

"Cut down" — "Set on high."

Psalms 90 and 91.

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The heading of Psalm 90, attributing its authorship to Moses, should arrest our attention to begin with. It makes it pretty certain that chronologically it is the first of the psalms, being written some hundreds of years before the rest. Moses, the writer, is spoken of not as the prophet or law-giver but as the man *of* God; and it is a prayer, though we find nothing in the nature of a petition throughout the first eleven verses.

Two songs are attributed to Moses. The first was sung by him and the children of Israel at the beginning of his forty years ministry, when they had crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 15: 1-18). It is full from beginning to end with what God is, what He had done, and what He was going to do in fulfillment of His purpose. The second was composed at the end, just before he died. It does not appear ever to have been sung. The instructions were, "Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel" (Deut. 31: 19). The song is written in Deuteronomy 32: 1-43, and Moses came and spake all the words of this song in the ears of the people. They would hardly be likely to sing it, for while in the earlier part it celebrates God's kindly dealings with them, and in the closing part His ultimate intervention and deliverance, the main burden of it is their folly in forsaking God and turning to idols, and the chastening and retribution that this was sure to bring upon them.

But in addition to the second song Deuteronomy furnishes us (in Deut. 33) with "the blessing, wherewith Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death." So we have in the Pentateuch the *two songs* of Moses and the *blessing* of Moses, and in the Psalms the prayer of Moses. In both the songs Moses spoke as the prophet-apostle of the law dispensation: in the blessing and the prayer he speaks more simply as the man of God. There is a definitely prophetic element in both the blessing and the prayer, but the more prominent thought is that as the man of God, called to be mediator of the old covenant, he mediates both the blessing from God to man, and the prayer from man to God. It is with the latter of these that we now have to do.

All the petitions that compose the prayer are found in verses 12-17; the earlier verses recite in very graphic fashion the plight in which man is found, which leads to the petitions being offered. Man is seen, stripped of all the false glory with which he surrounds himself, as a poor, fallen, dying creature.

Jehovah, as the Eternal One, is the true dwelling-place of His people in all ages. He pursues His even way from eternity to eternity without the shadow of turning. In contrast to this mortal man is turned to destruction, for as children of Adam we lie under the original sentence, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3: 19). In verse 3 of our Psalm the word "destruction" is literally "crumbling." In the New Translation it is rendered, "Thou makest mortal man to return to dust, and sayest, Return, children of men." Man stands before us a poor, feeble mortal creature; and the point is, that he is this by the express act of God.

Various figures are laid under tribute by the Psalmist; a flood, a sleep, a bundle of withered grass. God's sentence upon man is as irresistible as a flood. Man's uncertain existence here is quickly over, as quickly as seems to pass a night of sleep. He is cut down and He withers as swiftly as a handful of grass. Three score and ten years were the ordinary measure of his days. This, we may observe, was

especially applicable to the people amongst whom Moses moved in the wilderness. All those who were numbered from twenty years old and upward came under that word, "Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness" (Num. 14: 29); so those who were in their prime at thirty, when coming out of Egypt, cannot have lived to be more than seventy, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. It is remarkable that God should have used a man who lived to one hundred and twenty, and who when he died at that age was still full of vigour, to declare three score and ten to be man's days.

But why is man so frail, so mortal? Because he has fallen under the Divine displeasure. It is not an unreasonable accident that he is in this plight. He was not created thus. It is simply and only that anger and wrath from God lie upon him. An hard saying this, but a true one. It is the only explanation of the sad state in which man is found.

Moses does not stop at this point however: he traces the matter back one further step. Why is man under the Divine displeasure? Why does wrath lie upon him? He furnishes us with the answer in verse 8. "Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance." That is it! Sin lies at the root of the mischief; and even if men sin in secret, it avails not. All stands out clear and distinct in the light of God's face.

Such, then, is the pitiful state of mortal men, the children of Adam, as brought to light by the man of God who was also the lawgiver. No wonder that it moved the heart of Moses to a fervent prayer.

Before considering the prayer let us turn aside to note the great contrast between these earlier verses of Psalm 90 and the earlier verses of Psalm 91. The one is a picture of man in extremes" weakness and misery. The other gives us a view of man honoured of God, and not to be touched by any adverse power. The one is "cut down" to wither like grass. The other cannot be touched: no evil shall befall him, and ultimately he is to be "set on high."

The extraordinary contrast might perplex us were it not that we notice one thing. In Psalm 90 "man" is generic. The whole race of Adam, the first man, is in view, and consequently all through the pronouns are in the plural. It is *we, us, our they, them*. In Psalm 91 the word man does not occur, though clearly enough a Man is in view. The personal pronoun is used all through, but invariably in the singular. It is *he, him, thou, thee, thy*. Some particular Man is in the mind of the inspiring Spirit of God. We have no difficulty in identifying Him. He is not the first man, Adam, nor any of his race; but the Second Man, the Lord from heaven.

