus. The "cords" of the wicked will signify the bondage under which Israel had been subjected to the wicked. The kings of the earth and the rulers of the earth are said in Psalm 2 to take counsel together against the Lord, and

against His anointed, saying, "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us," that is, the bands and cords in which God held and restrained them. What Israel then proclaims is that God has emancipated them from their thralldom and servitude, and set them at liberty in their own land for His service.

The second part of the Psalm commences with verse 5, and contains the expression of Israel's desire for the confusion and defeat of the haters of Zion. To understand this it must be borne in mind that the haters of Zion are God's enemies. Zion has now (in these Psalms) become the dwelling-place of Jehovah and the seat of His throne. Hence it says in the preceding Psalm, as before noticed, "The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion"; and in Psalm 122, speaking of Jerusalem, the Psalmist says, "They shall prosper that love thee," for it was become the city of the great King. To hate Zion, therefore, was to take up a position of utter antagonism to God, and to His purposes of blessing for His people. What would answer to it now would be to hate the Church of the living God; for as we may see in the case of Saul of Tarsus, to entertain hatred against believers was to cherish enmity against Christ; for not only does He identify Himself with His own, but, as united to Him by the Holy Ghost, He regards them as a part of Himself, members of His body; and this explains the question which He addressed to Saul, "Why persecutest thou Me?" It was, consequently, to be in communion with God's mind — in that dispensation — for Israel to say, "Let them all be confounded and turned back that hate Zion." Indeed, when the throne of Christ is established in righteousness, all enemies will be put under His feet.

Then we have a further amplification of Israel's desire:

5 Let them all be confounded and turned back that hate Zion.

6 Let them be as the grass upon the housetops, which withereth afore it groweth up:

7 Wherewith the mower filleth not his hand; nor he that bindeth sheaves his bosom.

8 Neither do they which go by say, The blessing of the Lord be upon you: we bless you in the name of the Lord.

Isaiah uses the same illustration of grass upon the housetops to set forth God's judgment upon His enemies. He says, "They were as grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as corn blasted before it be grown up." (Isaiah 37: 27.) It is a figure to show the effect of judgment upon the haters of Zion. Under the wrath of God, it would soon be manifested that they were cut off from the sources of nourishment and life, and thus would wither away like, grass which has no depth of soil. There would be therefore no fruit, as it were, for God or man — nothing for the mower or for the binder of the sheaves.

It is, then, a solemn thing to hate what God loves; and let it be remembered that the carnal mind is enmity against God. No unconverted person, therefore, can love that on which the heart of God is set, and as such he is exposed to God's righteous judgment. But a further thing is here added: even the passers by, seeing the condition of these enemies of Zion, will refrain from giving the customary salutation, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you: we bless you in the

name of the Lord." When in communion with the mind of God, we can only reflect His attitude towards those by whom we may be surrounded, and we could not, for example, desire a blessing upon those who are under His judgment. It is now the day of grace, and we can and should pray for those whom the god of this world has blinded, but we could not desire their blessing *while in the state of active hostility towards the Lord and His people*. Thus the apostle John writes, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine ['the doctrine of Christ — the true teaching concerning the Person of Christ'], receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." (2 John 10, 11.)

It would help us greatly to perceive that the attitude of God towards all should govern the attitude of the Christian. The believer, indeed, in any dispensation is to represent God as revealed in that dispensation. Thus a Jew was to express the righteous Jehovah as made known to him, and a Christian is to display in his walk, conduct, and ways, the God of grace as revealed in Christ. To recollect this will greatly aid in the interpretation of the Psalms, as well as furnish the needed guidance in our coming into contact with believers and with the unconverted. It will scarcely need to be remarked, after what has been already said, that for the practical carrying out of this principle we must ourselves be walking in communion with God in the power of the Holy Ghost. To walk with God is the secret of all blessing and power.

## 10 — Psalm 130.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### De Profundis; or, Out of Darkness into Light.

IF in the preceding Psalm Israel recalls the sorrows through which they had passed, in connection with the oppression of their enemies, this describes the distress and anguish occasioned by the sense of their own sins. The structure of the Psalm is very simple. As with its predecessor, it is divided into two equal parts of four verses; but these again, as will at once be perceived, are subdivided. Thus the first two verses set forth the state of the soul under the sense of its sins; the next two express confidence in the Lord notwithstanding the consciousness of guilt; verses 5 and 6 give the sure ground of the soul's confidence, together with the persevering character of its expectation; while the last two contain an exhortation to Israel, founded upon the assurance of Jehovah's grace, and the certainty of a full and complete redemption from all their iniquities. Another thing of interest to the student of Scripture may be mentioned. In this and the preceding Psalm together, the name of Jehovah is used seven times; in this Jehovah is found four times, Jah\* once (in verse 3), and Adonai three times — eight names of God in all, corresponding with the number of the verses, although in two verses the name is absent. The reader should learn that the slightest detail of the inspired Word may be fruitful in instruction and profit.

\*The name Jah is probably a shortened poetic form of Jehovah.

To return to the subject of the Psalm, what can be sadder than the condition indicated in the opening words, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord"? But yet it is the indispensable requisite for the enjoyment of God's favour. For what had brought Israel into the

depths?\*" It was their sins, their iniquities; and there never can be hope for any until they, like Israel, are brought to feel and own their guilt. To be in the depths, therefore, is a blessed place when it is the consequence of a work of the Spirit of God. Jonah, for example, before his deliverance, had to cry, "For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about; all Thy billows and Thy waves passed over me." The deeper indeed a soul gets down before God under the sense of its sin, the more certain is it to enter upon a signal and glorious deliverance. Let none, therefore, ever attempt to shorten the exercises of a convicted soul, for there cannot be too deep a sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

\*In Roman Catholic graveyards it is a common thing to see "De Profundis" on the tombstones; and thus through ignorance, or worse, the passage is perverted to sustain the doctrine of Purgatory. On one occasion the writer of these lines, passing through a cemetery in a foreign land, was oppressed with sorrow at the repetition of these words.\* Entering, however, a little enclosure at one end, which he found was charitably set apart for the interment of Protestants, the first words which met his gaze were, "I am the resurrection and the life." It was like passing out of darkness into light.

