

## XII.

### A SONG OF HUMILITY.

#### PSALM CXXXI.

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| 1. | O Lord, my heart is not haughty,<br>Nor mine eyes lifted up;<br>Neither have I walked in great things<br>And wonderful, which are beyond me: | First<br>Strophe.  |
| 2. | But I have smoothed down and hushed my soul<br>As a weaned child upon his mother;<br>Like the weaned child lies my soul upon me.             |                    |
| 3. | Hope in Jehovah, O Israel,<br>From henceforth and for ever.  | Second<br>Strophe. |

PSALM CXXX. is a Song of Forgiveness; Psalm cxxx. a Song of Humility: the former celebrates the blessedness of the man whose transgressions are pardoned; the latter celebrates the blessedness of the man who is of a meek and lowly spirit. Forgiveness *should* humble us. Forgiveness implies sin; and should not the sinner clothe himself with humility?

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and when, not for any desert of his, but simply by the free grace of Heaven, his sins have been pardoned, should he not bind the garments of humility still more closely about him? The man who is of a nature at once sincere and sweet will be even more humbled by the sense of an undeserved forgiveness than by the memory of the sins from which it has cleansed him. Very fitly, therefore, does the psalm of humility follow the psalm which sings of the Divine loving-kindness and tender mercy.

David the  
Author of  
the Psalm;

Who wrote this Psalm? The title ascribes it to David. We have seen, however, that the titles of the Psalter are not always to be trusted, that they do not speak with authority, that they simply embody the conjectures of Jewish editors and commentators. Still in this case there seems no reason for questioning their conjecture. The Psalm breathes David's very spirit. It contains more

than one phrase of a peculiarly Davidic turn, characteristic expressions which are found in the acknowledged psalms of David.\* It is marked by a tone of child-like simplicity, of cordial and unaffected humility, such as we constantly hear from the lips of "the sweet singer of Israel." David, moreover, *was* such a man as the Psalm describes. His heart was not haughty, nor his eyes lifted up. He did not thrust himself forward and seek great things; although he achieved greatness, greatness was thrust upon him. He was drawn from his seclusion, from his obscurity, by events the influence of which he could not resist. We find no sign of vaulting and overleaping ambition in his career. He did not seize upon the throne. Even after Samuel had anointed him, he waited for God to fulfil the promise of his anointing; he did not scheme and plot for the fulfilment of the word of promise

—and his  
life the  
best illus-  
tration of  
it:

\* Cf. "mine eyes lifted up" in verse 1. Comp. Ps. xviii. 27, and Ps. ci. 5.

as, for instance, Jacob did. For ten years he fled before Saul, refusing to raise his hand against the man who hunted him as the fowler hunts the mountain partridge. For more than seven years after he was crowned in Hebron, he waited patiently till all the tribes freely accepted him. He let Shimei curse on unharmed. He fled before Absalom, his son, and cared more to save his son's life than to avenge his insulted authority and to regain his throne. Thenceforward, he shewed a noble humility, an entire willingness to wait on God, and to let Him shape events at his will. He was never impatient to assert himself, to grasp, eagerly and violently, at the prizes which came within his reach. He had his faults, but they were not faults of egotism, self-will, ambition. He fell into sins; but, though his sins were few as compared with those of the princes of his age, he cherished the profoundest sense of his guilt. Place him beside even the Hebrew princes—

—since he  
eminently  
possessed  
the Humi-  
lity it por-  
trays and  
lauds.

Saul or Solomon, for example, Absalom or Rehoboam—and he shews almost stainless, whether as man or king; and yet, with native and characteristic humility, he accounts of himself as utterly unclean. His sins are ever before him. Nothing but the unfathomable mercy of God can cleanse him from his stains. Take him for all in all, he is by far the noblest of the Hebrew princes, the most lovable, unselfish, and lowly of heart, as well as the most gifted and admirable. No one of them could say so truly,—

Lord, my heart is not haughty,  
Nor mine eyes lifted up;  
Neither have I busied myself in great things  
And wonderful, which are beyond me:  
But I have calmed down and hushed my soul,  
Like a weaned child on his mother's breast.

Of course it may be, as some of the commentators suppose, that the Psalm was written after the Return from the Captivity, written *of* David rather than *by* David. It is quite conceivable that one of the later Psalmists, wishing to

The possibility of a different Authorship considered.

read his generation a lesson of humility, gave them in these verses a portrait of the great King of Israel, and held up David before them as a model of humble and patient trust in God. It is quite possible that, to make his portrait the more lifelike, to give an air of verisimilitude to his work, he borrowed one or two characteristic phrases from David's pen. But I see no reason for taking the Psalm from David, and attributing it to a later and unknown hand, except the determination to date all these Pilgrim Psalms during or after the Captivity. It seems more reasonable to conclude that the Psalm was written by David himself, and that the compilers of the Pilgrim Psalm-book, whoever they were, included in it such psalms as served their turn, whoever the author might be, and whatever their date.