And so at once the whole atmosphere is changed. Instead of feebleness and misery and sin and the dust of death, we find ourselves rejoicing in One who abides under the shadow of the Almighty, who is untouched by any snare or pestilence or terror or destruction or evil or plague; One who is the object of angelic ministry. The arrows may fly thick and fast, and a thousand may fall at His side and ten thousand at His right hand, but not one arrow can come nigh Him. He cannot be touched by any adverse force.

We find something analogous to this in the history of David, who is spoken of as the man after God's own heart, when he was still in rejection yet under the Divine protection. Abiathar the priest, having escaped from the massacre of all his father's house, fled to David, who greeted Him with the word, "Abide thou with me, fear not: for he that seeketh my life seeketh thy life: but with me thou shalt be in safeguard" (1 Sam. 22: 23). Astute observers may have characterized Abiathar's move as great folly, as a jumping out of the frying pan into the fire — for after all was not Saul's animosity against the priests only secondary, and all his primary animosity reserved for David? That was indeed the case, and yet at that hour there was no safer spot in all the land of Israel than standing by David's side.

David was at that moment the man of destiny, the elect of God according to His purpose, and nothing could touch him. Saul's archers would bend their bows in vain as far as he was concerned, and to be with David was to be in safeguard. He had made Jehovah his refuge and habitation, not perfectly of course, still in a very real measure. He was a type and foreshadowing of the Perfect One who was to come.

Our Psalm gives us a lovely picture of that Perfect One. He always dwelt in the secret place of the Most High and under the shadow of the Almighty. He was perfect in His dependence upon God. Hence He could pass through every form of evil and it had no more effect upon Him than the burning fiery furnace had upon the three Hebrews of Nebuchadnezzar's day Angels had charge concerning Him. and He could tread down all forms of Satanic power, whether represented by lion, adder or dragon.

That this really was so the Gospels themselves bear witness. Satan himself knew that angels were concerned as to Him, and quoted, or rather misquoted, this very Psalm.

And we are permitted to have glimpses of this ministry of angels to their Lord, both after the temptation in the wilderness and the agony in the Garden. Moreover He touched the leper, but the leprosy could not touch Him. He was led, to the brow of Nazareth's hill, but every hand that would have pushed Him over was smitten with impotence. Nothing could prevail against Him or touch Him till His hour was come.

Now even Psalm 91 indicates that an hour, a great hour, was to come in His history; but before we contemplate it let us return to the actual petitions of the prayer of Moses, as recorded in the six closing verses of Psalm 90.

Verse 12 gives us the first request which it is easy to see, exerts a controlling influence on all the rest. We are but the feeble dying children of Adam, and much is gained if we only recognize that fact. For so long as we do not number our days aright, and consequently imagine ourselves to be something other than what we are, we apply our hearts to pleasure or money-making or sport or a hundred and one things of small importance. When we number our days aright and realize the plight we are in, we apply our hearts to wisdom, and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. But we have to pray to God to teach us to do this, for we shall not do it of ourselves.

Moses was taught to apply his heart to wisdom in an eminent degree, hence he prayed with divinely given intelligence for exactly that which we need. He uttered a four-fold cry: —

1. "O satisfy us early with Thy mercy"
2. "Let Thy work appear"
3. "And Thy glory"
4. "And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us."

All four of his requests are centred in God. Man being what he is, there is no hope in him and nothing to be expected from him. God's *mercy*, God's *work*, God's *glory*, God's *beauty* were his desire.

Now see how wonderfully all these things were realized in Christ. Just before His birth the prophet spoke "the tender mercy of our God; whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us" (Luke 1: 78). The coming of the Son of God into the world was the supreme expression of God's mercy. So too the activities of the Son of God in the world, culminating in the Cross, were the supreme expression of God's work. He Himself said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5: 17). Again His whole life displayed God's glory. The Word having been made flesh and dwelling among us

full of grace and truth, the apostles were able to say, "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1: 14). Moses had desired to see the Divine glory in connection with the giving of the law, and had been refused, for no man could see that glory and live. Nevertheless he prayed that the glory might appear in due season, and it has appeared. When the Word was made flesh it shone forth, but so softened down by grace that human eyes could gaze upon it.

The fourth of these requests is marked by astonishing boldness. David knew that the beauty of the Lord was to be seen in His temple (see Ps. 27: 4); but to behold it is one thing, to ask for it to be upon such as ourselves, so that we should be invested with it, is quite another. It is to be "upon us," and Moses has just been telling us what sinful, mortal creatures we are. Moses, we might ask, how did you muster courage to ask for so amazing a thing as that? How came the conception of a thing even to enter your mind?

There is but one answer to such questions. It was by inspiration of the Spirit of God. So great a design as that was in the mind of God for His saints, and in due time, when His mercy, His work, His glory had appeared, the basis for it was laid and the fact of it came to light. The gospel today introduces us into "the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1: 5, 6). Acceptance in the Beloved involves this, that we stand before God in all His favour: the beauty of the Beloved is upon us. No greater beauty than that could possibly be ours. Moses' request was a bold one, but not too bold. It has had an abundant answer.

