

Christ in the Psalms

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Martin Luther used to call the Book of Psalms "a little Bible." Bishop Horne describes it as "an epitome of the Bible." These terms are fully justified in the fact that in the Psalter we find concentrated all the truths which are elsewhere elaborated and enforced in all the divine Word. It thus possesses an internal completeness not found in any other single book in the inspired volume. Having, evidently, this thought in mind, Thomas Scott, the eminent commentator, says, "There is nothing in true religion — doctrinal, experimental, and practical — but will present itself to our attention whilst we meditate upon the Psalms. The Christian's use of them in the closet, and the minister's in the pulpit, will generally increase with the growing experience of the power of true religion in their own hearts."

One essential reason for this internal completeness of the Psalter is that Christ is the central figure in it, as He is in the entire Word of God. Every book, indeed, of the Old Testament is intended to lead directly or indirectly to Jesus Christ. But in this respect the Book of Psalms stands preeminent among the entire thirty-nine. Of this the illustrious Edwards said, "The main subjects of these songs were the glorious things of the Gospel, as is evident by the interpretation that is often put upon them, and the use that is made of them, in the New Testament. For, there is no one book of the Old Testament that is so often quoted in the New as the Book of Psalms. Here Christ is spoken of in multitudes of songs." By the inspired writers of the New Testament the Psalter is used chiefly as a storehouse from which to bring forth Messianic prophecies to be expounded and applied. Indeed it has been affirmed that it would not be much beyond the fact, if any, to say that there are more references to the Psalms, as speaking of Christ, than to the whole of Moses and the Prophets taken together.

Not only has Christ been found in the Psalms by eminent divines of ancient and modern times, and by the pious in all the intervening ages, and by the inspired writers of the New Testament, but that He is revealed in them is declared unto us by our Lord Himself. In the evening of the day of His resurrection, when He appeared in the midst of His astonished disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, having first convinced them of the reality of His bodily presence, He said unto them, "These are My words which I spake unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must needs be fulfilled which are written in the Law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Me." And that they might be able to grasp the revelation of Himself therein contained, "then opened He their mind, that they might understand the Scriptures," and thus enabled them to see in the Psalms, as well as in Moses and the Prophets, the glorious gospel of

Jesus Christ, which they were thenceforward to proclaim. "And he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." This wonderful discourse of our Lord evidently made a profound impression upon the minds of the Apostles, for we find the substance of it embodied in their sermons and Epistles. One cannot read Peter's Epistles, for example, or his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, without feeling that he availed himself of this exposition which he heard from the Master, and especially that portion of it which pertained to the Psalter. The same is true of all the discourses and writings of those who heard Christ in the upper room, and of those of the Apostle Paul as well, who tells us that he delivers unto us that which he also received, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." The same characteristic appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which, in the very first chapter, in order to show from the Scriptures the transcendent dignity of Christ's person and office, quotes at least six of seven passages given from the Book of Psalms. That there is Messianic prophecy in the Psalter, therefore, is positively asserted both by Christ Himself and His inspired Apostles, and must have credit, upon their testimony, from all who are not prepared openly to reject the authority of their teaching.

In referring briefly to a few of the Messianic Psalms it will be convenient to group them in two divisions — first, those which are directly Messianic, and second, those which are typically Messianic.