But if Israel were in the depths, he turned to the Lord. This is the blessed fruit of grace, even as the publican, who, though he would not so much as lift up his eyes unto heaven in the deep feeling of his utter unworthiness, yet, as he smote upon his breast, cried, "God be merciful to me a sinner." So Israel, in our Psalm, cried, "Lord, hear my voice: let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications." Such is the sure pathway to blessing, for as soon as the sinner's eye is directed to the Lord faith has sprung up, however feebly, in the soul, and the light of the coming day has already begun to dispel the darkness by which it has been enshrouded. The importance of these two things — conviction of sin and turning to God — cannot be over-estimated, and is earnestly commended to all who are passing through exercises similar to those of Israel.

Especial attention should be given to the next two verses:

3 If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.

First, then, there is the confession of the holiness of God, and of the desert of sin. Not one on the face of the whole earth could be before God's all-searching eye on the ground of his own merits. It is an immense thing when the soul perceives this, for then there will be no attempt at self-justification, but a frank and full acknowledgement that it, is amenable to the righteous judgment of God. This gives God His place, and puts the soul, at the same time, into its only proper place before God. Together with this, Israel has learned that there is grace in the heart of God to meet its need. As we know, the cross of Christ is the foundation, the righteous basis, on which grace can be exercised and dispensed. It is in virtue of the perfect and the finished work of Christ, which was accomplished there, and by which God was glorified in respect to all that we had done and were, that He can now be just and the Justifier of every believer. This is one of the elements of Christian knowledge; but it is a little remarkable to find Israel, before their final deliverance, even if in the land, in the apprehension of grace. Here, however, it is, and not only

so, but the object of forgiveness is before the soul — "that Thou mayest be feared." One of the modern taunts (as, indeed, it was also in the apostle's days) against the doctrine of grace is that it relaxes the obligation to a holy life. Even Israel will know better than this, for they will understand, what every true Christian has learned, that nothing binds the heart to God or gives it such a sense of moral responsibility as God's sovereign unmerited favour in Christ. The constraining power of the love of Christ is a mightier influence than all the legal enactments that were ever ordained. But to understand this the heart must be in the enjoyment of the love of Christ, and to this, alas! the objectors to grace are strangers.

In the next two verses we have the soul's attitude and confidence:

5 I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope.

6 My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning.

Such waiting on the Lord could only spring from the confidence of faith. The word so translated, indeed, means "to hope that a thing will be effected, and to wait steadily and patiently till it is effected." Everywhere in the Scriptures, especially in the Gospels, perseverance is seen to be a characteristic of genuine faith. Assured, therefore, that there was forgiveness with the Lord, the Psalmist waits upon Him until he enters upon the enjoyment of the desired blessing. And he tells us, moreover, the ground of his expectation: "and in His word do I hope." It was this which encouraged him to wait on,\* because having the word of God as the foundation of his trust, he knew that he would not be confounded. So we read in John's Epistle, "If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us; and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." Knowing this, we can wait on, wait His time, calmly resting upon His word, as in our Psalm.

\*The word rendered "hope" is often given as "wait," though not the same word as in the former part of the verse. It "imports properly a long and patient waiting," combined with the expectation of the thing waited for.

The eager character of the waiting here is described in the next verse, wherein he tells us, and intensifies the statement by its repetition, that he waited for the Lord more longingly than a night sentinel looked for the dawn of the coming day. It was thus a waiting from which all doubt had been dispelled, and in which he already anticipated the fruition of his hope. We may surely glean instruction for ourselves from this blessed attitude of soul. It is a day of much public and united prayer. Week after week God's people are gathered together to pour out their hearts before Him in supplication and intercession. Suffer, then, the question whether there be this waiting on the Lord in the confidence of faith for the answers to the prayers. Is there not a danger of being satisfied with having prayed, and of having too little regard to the waiting for the blessings sought? We might well ponder upon the earnestness of faith, the certainty of the confidence indicated here, as we challenge our own souls in seeking to answer the above questions.

The next verse is but the consequence of the undoubting expectation expressed in verses 5, 6: "Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption." It is as if he said, "Do not doubt for one moment as to the issue of our present

sorrows. Already I see, in the exercise of faith, the breaking up of the clouds, and the outshining of God's grace and unchanging faithfulness. Trust Him still, wait on, and we shall find that He will, without fail, interpose for our deliverance even beyond our most sanguine expectations."

Remark, moreover, that although the speaker is not yet in the enjoyment of what he seeks, he can confidently testify as to what is in the heart of God for His people. "With the Lord," he says, "there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption." What an immovable foundation his faith had reached! It was not Israel's state, nor his own prayers, but it was the immutability of Jehovah's love which begat and sustained his confidence. He had learned the blessed lesson that God would act, not according to His people's need, but according to His own heart, according to Himself. It is similar to what we find in the Ephesians, where the apostle tells us that "God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ," etc. It is thus that the Psalmist can speak, not of redemption merely, but of plenteous redemption. It will be, he is fully assured, a redemption worthy of God Himself, and consequently beyond all His people's thoughts and expectation.

The last verse goes still further: "And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

We understand this to go far beyond interposing for their present succour and deliverance; and, in fact, to include the history of Israel to the end. Jehovah will "redeem" Israel for ever from the consequences of their sins; or to put it in other words, it is a full and final redemption which is here contemplated, and not only that which is governmental. It will be the fulfilment of the word of the angel to Joseph And thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins." The Jehovah of our Psalm is this Jesus; and, on the ground of His one sacrifice, His finished work which was wrought out at Calvary, He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. Blessed be His glorious name for ever! And oh! that every reader of these lines may be constrained, in the power of the Holy Ghost, to say from the heart, Amen and Amen!

