

The Upward Way

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The fifteen Psalms (120 to 134) which are entitled 'Songs of Degrees' have a progressive character which is strongly marked. They set before us prophetically the various and progressive exercises and stages by which in the future a remnant of Israel will be restored to the land, the city, and God's dwelling-place in Zion, and enjoy to the full millennial blessedness. If the reader will quietly read the whole series he will doubtless notice this for himself. Our present purpose is to notice how strikingly the last five illustrate the upward way of the saint today. Let these five Psalms at least be read. If they are not, the reading of this article will probably be waste of time.

Psalm 130 commences with the words "Out of the depths." Thence have we all come, and what depths they were! The Psalmist, however, set the Lord before him and addressed his cry to Him. Consequently he found what we find: first, that "there is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared"; and second, that He not only forgives but redeems. "He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." In a much earlier Psalm there had been the cry, "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles" (Ps. 25: 22). But *troubles* are, after all, only symptoms and results, while *iniquities* are the cause. We have not started on the upward way unless, having realized the depths in which we were plunged, we have cried to the Lord out of them and hence have tasted His forgiveness as to the guilt of our iniquities, and experienced His redeeming power in rescuing us from under their weight and oppression.

Nothing subdues the heart and weans it from the world save this grace. Psalm 131 gives us a picture of its blessed effects in the believer. In our unconverted condition our hearts were haughty and our eyes lofty; we *did* exercise ourselves in great matters, and esteemed nothing too wonderful for us; and further the world fascinated us, so that in the presence of its allurements we were *then* unable to restrain ourselves. Now things are otherwise for those who have received the grace of God in truth. Such can say with the Psalmist, "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" — for they have learned something of their own littleness, and instead of exercising their own minds they are content to accept in faith the mind of God revealed in His Word. Further, they can add, "Surely I have restrained and composed my soul, like a weaned child with its mother: my soul within me is as a weaned child" (N. Trans.). The unweaned child may happily play with others, yet, if placed with its mother, it loses all its restraint and composure. The weaned child, on the other hand, can be with its mother restrained and composed, no longer feeling the peculiar attraction which once dominated it, for other sources of nutriment and satisfaction are known by it. Just in this manner the soul is weaned from the world and the old loves connected with the world. The believer has discovered in Christ an Object of supply and satisfaction which gives him a calm superiority to worldly joys.

In Psalm 132 the way is upward still. We are reminded of David in his afflictions, and of that feature which distinguished him and largely accounted for his being designated "a man after God's own heart." From a very early moment in his life he set his affection towards the ark of God, even though it had gone into captivity in the land of the Philistines, and subsequently, though given up by them, had reposed in obscurity in the house of one Abinadab (1 Sam. 7: 1). That ark was the symbol of God's presence in the midst of Israel, and typified prophetically the way in which He would be amongst men in "the Man Christ Jesus" as Redeemer.

Now David heard of the ark at Ephratah (i.e., Bethlehem-Judah) — where he dwelt in boyhood's days, and ultimately he found it "in the fields of the wood" (verse 6) — a reference probably to Kirjath-jearim where Abinadab's house was. But between those two points of time came the long and testing period of his afflictions under Saul, when, though the anointed king, he was in rejection. As those years of trouble dragged their weary course, what was his supreme desire? For most of us would it not have been to reach an haven of rest, to have a house where we might abide in safety without continual alarms, and so be able to go up to our bed and give peaceful sleep to our eyes?

All this was doubtless as attractive to David as it would be to us, yet it was subject to a desire which overmastered it. So supremely did the other affection hold him that he solemnly expressed it in a vow to Jehovah, the mighty One of Jacob. His own security and comfort would be set aside until he should "find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob" (verse 5), and thus having found a suitable place for the ark, be able to say, "Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy strength" (verse 8).

"Out of the depths" is drawn the soul of the saint, and as forgiven and redeemed from all iniquity his soul is freed from the lofty pretensions of the flesh within and the seductive attractions of the world without. This deliverance, however, has an end in view. We too pass through a time of affliction and patience as now identified with our rejected Lord, and beyond forgiveness and redemption and deliverance, beyond even the sweet rest which we *do* find already, while waiting for the rest of God which is to come, is this enshrining of CHRIST — the true "ark of the testimony" in our affections, so that "a place for the Lord" is our great concern while we wait for the day when the Lord will arise and fully and finally enter into His rest.