I. The directly Messianic Psalms. There are some Psalms which are applicable to none but Jesus Christ, and which relate to Him directly and exclusively. Of these we may take the Twenty-Second as an example. The title refers it to David as the writer, but nothing in David's life, so far as recorded, corresponds to the experiences which the sufferer in this Psalm here records as his own. David's hands and feet were never pierced, nor did his enemies part his garments among them, or cast lots upon his vesture. Moreover, this sufferer, rising above his present pain and desertion, rejoices that his agony will result in bringing the nations of the earth to God, and no such result ever flowed from the persecutions of David. The only adequate explanation is that which hears in this Psalm the voice of the Man of Sorrows, and sees in the picture here so vividly portrayed the sufferings of the Messiah and the glory that was to follow. The scene described is just such a scene as was witnessed on Calvary. The sufferer is surrounded by scornful enemies, who heap reproaches upon him in his agony. They pour out derision upon him in terms almost exactly identical with those which, the Gospel writers tell us, were used by the heartless crowds that gathered about the cross of the Nazarene. And this crucifixion scene is described, not merely in vague and general terms, but in unmistakable detail. The burning thirst making the tongue cleave to the jaws, the strength dried up, the bones protruding so that they might be counted, the staring crowd, the piercing of hands and feet, and parting of garments by lot among the executioners — surely all these, written more than a thousand years before the event, present to us the very cross of Christ as vividly and as accurately as do the descriptions of the same scene written in the Gospels. It is not strange, therefore, that Jesus, when suffering under the burden of the sins of the world, cried out in the very opening words of this Psalm, and thus claimed it forever as pertaining to Himself. And as corroborating this view, though this Psalm is a cry from the depths of distress by one who is not only bitterly

persecuted by man, but who seems to himself to be, for the time, forsaken of God, yet there is no confession of sin, no compunction, or remorse. If David, or any other saint of old, had written it concerning his own sorrows, surely there would have been in it somewhere some word of contrition. Such sad lament, without note of confession, can be appropriate only upon the lips of the Man of Sorrows. The Psalm is in two parts, one pointing to the sufferings, and the other to the glory that should follow as consequences of the sufferer's woes and deliverance, and these results are such that it is impossible to suppose that any mere man's experiences could ever be so important and far-reaching. The whole congregation of Israel is to learn more of God's name through him. Yea, more — his anticipations embrace all lands and all ages, and assume that through his sufferings "all ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto Jehovah." This language can be appropriate to but one mouth. Such world-wide and lasting consequences can follow but one life. The sorrows of the first part of the Psalm can only be a description of our Lord's passion, and the glories of the second can only be a prophetic vision of His universal Kingdom, extending to the remotest generations of mankind. To understand this Psalm we must keep in mind that "He hath made Him to be sin for us." "Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree." To reach the golden treasures of this Psalm, as of many others, we must follow the leading of the Crucified One.

Another example of the directly Messianic Psalms is the One Hundred and Tenth. That it is a prophecy is intimated in its opening words, "Jehovah saith," — a formula almost identical with the "Thus saith Jehovah" used by the prophets to introduce the messages of God which they were commissioned to deliver. Two facts are announced concerning the promised Messiah, which, at that time, were but dimly understood — His exaltation to God's right hand, and His perpetual and royal priesthood. That this Psalm was understood by the Jews in our Savior's time to refer to the Messiah, even though it may have been but imperfectly apprehended, is evident from the fact that when He cited it to prove that David's Son was also David's Lord, the Pharisees were not able to reply. If its Messianic reference had not at that time been generally conceded, if there had been difference of opinion in regard to it, no doubt the wily Pharisees would have been very ready to avail themselves of that fact in order to escape the dilemma into which the Master's question led them. Besides, it is only when read as a prophecy of the Messiah that the understanding of this Psalm becomes possible. David, who was unquestionably the writer, upon the testimony of both our Lord and the inspired writers of the New Testament, could hardly have written of himself as "My Lord," and nowhere in all the Scriptures is an earthly king invited to sit at the right hand of Jehovah as His fellow. Neither do we find in the history of David, or of any other king, that the people are represented as following him in holy vestments as an army of priests as they follow the One here spoken of, and of Whom in the Revelation we read that His "armies followed Him, clothed in fine linen, clean and white." And whether David ever offered sacrifices with his own hand or not, he assuredly was never priest in such sense as the one here celebrated — "Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." A priest without predecessor or successor, one whose priesthood is forever, and to whom his office has been confirmed by the solemn oath of Jehovah Himself — this can be none other than the Great High Priest Who has passed into the heavens. This is the Psalm from which the New Testament writers preach Christ more than from any other single passage in all the sacred Scriptures, and the wonderful conqueror, whose

portrait is here painted in such glowing colors, so far transcending any possible original among the sons of men, this priest enthroned at God's right hand, who is both Son and Lord of David, can be none other than the Son of God. These are but two instances of directly and exclusively Messianic Psalms. Of the same character are the Second, the Forty-Fifth, and others.