## **11 — Psalm 131.**

### **A Song of Degrees for David.**

#### **A Weaned Spirit.**

AN intimate moral connection between this and the foregoing Psalm may readily be detected. The state of soul here indicated is, indeed, the result and consequence of the exercises there depicted. Making the necessary allowance for the dispensation under which David lived, it might be almost said that what is here presented is characteristic of enjoyed deliverance. In one sense, however, Psalm 130 is an advance upon Romans 7; for, as it has been well remarked, the sorrow here is not "merely" legal distress. Confidence in Jehovah characterises it, though accompanied by depth of distress and humiliation. This is the effect of the connection of the sense of sin and of mercy in the soul. Mere legal distress is more selfish in its terror, though admirable for destroying confidence in self and throwing on mercy; conviction with the sense of mercy is more the sense of wronging the God of goodness." This is a most important distinction; and, it may be added, the deeper the exercises thus produced, the more durable and settled the peace to which they conduct the soul. Unshaken confidence in the Lord is expressed in the last

verses of the preceding Psalm, and hence the soul, although it may yet have to wait for the consummation of its hopes, can rest upon the mercy of which it has been assured, and in the certainty of a full and everlasting redemption. The end is thus already secured to faith, and the soul, chastened by its past sorrow and exercise, can quietly lie low at the Lord's feet, abasing itself there that He, and He alone, may be exalted.

This will explain the language of the first two verses:

1 Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me.

2 Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.

This is the language of David himself, as the title shows, but of David as the vessel of the Spirit to express what in a future day will be suited to the feelings and experiences of Israel in their then circumstances. It is on this account that, in all these personal exercises, Israel is so often named and addressed. David becomes in this way a representative of the nation, or, at least, of the spared remnant which will in that day occupy the place of the nation before God. Understanding this, we may, for our own profit, consider these words in their application to ourselves individually.

Let it be observed, then, first of all, that David speaks to and before the Lord. It is as under His all-searching eye that he says, "My heart is not haughty." He is therefore characterised by the true heart, of which we read in Hebrews 10 To say that his heart was not haughty, nor his eyes lofty, conveys the thought of his humility. Constantly we find that nothing is more abhorrent to the Lord than pride and high looks. We read, for example: "Him that hath an high look and a proud heart will not I suffer." (Psalm 101.) Humility, on the other hand, is as often commended: "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." (Isaiah 57: 15.) Yea, as the Lord Himself said: "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18.) Humility and meekness, indeed (and they are twin graces), are the two blessed moral traits in our Lord's own example, which are presented to us as the pathway to finding rest to our souls. Nothing, therefore, speaks so distinctly of a powerful work of grace in the soul as the possession of humility. It is the sure product of the sanctifying power of the truth, and hence the infallible sign of growing conformity to Christ. Thus to get down ever lower is to get morally ever closer to Him. May we all learn the lesson in this day of independence and self-seeking even among Christians. When will it be apprehended that one of being filled with the Spirit is submitting ourselves one to another in the fear of God?

It is but a fruit of this humble-mindedness that we find in the next clause: "Neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me." The humble soul is distinguished by an absence of reasoning; he is content to leave the management and issue of all things to the hands of the Lord. He would not govern his circumstances if he could; nor does he desire to probe into second causes. Rather, connecting everything with the Lord's ordering, he maintains

the posture of waiting quietly before Him, and he is thus satisfied with all His arrangements. How many there are who get off the ground of dependence through their eagerness to penetrate into these great matters, and to be able to explain the things that are too high for them! What have we to do with either the one or the other? Even the blessed Lord, at the moment of His rejection, turned to the Father and said: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. *Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight.*" And this — "it seemed good in Thy sight" — will be the sheet anchor of our souls if we are characterised by the same features as those which distinguished the Psalmist.

In the next verse we perceive the condition of soul out of which the traits of verse I have sprung. There are two things to be noticed: the first is stated absolutely — my soul is even as a weaned child; and, secondly, he behaved and quieted himself as such. Much, and even profound instruction may be gathered from these points. In regard to the first, it will be admitted by all that weanedness of spirit should characterise every Christian. It is of importance, therefore, to ascertain how it is produced. In the case before us, assuming the connection with the previous Psalm, it is the result of finding what God is for His people, what He is in grace for them when they have passed through their sorrowful exercises on account of their sins. Redeemed from all their iniquities and delivered from the enemy's power, the Lord has become the portion of their hearts; and in the enjoyment of this satisfying portion they are practically weaned from everything else. It is so with believers now: once let them discover what Christ can be to their hearts, let Him have the supremacy there, so that He "sups" with them and they with Him, and every attraction and allurements which this world can present will lose their power. Weanedness is thus in this way the effect of the enjoyment of Christ Himself.

There is, however, another method. In the case of some this spiritual condition is only reached through discipline. The Lord loves His people, and when they turn aside to other objects, or if they fail to respond to His call to come to Him, He often steps in with chastenings, blights for them their earthly prospects, dims the brightness of this world, and allures them into the wilderness, where He speaks "comfortably" unto them, discovers Himself to their hearts, and satisfies them with Himself. In both cases alike the power which produces the weaned condition is Christ, Christ known and delighted in by the soul. True, the pathway to this goal lies through death, death applied morally to all that we are, so that we might be free to enter upon the wealthy inheritance which, through the grace of God, is made ours in Christ. Let us earnestly seek this desirable state, for it is the secret both of the enjoyment of the heavenly life and of power in conflict with the artifices of Satan.