By this time we can certainly see that the main burden of the prayer of Moses was an earnest cry for the advent of the Christ of God. A glorious answer was given at His first advent, and the finishing touches will be given at His second advent. It is not surprising therefore that Psalm 91 should foretell His excellence and sufficiency, and set Him before us as the Second Man in sharpest contrast to the first.

But not only does it set Him before us thus, it also indicates in its three closing verses that the greatest hour of all would come in His story, when very opposite conditions would prevail to those stated in the early part of the psalm. An hour would strike when He *should* be in trouble, when He *would* need an answer to His call, in the shape of deliverance and salvation. How could this be? Have we not just been hearing that angels have charge concerning Him, and that not one of the forces of evil can touch Him? If He is so fully under the shadow of the Almighty that no arrow that flies by day has any terrors for Him, how is it possible that He should *need* salvation, or to be satisfied with long life?

Many a saint of Old Testament times may have been puzzled by the paradox involved in this, and longed to arrive at an incontestable solution. That solution, thank God, is ours. The wonderful Person portrayed in this Psalm, the Second Man so different from all other men, intrinsically holy, with life untainted and altogether unforfeited, will go into death on behalf of the feeble dying men so graphically pictured in Psalm 90. The hour struck, and into death He went of His own free will otherwise He had never been there, for He said, "I lay down My life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10: 17, 18). He, over whom all evil and even death itself had no power, because having no claim upon Him, went into death impelled by His love. He permitted death to have dominion over Him for one brief moment, in order that He might redeem us and recreate us for God's pleasure.

Of old it had been predicted that the Seed of the woman should crush the serpent's head. In verse 13 we accordingly read of Him treading on the adder and trampling under His feet the dragon. But the prediction also stated that in doing this His own heel should be bruised. In verses 14 to 16 we can see

something of what this means by simple yet very plain inferences. The time would come when He would need deliverance and to be shown the salvation of God: then evidently He must be in *weakness and adversity*. He would be set on high: then evidently He must have been *brought* low. He is to know what *trouble is*. Again He is to be not only delivered but honoured: that indicates that He must pass through a time of *dishonour*. And yet again He is to be satisfied with long life: that infers that He is to come face to face with *death*. Such is the wonderful story.

When He died and came forth in resurrection, the mercy, the work, the glory of God came perfectly into view, and as a result the beauty of the Lord rests upon His saints. In all His acceptance we are accepted.

One thing more remains to be said. We have noticed the opening petition of the prayer of Moses, and also the four-fold cry of verses 14 to 17. The closing words of the Psalm voice a sixth request based upon the other five. It concerns not God's work but our work — "the work of our hands." He desired that in addition to the beauty of the Lord being upon us the work of our hands might be established upon us. What exactly did he mean?

It may be difficult to say just what was in his mind, but we think we catch a glimpse of what it means for us. We know the mercy of God. Our souls rest upon the work of God. We have seen the glory of God. We stand in all the acceptance and beauty of the Beloved before God. Now we have the great privilege of putting our hands to work of such a character that in its blessed results and fruitage it may be established upon us for eternity.

Work of this sort is outside the range of the man of the world. He cannot touch it. He applies his hands to work of many varieties, yet it all decays. His empires, his pyramids, his skyscrapers, his giant businesses, his elaborate scientific speculations, all of them, and much more beside, will come in their sum total to exactly — *nothing*.

We go further, and affirm that work of this sort lies very much outside the range of the carnally-minded believer. We may well ask ourselves how we stand as to this point. Come now: what activities are really filling our lives? Are we going with the stream of present-day religion? Are we just fulfilling certain duties, attending certain meetings, and then filling up the rest of our time with pleasures of a respectable and innocuous sort? Are we seeking to get as much as we can out of the earth and the world, or are we seeking *first* the things of the kingdom of God?

Moses, the writer of the Psalm, threw up his brilliant work and prospects in Egypt in order to put his hands to the work of God. It will be established upon him, and he must have begun to see it when he stood with the Son of God on the holy Mount. Saul of Tarsus had immense advantages, yet he esteemed them but refused and chose a path of suffering and death, putting his hands with abundance of spiritual energy to the work of the Lord from the start of his Christian life to the finish. When the day of Christ arrives he is going to have the Thessalonian converts, and a multitude more beside from many a city between Jerusalem and Rome, as his joy and crown in the presence of the Lord Jesus. When his detractors and their works are all forgotten, the work of his hands will be established upon him in glory.

And so too it MAY be for us. The early Christians at Corinth were carnal and not very promising on this line, yet to them Paul said, "Be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." If we are keen in the work of the Lord, and we do it *in* the Lord and *for* the Lord, we shall not work in vain and without results that abide for eternity.

We know, with Solomon, that what God does He does for ever. It is certain therefore that if God

establishes upon us the work of our hands it will be forever. Just think of it! You and I have at the present moment the opportunity of putting our hands to work, the results of which will never disappear. The work of kings and statesmen, of conquerors and diplomats and builders of big business, is as nothing compared with it.

We are fully blessed in Christ, yet just because of that how foolish should we be were we to fritter away our lives in the pursuit of irrelevant trivialities, instead of grasping firmly and with joy the golden opportunity that is within our reach.