II. In the second group which we are to consider are those which are typically Messianic. We find in the Psalter numerous passages, which, though written with primary reference to David and his kingdom, were intended to turn our minds forward to the person and kingdom of that Son and Lord of Whom David was a conspicuous type. Hence in his writings, under the Spirit's influence, he frequently rises above his personal experiences, and speaks in terms which, though applicable in a limited sense to himself, are only applicable in their full meaning to our Lord. Such, for example, are the words in the Sixty-First Psalm — "Thou wilt prolong the king's life; His years shall be as many generations; He shall abide before God forever"; and similar words in the Twenty-First Psalm — "He asked life of Thee, Thou gavest it Him, even length of days forever and ever." These statements are made concerning a king, and have a certain application to David, but can only be applied in their full meaning to the King Who is enthroned in the skies.

In the One Hundred and Eighteenth Psalm, which is probably a song of the second temple, a rejected stone which was ultimately given the place of honor as the corner-stone represents primarily the despised remnant of God's people honored in the great plan for saving the world, but at the same time typifies the advancement of the One Who was "despised and rejected of men" to the supreme place in the wonderful plan of God — "The stone which the builders rejected is become the headstone of the corner." The Apostle Peter, in his address before the Sanhedrin, fixes the ultimate meaning of these words when he says with reference to Christ, "He is the Stone which was set at nought of you builders, which was made the head of the corner."

Another typically Messianic Psalm is the Seventy-Second. In it the reign of Solomon is evidently in mind, but only as a type of the wider reign of the king's greater Son, and hence as the Psalm progresses we find our thoughts carried far beyond the young king to another Son of David, Whose dominion is to extend to "the ends of the earth." "His name shall endure forever; His name shall be continued as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed." The type gradually recedes as the song advances until our thoughts come to be concentrated entirely upon the great Antitype, the glorious Prince of Peace. To this typically Messianic group belong the Eighth Psalm, the Sixteenth, Eighteenth, Fortieth, the Fifty-Fifth, Sixty-Ninth, Eighty-Ninth, One Hundred and Ninth, and others.

The offices of Christ as mediator are as truly set forth in the Psalms as in the New Testament. As a prophet He says in the Twenty-Second, "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren"; and in the Fortieth, "I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great assembly. . . . I have declared Thy faithfulness and Thy salvation." As to His priestly office, the Father says to Him in the One Hundred and Tenth Psalm, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." In the Fortieth, we find Him entering upon the work of this office: "Lo, I am come; In the roll of

the book it is written of Me: I delight to do Thy will, O my God." His kingly office is declared in the Second Psalm — "Yet have I set My King upon My holy hill of Zion," and in the Forty-Fifth, "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever. A scepter of equity is the scepter of Thy Kingdom." These are but a few of the references to the three-fold work of our Redeemer.