Secondly, the Psalmist says that he behaved and quieted himself as a child that is weaned of his mother. This points to the fact that watchfulness and spiritual energy will always be necessary to maintain the weaned state. For just as the weaned child will, especially at the outset, long for its accustomed nourishment, so the believer, if not kept on his guard in the power of the Spirit, will often be tempted to fall back upon his old enjoyments, just as Israel, when in the wilderness, were continually craving after the "flesh pots" of Egypt. It is on this account that the need arises to be so walking in the presence of God as that we may discern the real character of every temptation with which we may be plied. Let us never forget, then, the dangers by which

we are surrounded, or that constant diligence is required, diligence in the Spirit, to behave and quiet ourselves as those who are weaned of their mother.

The lesson of the whole Psalm, and indeed that also of the foregoing Psalm (v. 7), is contained in the last verse:

3 Let Israel hope in the Lord from henceforth and for ever.

This exhortation gathers great force when it is remembered that it proceeds from the Psalmist's own experience. Having found for himself that the Lord may be trusted at all times, that none that wait for Him are ever ashamed, he says in effect, "Never give up your confidence in Jehovah; He will never disappoint your expectations. He may test you, keep you waiting, pass you through many sorrows and trials, but He will never forget you or give you up. Always, therefore, hope in the Lord from henceforth and for ever." This is a very blessed exhortation, and one which we also, dear Christian reader, would do well to lay to heart. For we are often beset with difficulties and temptations, and, like Peter, when we see that the wind is boisterous we begin to sink. Here there is the sure and efficacious antidote to all fear and unbelief: Hope in the Lord, and never cease to hope in Him, whatever the gloomy appearances of present circumstances. For He abides faithful, He cannot deny Himself, and He has said concerning Israel, "The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee. neither shall My covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy upon thee." All that He is, therefore, presses the exhortation upon us to hope in Him henceforth and for ever.

## 11 — Psalm 132.

### A Song of Degrees.

#### Zion and God's Rest.

BEFORE entering upon the consideration of this beautiful Psalm, the moral connection with its two predecessors may be briefly indicated. In Psalm 130 we have the sure path of deliverance. It begins with "the depths" of sorrow and distress, and it closes with the assurance that the Lord will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. In the next our attention is called to that weanedness of spirit which ever marks the enjoyment of deliverance, together with that unshaken confidence in the Lord which deliverance always begets in the soul. Then we find in our Psalm the subject of the habitation for the mighty One of Jacob, of Zion, which God had chosen as His rest for ever. Until deliverance is known and enjoyed there could be no apprehension of the truth of God's habitation.

As a key to the understanding of the whole Psalm, the following words are cited, and should be carefully weighed: "The three principles of government had been brought out in Israel. First, *direct* responsibility to God under priesthood. That had failed under Eli, and that was Ichabod. It was over with Israel on the ground of their own responsibility. Then God intervened by a prophet. That He could still do; it was a sovereign act. But that failed; so did royalty as set

up by the people. Then we have royalty as power in grace, as it will be in Christ, and the lost ark brought back. This is what we have in this Psalm."\*

\* *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 6. New edition, revised.

Understanding this, and thus viewing David as a type of Christ, we shall enter more fully into the striking and touching appeal, or prayer, contained in the first five verses:

1 Lord, remember David, and all his afflictions:

2 How he swore unto the Lord, and vowed unto the mighty God of Jacob;

3 Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed;

4 I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids,

5 Until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.

The ground, then, on which this appeal is based is David and all his afflictions. It is these the Spirit of God calls, as it were, to the remembrance of Jehovah — David and all the sorrows and the persecutions he passed through when he was the anointed and yet rejected king. So now, how grateful it is to the heart of God when His people remind Him of the rejection and sufferings of His beloved Son; and as they dwell upon Him as so presented, as the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, they are led into the enjoyment of God's own delight in the One who endured all, even the death of the cross, to glorify Him, and to find out a resting-place for Him throughout all eternity. Let us ever remember it, that it is not ourselves nor our blessings that we are to present in our priestly service, but Christ and His afflictions. We need to learn the lesson, that we may lose sight of ourselves in all the acceptability and fragrance of Christ when we are before our God.

David and his afflictions are, then, in what they typify, the efficacious foundation on which all the hopes of Israel, and the hopes of God's people in all ages, rest; for they furnish a plea which ever commands the ear and the heart of God.

The next four verses contain the record of the oath and the vow of David respecting the habitation of the mighty One of Jacob. There is no historical record of this solemn transaction between David and his God; but we do find that not only was his heart set upon the ark, but also that he desired to build for it an habitation. "See now," said the king to Nathan the prophet, "I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains." This was doubtless the expression of the purpose which David had formed, as mentioned in our Psalm, a purpose which God commended, though He did not permit His servant to execute it. (1 Kings 8: 18, 19.) The desire, indeed, was according to God (v. 13), and David was thus in communion with God's own thoughts. This may perhaps explain the term, here twice connected with Jehovah, "the mighty One of Jacob," a term which was first used by Jacob himself when blessing his twelve sons before his death, and in connection, moreover, with Joseph, who, though the archers had sorely grieved him, shot at him, and hated him, had his arms made strong by the hands of "the mighty

One of Jacob." Through rejection he had been exalted, as the One he foreshadowed has been, and will yet be even in this world. David, therefore, had travelled back to the beginning, and in communion with God's purposes had desired to become the vessel for their accomplishment in the kingdom. His heart was thus where God's heart was, and hence the acceptability of his vow to God.