As a matter of fact, though David could say, "I have set my affection to the house of my God" and consequently "I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God" (1 Chron 29: 2, 3), he was not permitted to build the temple. He did find "a place for the Lord" in Jerusalem and pitched a tabernacle for it there, still that was but provisional and preparatory to the erection of the temple, and it was the lips of Solomon that actually pronounced the words of Psalm 132: 8, 9 as recorded in 2 Chr. 6: 41. In the same way we wait for the moment when Jehovah and His Christ — who is the true "ark of His strength" — shall enter into their permanent rest; the moment when in the symbolic language of Revelation "the throne of God and the Lamb" shall be in the heavenly city, and "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb" shall be "the temple of it."

Still even while we wait "a place for the Lord" has been secured in the scene of His rejection. He has built His church, and the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it. In spite of all human failure, the assembly as the house of God is on earth, and is of great interest to us. Of *great* interest, but not quite our *chief* interest. The church or assembly of God is indeed a *place* for the Lord. Still it ranks second to the LORD whose place it is. Apart from Him it would be nothing.

Dispensationally how great the change between David's day and ours! Still the underlying principles remain. God still deals with our souls after this pattern, leading us to find our supreme Object in Christ, and our great desire that while as the fruit of His rejection unto death He is personally absent, He may yet have a place here.

Have we all of us reached this point? Is it our supreme thought? Those of us who evangelise and labour for the winning of souls, do we find inspiration in it, and rejoice over every true convert with the thought — another soul in whom there is "a place" for Christ by His Spirit? Those of us who labour in the word and doctrine, or shepherd the flock of God, do we teach and pastor that Christ may practically have His proper place in the hearts of His saints and thus His life being reproduced, He may be visible

in them? Those of us who have no gift at all and walk in quiet and shady paths, do we say with Paul, "My earnest expectation and my hope . . . as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death"? (Phil. 1: 20).

In the latter part of Psalm 132 we still pursue our upward way. Its characteristic note is *blessing*. "I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread . . . her saints shall shout aloud for joy." There is no blessing, no satisfaction, like that which is known by the soul in which Christ has His proper place of supremacy.

But then His blessing is not enjoyed by each saint as a solitary unit. We do not each eat our morsel alone. We rather share it in common. Hence in Psalm 133 we get a further step, that of *unity*, which is a good and pleasant thing. Practical unity is only possible under the guidance of the Spirit, "like the precious ointment upon the head." The unity that counts is the unity that flows in the grace of the Spirit from the great Head of the church above, as the precious ointment poured on Aaron's head flowed down until it touched and imparted its fragrance to the bottom hem of his garment. Or, to change the figure, it is like "the dew of Hermon that descended on the mountains of Zion" (N. Trans.). The mountains of Zion were but little compared with Hermon's lofty head; yet the dew that was Hermon's descended upon them and there was the blessing, even eternal life.

The New Testament doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ stands connected with the purpose of God and not with the experience of the saint. Psalm 133 deals with that practical unity amongst the saints as brethren which is so largely connected with their experimental entry into these things whereof we speak.

In Psalm 134 we reach the top of the staircase as regards these Songs of Degrees. *It is worship*, and beyond that the saint can hardly get. All that we may receive from God, and enter into by faith in the energy of the Spirit, must flow back to God in this way. The servants of the Lord bless the Lord even though they stand in the house by night. Night is the time of darkness and of sleep. All nature is quiet. The song-birds have gone to roost. The only voice is that of the servant who lifts up his hands in the sanctuary and blesses the Lord.

So it may be today. The night that settled upon this world when Christ was refused still persists. Yet may the saints have access to God and, like the nightingale, sing before the dawning of the day when other songsters will awake. Our hearts may flow forth freely in the worship of the Lord. Alas! how little they do so. Christ so little has the supreme place in all our hearts that we but little enter into any part of the threefold result thereof — *Blessing, Unity, and Worship*.

The last verse of the Psalm says, "The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion." For even if we give to God, as is our privilege in worship, we always find what we give poured back to us again with added blessing, since God is no man's debtor. Having reached the climax of the upward way *God has the last word, and that in blessing*.

How could it be otherwise? Does He not infinitely transcend the sweetest experience that we ever knew? Of course He does.

"Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed to him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."