But the person of Christ is fully presented in the Psalter, as well as His work. Indeed, it has been asserted, and not without reason, that out of the Psalms one could compile a biography of Jesus. His eternal Sonship is declared in the Second Psalm: "Jehovah said unto Me, Thou art My Son; This day have I begotten Thee." His incarnation is foretold in the Fortieth Psalm as applied in the tenth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not, but a body didst Thou prepare for Me," and in the Twenty-Second: "Thou art My God since My mother bore Me." It is at least suggestive of the supernatural birth of Jesus that, while He speaks repeatedly and tenderly in the Twenty-Second Psalm of a human mother, there is not a word concerning a human father. His favorite name, "Son of Man," is taken from the Eighth Psalm, as well as from the Book of Daniel. As we have seen, He is presented in the Second Psalm as the "Son of God," and in the same Psalm He is called the "Anointed," that is, "the Christ," while the Twenty-Third is evidently the origin of "the Good Shepherd." All the usual names applied to Him in the New Testament are given in the Psalms, except the name Jesus, and it is given frequently in substance, if not in form. His trust in God and obedience to Him are beautifully set forth in the whole of the Eighteenth Psalm; His moral beauty in the Forty-Fifth — "Thou art fairer than the children of men"; likewise His anointing of the Holy Spirit — "Grace is poured into Thy lips." His life of self-sacrifice is shown from the Sixty-Ninth Psalm by the Apostle Paul, "For Christ also pleased not Himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached Thee fell on Me." In this Psalm we have His passionate devotion to God's service — "The zeal of Thine house hath eaten Me up." His taking sinners into union with Himself — a truth which underlies the whole Psalter — is stated in the Twenty-Second, as interpreted in the Epistle to the Hebrews — "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren."

His rejection is mentioned in the Sixty-Ninth — "I am become a stranger unto My brethren, and an alien unto My mother's children"; "They that hate Me without cause are more than the hairs of My head." His triumphal entry into Jerusalem was foreshadowed in the Eighth Psalm — "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast Thou established strength," and in the One Hundred and Eighteenth — "Blessed be He that cometh in the name of Jehovah." The conspiracy of His foes against Him is in the Thirty-First — "They took counsel together against Me, they devised to take away My life." His betrayal by one of the Twelve is foretold in the Forty-First, as He Himself pointed out — "He that eateth My bread lifted up his heel against Me." The manner of His death is foretold in the Twenty-Second — "They pierced My hands and My feet." Even the disposition of His clothes is mentioned — "They part my garments among them, and upon My vesture do they cast lots." His cry of desertion was in the opening words of this Psalm, in which they are followed by a most accurate and pathetic description of the whole crucifixion scene. The Sixty-Ninth adds another line to the dark picture — "They gave Me also gall for My food; and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink." That His bones should not be broken, as were those hanging on either side of Him, is predicted in the Thirty-Fourth, as applied in John's Gospel — "A bone of Him shall not be broken." His dying words were from the Thirty-First —

"Into Thy hands I commend My spirit." His resurrection is foretold in the Sixteenth, as cited in Peter's sermon at Pentecost — "Thou wilt not leave My soul unto Hades, neither wilt Thou give Thy Holy One to see corruption." His ascension, also, is mentioned — "Thou hast ascended on high"; "God is gone up with a shout, Jehovah with the sound of a trumpet." His kingdom and its ultimate triumph are described in the familiar Seventy-Second Psalm, and His coming in judgment in the Fiftieth and the Ninety-Eighth — "Our God cometh, and doth not keep silence"; "He calleth to the heavens above, and to the earth, that He may judge His people"; "For He cometh to judge the earth; He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."

In these revelations of Jesus in the Psalter there is this advantage over all others — He speaks mainly in the first person, and tells us His own feelings while working and suffering and dying for our redemption. And these revelations are chiefly in the past tense, as if to indicate that they were intended more for the gospel age than for that in which they were written.

With the narrow limits of the time allotted it has been possible to present but the merest outline of the Christology of the Psalms. Many fertile and inviting fields have been reluctantly passed by. But even with such a limited view of the subject, does it not seem remarkable that the use of these matchless songs in the services of praise should ever have been objected to as having no Christ in them by any who claim acquaintance with them, or with the application of them made by the inspired writers of the New Testament? Stanley declare of the Psalter, that "no one book has played so large a part in the history of so many human souls." And is not this chiefly because it is so full of Him Who is the light and life of men?