In the two following verses we have the Spirit of God in the elect remnant of Israel. Looking upon the vow of David as already performed (for we are here in the field of prophecy), they exclaim:

6 Lo, we heard of it at Ephratah: we found it in the fields of the wood.

7 We will go into His tabernacles: we will worship at His footstool.

Ephratah is the ancient name of Bethlehem, as may be seen from many scriptures.\* (See, for example, Ruth 4: 11; 1 Samuel 1: 1; Micah 5: 2, etc.) This makes it all the more remarkable, in that it goes back to a time previous to David's accession to the throne. The reference is undoubtedly to the ark, concerning which David said, when consulting with his people as to bringing "again the ark of our God to us," "We enquired not at it in the days of Saul." It seems clear, therefore, that David from his earliest days, when he dwelt with his father at Bethlehem, was characterised by attachment to the ark; and that his bringing it to Zion was but the expression of his early affection. The Spirit of God recalls this here to the minds of His people, and endorses it with His approbation. At Ephratah they had only heard of the ark, but they found it, when David was king and determined to bring it to Zion, in the fields of the wood, that is, in Kirjath-jearim, "city of the woods," whither it had been taken after the Lord had smitten the men of Beth-shemesh for looking into it, when it was restored by the Philistines. (1 Samuel 6: 19-21.)

\* One writer, however, says that the Ephratah of this Psalm "seems to be certainly not Bethlehem . . . but the district in which Kirjath-jearim was situated, Caleb-ephratah." (1 Chr. 2: 24.) But we prefer the interpretation given in the text.

"Found" in the fields of the wood, it was eventually brought with great joy and rejoicing to the city of David, where the king had pitched for it a tent (1 Chronicles 15); and this event is regarded in our Psalm as prophetic of the final establishment of the habitation of the mighty One of Jacob. As yet, historically, there was only the ark within its tent, but for faith this was the pledge for the erection of the house (compare Hebrews 12: 22-24); and hence the Spirit of God can lead the hearts of His willing people to say, "We will go into His tabernacles: we will worship at His footstool." David was in communion with the mind of God in the oath which he swore unto the Lord, and the people are in communion with him; and thus faith being in lively exercise, that faith which substantiates the things hoped for, they are in spirit already within the sacred precincts of the house, and bending low before Jehovah with adoration.

The next three verses introduce a change: the address is now again to Jehovah, containing the desires of His people as they "worship at His footstool":

8 Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy strength.

9 Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness; and let Thy saints shout for joy.

10 For Thy servant David's sake turn not away the face of Thine anointed.

Such is the prayer which is presented by God's people when, at least to faith, they are within the habitation which has been raised for the mighty One of Jacob. It is very interesting to notice the almost entire correspondence between it and the words of Solomon at the dedication of the temple. "Now therefore," he said, "arise O Lord God, into Thy resting place, Thou, and the ark of Thy strength: let Thy priests, O Lord God, be clothed with salvation, and let Thy saints rejoice in goodness. O Lord God, turn not away the face of Thine anointed: remember the mercies of David Thy servant." (2 Chr. 6: 41, 42.) Both alike were taught of the Spirit, and in both alike, even if they do not fully embrace (as we shall see they did not), the whole extent of the grace of God's heart, there is communion with Jehovah's own desires and purposes. This, indeed, is the secret of efficacious prayer, as the Lord Himself taught His disciples, "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15: 7.) Numerous illustrations of this truth may be gleaned from every part of the word of God. (See, for example, 2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 62, etc.)

The divine intelligence of the prayer in verse 8 will at once be perceived if we compare it for a moment with what is recorded in Numbers 10. There we read that "they [the children of Israel] departed from the mount of the Lord three days' journey: and the ark of the Lord went before them in the three days' journey, to search out a resting place for them . . . And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee," etc. (vv. 33-36.) This is, as has been well said, "a beautiful picture of the tender and precious grace of Him who, if He makes us to pass through the wilderness for our good, does not fail to be with us there, and who takes care, in putting out His sheep, to go before them, and to solace them with His love. Mighty Leader of His people by the way, He is their joy and their glory when He comes to rest in their midst."\* And it may also be remarked that in this incident we have a striking foreshadowing of the fact that the Lord Jesus went the three days' journey, through death, to find out a resting-place for His people; and hence it is that there remains a rest for them, God's own rest, at the end of the wilderness journey, and that they who believe enter into this rest. (See Hebrews 4.)

*\*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, vol. 1.*

*But the point to be observed in connection with our Psalm is the contrast.* In the wilderness it was, "Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered"; here it is, "Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy strength." For to faith the goal was reached as soon as the ark was brought to Zion, and all the enemies were scattered. This, indeed, will be actually the case before Messiah, as the Priest upon His throne, shall build His temple and bear the glory. (Zechariah 6: 12, 13.) It is not till then that the words of this Psalm will have their complete realization.

Leaving the details of the petitions until we consider the abounding grace in the answer vouchsafed, it may now be observed again that the ground of the plea is still David. "For Thy servant David's sake turn not away the face of Thine anointed." The believer will enter into this, inasmuch as he knows that all his prayers are only heard as presented in and through the One

whom David typifies. What power and what perseverance in prayer this should give to the Lord's people, as they remember that they can plead all the infinite acceptability of Christ Himself before God! Yea, He has said, "If ye shall ask anything in My name, I will do it." (John 14: 14.)

From verse 11 to the end we have the response of Jehovah to the cry of His people.\* The promise to David flowing out from verse 10 is twofold, absolute, and conditional. In verse 11 it is the expression of the divine purpose, "The Lord hath sworn in truth unto David, He will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne." Historically speaking, this might be said to have been fulfilled in the accession of Solomon; but in view of the prophetic character of the whole Psalm, Christ as the Son of David is doubtless here included. In verse 12, where the condition of keeping Jehovah's covenant and testimony is annexed, it is David's natural heirs. The same distinction is drawn in 2 Samuel 7: 12-16. (Compare also 1 Kings 2: 4; 1 Chronicles 17: 11-14, 28: 3-6.) Thus when Christ, as the Son of David, is before the mind of the Spirit, the promise is unconditional, because it is the announcement of God's purpose in grace; but when David's children, his immediate descendants, are in view, their continuance upon his throne is made dependent upon their responsibility — upon their keeping God's law, and walking according to His commandments.

\*Some would divide this into two parts, taking verses 11-13 as the basis of the answer contained in verses 14-18; but we prefer to regard the whole as the divine response to the petitions in verses 8-10.

Thereupon the ground of Jehovah's oath to David is stated, "For the Lord hath chosen Zion; He hath desired it for His habitation. This is My rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it." (vv. 13, 14.) If, therefore, David brought the ark to Zion, he was but accomplishing the purpose of God. Not that this was the full realization of it, for, as another has said, "The peace he (David) enjoyed was but transitory. The establishment of the ark on the hill of Zion formed, however, an epoch; for Mount Zion was the seat of royal grace, where the king who had suffered — and as having suffered — had established his throne in power and grace with respect to Israel. This is the key to Rev. 14, a book in which the Lamb is always (as it appears to me) the Messiah who has suffered, but who is seated on the throne of God while waiting for the manifestation of His glory." From these remarks it will be readily gathered that the fulfilment of the words of our Psalm will only be seen in the day of the glory of Christ, when He shall have taken His great power, and will have established His kingdom. It is of this glorious day that the prophet writes when he says, "Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee." (Isaiah 12: 6.)

Two things thus follow: first, that Zion is the election of God's sovereign grace; and secondly, that there, when Christ is King, will be His full earthly rest. Believers of this period know that there is another and a higher rest, that to which allusion has already been made, as set forth in the Epistle to the Hebrews. But whether in Zion or in heaven, it is connected with Christ; in the former, with Christ as God's anointed King, whom He will set upon His holy hill of Zion; in the latter, with Christ as seated at His own right hand, glorified there in virtue of His having glorified God in all that He is through His work upon the cross. In Him God has found His infinite satisfaction and delight, and in Him He will rest for ever, and we also, through His grace,

shall participate in His rest. Blessed, boundless prospect, and one that will surely animate the hearts of God's pilgrim host with courage, and fill them with unspeakable joy!

Another thing will be observed. All the blessing promised in answer to the prayer in verses 8-10 flows from, or is connected with, the accomplishment of God's counsel respecting Zion, finding His rest, and dwelling there. It was so in principle from the moment God brought His people out of the land of Egypt. "Let them," He said, "make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them"; and again, speaking of the very time of our Psalm, "My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Exodus 25; Ezekiel 37.) But great as will be the blessing of this future day on the earth, it is only when the new heaven and the new earth have come upon the scene that God's eternal thoughts will be realized; for it is then that the proclamation is made, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God." (Rev. 21.) But whatever the period or dispensation, it is still true that all blessing is dependent upon God's rest and His dwelling in the midst of His people.

We may now proceed to consider the answers God gives to the prayers of His people; and we shall see how in every case He abundantly exceeds their requests. Thus in verse 8 they had said, "Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy strength." In response, Jehovah says, "This is My rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it"; and, moreover, He adds, "I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread." With God dwelling in their midst, His people surely could not lack, for it is in His heart to bless them at all times beyond their utmost desires. Thus the Lord when upon earth challenged His disciples as He asked them, "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing? And they said, Nothing." No, His presence secured everything for them, as it ever does when we apprehend and count upon it. We can understand, therefore, this bountiful promise of Jehovah's grace, as we also sorrowfully confess that we, like Israel of old, often limit our God by our unbelief. Meditate much, then, upon the words, "I will *abundantly* bless her provision: I will satisfy her *poor* with bread." Let us remember, at the same time, that it is the *poor* who are thus satisfied.

In verse 9 the prayer had been, "Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness; and let Thy saints shout for joy." The answer is, "I will also clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy." (v. 16.) The righteous Lord loveth righteousness; and it was according to God's mind that this prayer should be offered for His priests; but He in the sovereignty of His grace can magnify His word above all His name, and promise that they shall be clothed with His salvation — His "full, complete, and final deliverance."\* Observe another thing: faith had said "Thy priests" and "Thy saints," and truly they were Jehovah's; but in the response He says "her" (Zion's) priests and "her" saints. Jehovah thus identifies Himself with Zion, and ascribes to her that which belonged to Him. It is the blessed association of Zion and the priests and saints with Himself. The Christian will understand this, knowing as he does how completely he is associated with Christ in every aspect and relationship, and how the Lord shares with His own all that He Himself has acquired in virtue of redemption, so that they can be described as "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."

\* The shouting "aloud" for joy is hardly justified, for, in fact, it is the same word both in verse 9 and verse 16. It will bear the translation of shouting aloud, but then it should be so rendered in both verses.

Further, it is added, "There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for Mine anointed. His enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish." The simplest reader will at once perceive that these expressions will only find their realization in the establishment of God's King upon His holy hill of Zion; when all God's counsels concerning His Anointed, concerning His chosen people, and concerning the nations of the earth, will have their full accomplishment. It is of this period, and the promised blessings in connection with it, that Psalm 72 speaks, when Messiah's "name shall endure for ever: His name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in Him: all nations shall call Him blessed." (v. 17.)

The following remarks of another will fitly conclude our meditations upon this Psalm. "The place of Christ's glory (Zion), which is God's rest, where He dwells, God owns is His for ever. . . . And faith looks at all connected with it, priests and saints, as God's — 'Thy priests' and 'Thy saints.' But then He, taking Christ for the resting-place of His glory, and contemplating the place of His dwelling and rest and habitation (that is, for us, the Church, which is His habitation, His tabernacle, His city, holy Jerusalem) He having thus so associated Himself with her (compare Eph. 3: 21, and Rev. 21: 3), looks it the priests and saints as her priests and her saints, thus specially showing His delight in her, His identification with her. . . . *Then* it is He sets up the glory of David's horn, the glory of the power and rule of the Beloved; and this (while David is the foundation, His everlasting glory the result) is the subject of the Psalm — Zion — for us, the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is His rest, His dwelling-place for ever, His desire, what He has chosen. And if He fully glorifies His Anointed (as He will and must do), it is there He will do it. Though His name flourish in Himself (for His person must be the ground and centre of glory), yet its place is in the city of grace and glory. Her priests, her saints, will have salvation and abundant joy."

Thus all God's ways on the earth, we may add, will result in the glory of His beloved Son, as His Anointed King, and in the blessing of His people. We may therefore say with full hearts, "And blessed be His glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory; Amen, and Amen."

## **12 — Psalms 133, 134.**

### **A Song of Degrees of David.**

#### **A Song of Degrees.**

#### **Unity and Praise.**

SO intimately are these two Psalms connected, that it will be profitable to consider them together. For faith, the habitation of God and the rest of God have been reached in Zion, the place of His sovereign election; and there, moreover, He has set His King upon His holy hill.

Full and complete blessing is the result, and upon His Anointed, His enemies being put to shame, His crown will for ever flourish. The state of restored Israel is now depicted, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" Ephraim shall no more vex Judah, nor shall Judah again vex Ephraim (Isaiah 11: 13), but they shall be "one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all." (Ezekiel 37: 22.)

So was it after Pentecost. In Acts 2, when, according to promise, the Holy Ghost came down to dwell with and in believers, God's new habitation was formed; and immediately after we read that the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of One soul (Acts 4: 32), a unity which could only have been produced by, and displayed in, the power of that Spirit which they had received; a unity, too, which involved, as they were afterwards to learn, oneness with Christ, as their glorified Head, as well as with one another. Indeed, it is only the sense of union with Christ that could lead to brethren dwelling together in unity. But it is the fact, rather, which here we are invited to contemplate, and the acceptability of the fact to God Himself; for it is the Holy Spirit who calls our attention to this "good and "pleasant" spectacle.

We might well humble ourselves in the dust before God, as we are reminded of the contrast to all this which is presented by believers of the present day. "That they all may be one" was the Lord's own desire; and for the brief period alluded to in Acts 4 this desire was realized — but ever since that day the Church of God, as to its outward position in the world, has gone on being divided and subdivided in such a way that the divine original has been almost entirely obscured even from the minds of Christians. While, however, we deplore this work of the enemy, let us never forget what God's thoughts are, and never fail in our own circle of fellowship to remember how acceptable it is to God to see His people walking in fellowship, and endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace. And we might also remember that it is the Lord Himself who has said, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13: 35.)

The very symbol used in the next verse does but intensify the divine estimate of the manifested unity of the saints: "It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments as the dew of Hermon, [and as the dew] that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." (vv. 2, 3.) The reference in this emblematical language is doubtless to the anointing oil which was poured upon Aaron's head on the day of his consecration (Exodus 29: 7), and which, flowing down to the lowermost borders of his priestly robe, filled the scene with its fragrance. The composition of, and the directions concerning, this "precious ointment" are given in Exodus 30; but the point to be observed here is, that precious as were the odour and fragrance of this ointment at the consecration of Aaron, so precious and fragrant before God are His people when dwelling together in unity.

If, however, the reference is to the consecration of Aaron, the allusion is also prophetic in its fullest and richest significance. The apostle Peter uses language, in fact, which justifies this interpretation. Speaking of the resurrection of Christ, he says, "Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." (Acts 2: 33.) Not that he is speaking here of the unity of

the saints, but we cite his language as an illustration of the fact that Christ, having received of the Father the promised Holy Ghost, bestowed Him upon all that believed on Him as the risen and exalted One: the Spirit thus flowed down from Christ "to the skirts of His garments," uniting His people to Himself, and filling the house with the fragrance of their exhibited unity. Let the two things be recalled and emphasised: first, that it is the Holy Spirit as coming down from our exalted Head who produces the unity; and, secondly, that it is only in the power of the same Spirit that the unity can be displayed.

Another figure is then introduced: it is "as the dew of Hermon [omitting the inserted words] that descended upon the mountains of Zion." The connection of Hermon here with Zion has been the occasion of much conjecture; but the following words, borrowed from another, give, in our judgment, the true explanation The abundant dew of Hermon, that is, abundant as on Hermon, fell upon the mountain of Zion.\*

\*"The snow on the summit of this mountain (Hermon) condenses the vapours that float during the summer in the higher regions of the atmosphere, causing light clouds to hover around it, and abundant dew to descend on it, while the whole country elsewhere is parched, and the whole heaven elsewhere cloudless."

Dew is constantly used in Scripture as an emblem of blessing and refreshment descending from heaven. Thus Moses says, "My speech shall distil as the dew"; and in Hosea we read, "I will be as the dew unto Israel." (Hosea 14.) In addition, therefore, to the sweet fragrance of dwelling together in unity, produced by the mighty and unhindered action of the Holy Ghost come down from our exalted and glorified Head, there is a further thought of God's favour descending upon His people like the dew, which, resting upon them, brings reviving and refreshment to them all.

Then, lastly, it is said, with the mention of Zion, "For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." Two things here require notice: first, that there is a place of blessing, which is, in this instance, Zion; and the reason is found in what has been seen in the preceding Psalm, viz., that "the Lord hath chosen Zion; He hath desired it for His habitation. This is My rest for ever: here will I dwell: for I have desired it." We thus learn once again that God's blessing is to be found where He dwells, in His own habitation; and it may be needful to remark, for the instruction of some, that God's "spiritual house" is now built up with "living stones," with those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, and have come to Him as the Living Stone. (1 Peter 2: 3-5.) As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." (Eph. 2: 22.) In a future day Zion will be Jehovah's dwelling-place, and, on this account, it will be the place of blessing; but now it is the Church which is the house of God. (1 Timothy 3: 15.) In both cases alike it is the presence of God in His habitation which secures the blessing.

The second thing is the character of the blessing, which is "life for evermore" — eternal life. There is only one other place where eternal life is mentioned in the Old Testament, and this is in Daniel 12: 2. This is eternal life in the sense in which the Lord Himself uses the words in Matthew 25: 46, that is, eternal life for His earthly people according to the revelation of God, which they will enjoy under the sway of their glorious Messiah. Eternal life, which is connected

with the revelation of the Father in and through the Son, is reserved for believers of this period (John 17: 3); and the enjoyment of this with the apostles was really fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1: 3.) Such is the full sense of eternal life as set forth in John's Gospel; but the eternal life on which the believers of a future day will enter will be as perfect in their relationship to Jehovah, even if of another character, as that which Christians possess through their heavenly association with Christ in His own place and relationship. (John 20: 17.)

In the last Psalm of this series we pass to a summons to bless the Lord:

1 Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.

2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord.

In the account of the organisation of the temple services we read of the "singers, chief of the fathers of the Levites, who remaining in the chambers were free: for they were employed in that work day and night" (1 Chr. 9: 33); and again of the Levites, who were "to stand every morning to thank and to praise the Lord, and likewise at even." (1 Chr. 23: 30.) Now that the Lord has found His rest in Zion, He will "inhabit" the praises of His people; and, all ordered according to His own mind, the Spirit can call upon His servants to bless Him who giveth songs in the night. It is remarkable that they should be here described as by night standing in Jehovah's house, but it would seem to refer to the fact that at this time there will be perpetual praise. The sorrows of Israel will then be over, and basking, as they will then do, in the full rays of Jehovah's favour and blessing, with neither adversary nor evil occurrent, they will desire to pour out their hearts, through the appointed channels, without intermission, in thanksgiving and praise. The next verse does but emphasise the summons.\* Whether the rendering referred to below be received or not, we may yet learn that it is only in the "sanctuary" that worship can be presented. As the reader knows, this "blessing the Lord" is what will characterise the earthly people — Israel — when restored and in the enjoyment of Messiah's favour and reign.

\*Some, however, would translate, "Lift up your hands in holiness, and bless the Lord." If this be accepted, there may be an allusion to this scripture by the apostle in 1 Timothy 2: 8, where he directs men to pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands.

Believers of the present period of grace worship now in the holiest, and it is their privilege to offer perpetual praise in anticipation of the time when there will be no night, and when their occupation will be the service of praise.\* It is interesting to observe that the word "bless" in this Psalm is the very word (as given in the Septuagint) which is used of our Lord when He "blessed" before the distribution of the loaves (Matt. 14.) and at the Passover Table (Matt. 26), etc.

\*In the expression "His servants shall serve Him" a word is used to indicate that it will be as worshippers.

Finally, the Psalm concludes with an invocation addressed to Jehovah Himself: "The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion." The expression "Jehovah that made heaven

and earth" brings before us God as revealed to His chosen people. Thus Jonah, as already pointed out, confessed Him as such to the mariners; and even the Pentecostal saints in Jerusalem said, "Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is." (Acts 4: 24.) As to the meaning of the desire addressed to Jehovah, another has said, "I should be disposed to count the last verse rather the voice of Christ as the Son of David, something in the character of Melchizedek, who said, 'Blessed be the most high God, and blessed be Abraham of the most high God,' only specially in connection with Jehovah (as Zech. 6: 13) blessing the godly remnant out of Zion. The last verse is a kind of answer to the call of the preceding ones — the Spirit of Christ in the remnant calls on Jehovah's servants to bless Him, and they from Him bless the godly one." There are those, however, who regard it as the Spirit's cry to Jehovah through the remnant for blessing on the Messiah Himself, even as we read, for example, in Psalm 72: "Prayer also shall be made for Him continually." (v. 15.) The spiritual reader will judge which of these interpretations is most in accordance with the divine mind.

Whichever may be adopted, it will be perceived that the goal of full blessing has been reached for Israel. The series of the Songs of Degrees commences with the words, "In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me"; it concludes with the Lord's servants blessing Him in the sanctuary, and He Himself blessing out of Zion — blessing rendered and blessing enjoyed. This will help to the understanding of the following description (cited at the outset of these papers) of this series of Psalms: "The Psalms of Degrees are the progress of Israel in the land, out of sorrow and through sorrow, to the full blessing in Zion, which forms the crowning result, Jehovah being there." And how it enhances our admiration of this result (all surely to the glory of God) when it is remembered that Jehovah is JESUS, who is Jehovah the Saviour, and who now has saved His people from their sins. As we contemplate Him as blessing out of Zion, we can unite again with full hearts in the language of the Psalmist: "And blessed be His glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory — Amen, and Amen." (Psalm 72: 19.)

The Christian has a yet more blessed prospect, even the Father's house, where, with all the redeemed conformed to the image of God's Son, Christ will ever be in their midst as the firstborn among many brethren.\*

\*That the two following psalms form a kind of appendix to the Songs of Degrees seems very evident; and it is exceedingly interesting to notice in the first the mingling of the Hallelujahs, Praises, and Blessings which ascend to Jehovah from all the ranks of His redeemed and that the theme of their song in the second is that Jehovah's mercy endureth for ever. It is, in fact, the fulfilment of David's prophetic psalm, which, first sung in connection with his bringing the ark to Zion, concluded with these words:

"O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever.

"And say ye, Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather us together, and deliver us from the heathen, that we may give thanks to Thy holy name, and glory in Thy praise.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for ever and ever. And all the people said, Amen, and praised the Lord." (1 Chr. 16: 34-36.)

"Oh, what a home! The Son who knows,

He only all His love;

And brings us as His well-beloved,

To that bright rest above,

Dwells in His bosom — knoweth all

That in that bosom lies,

And came to earth to make it known

That we might share His joys.

Oh, what a home! There fullest love

Flows through its courts of light;

The Son's divine affections flow

Throughout its depth and height.

And full response the Father gives,

To fill with joy the heart —

No cloud is there to dim the scene

Or shadow to impart.

Oh, what a home! But such His love

That He must bring us there,

To fill that home, to be with Him,

And all His glory share.

The Father's house, the Father's heart,

All that the Son is given

Made ours — the objects of His love,

And He, our joy in heaven."