Humility asserted.

Let us take the Psalm as David's then, and mark what its theme is, and how it

is wrought out. It is a song of humility, <sup>yet not</sup> the frank utterance of a soul so childlike <sub>lost.</sub> and lowly that *it can assert its own lowliness without losing it*. To boast of one's modesty, or even to speak of it, is commonly a sign that there is very little of which to boast. But there is no boasting in this Psalm. Its tone is grateful, not vain-glorious. It is an appeal to the great Searcher of Hearts as to the real state of the heart that speaks to Him. It is a thankful acknowledgment that He, Jehovah, has freed it from the agitations of self-will, and brought it to the rest and peace of a constant trust in Him. And this theme is wrought out with rare skill. "All virtues together," it has been said, "are a body whereof humility is the head." It is this capital grace, this chief and crowning virtue, to which David lays claim. To claim this virtue is, as a rule, to forfeit it; but David contrives *to claim humility with humility*. His words have no taint of pride in them; they leave no

impression of arrogance on us as we read them. We feel that he is alone with God; that he is shewing God his heart as it really is; that he is virtually thanking God for the meek and quiet spirit which He has given.

Pride  
described  
and dis-  
owned.

One and a leading excellence of the Psalm is, therefore, that it claims humility without pride. But it is also full of the most admirable skill and beauty of expression. How complete and finished, for example, is the description of pride suggested by the first verse:—"My *heart* is not haughty, nor mine *eyes* lifted up, neither have I *walked*"—that is, busied myself, had my way and course of life—"in great things and wonderful." So, then, pride has its seat in the heart, looks forth from the eyes, and finds vent in the daily walk and conversation. "This pride," says David, "which thus takes possession of the whole man, has not been the animating and ruling spirit of my life. Lord, I have remembered that

Thou dwellest with him that is of a humble spirit, that Thou hast respect unto the lowly. And hence, if pride has at times crept into my heart, it has not found a home in my heart. If it has at times flashed from my eyes, I have not habitually walked with eyes lifted up as in disdain of my fellows, or as affecting to be for ever commercing with the skies. If it has at times moved me to speculate on mysteries too great for my grasp, or to attempt enterprises beyond my strength, I have not habitually walked in the high slippery places of thought, or aimed 'to wind myself too high for mortal man beneath the sky.' I have been content to busy myself with the common round of thought, with the daily task of life, to search for what I could hope to know, to attempt what I could hope to do. I have not been for ever reaching out to things 'which are beyond me,' but have been content to learn 'the *present* truth,' and to do 'the duty that lay

next' me. To Thy Name be the praise!"

Humility,  
for us, the  
Conquest  
of Pride  
and Self-  
will.

Such seems to be the meaning and scope of the first verse. The second verse touches a higher, a more poetic, chord: "*I have smoothed down and hushed my soul.*" The verb rendered "smoothed down" is used by Isaiah of *levelling* the ground after it has been turned up in clods by the plough. As employed here, it seems to imply that David had only gained peace through suffering; the ploughshare of affliction had been driven to and fro upon his soul before it was smoothed down. The use of the two verbs "smoothed down" and "hushed" implies and suggests the length and difficulty of the process. Not in a moment, not by a sudden and immediate effort, did he enter into rest. In his soul, as in ours, there was long and dubious conflict. There were in his soul, as in ours, passions that hankered after sinful gratification, mutinous powers of the will

Is. xxviii.  
25-



on which the yoke of the Divine law had to be painfully forced, eager desires for earthly good, fretful discontents with his lot. All these had to be subdued, to be brought into harmony with the dictates of reason and faith. The task was hard and long, the conflict severe; but at last he succeeded in reducing and pacifying them; the warring and tumultuous passions of his soul subsided into stillness, and it lay calm and bright, like a lake untroubled by winds, which reflects the pure and tranquil heaven above it. He had *smoothed down and hushed* his soul.

But *David* uses a more original and pathetic figure than that of the lake. His soul, he says, lay upon him like "a weaned child upon his mother." And surely no figure could more forcibly express either the cost at which he gained rest, or the purity and unselfishness of the rest he gained, than this homely figure of the weaned child. For a child is not weaned without much pain and strife.

When  
Pride is  
con-  
quered,  
the Soul is  
like a  
weaned  
Child.

That familiar process is commonly a child's first serious experience of loss, of a pain that cannot be soothed, of a desire that cannot be gratified; here it meets its earliest demand for self-denial and self-control. But when once the boy is fairly weaned, he lies still and content on his mother's bosom, no longer craving, and fretful unless his craving be satisfied. "So has it been with me," says David. "I too was as one banished from God, the Source of all comfort and joy. I have had to endure pain, loss, and the stings of unsatisfied desire. But, at last, my soul is weaned from all discontented thoughts, from all fretful desires for earthly good, from all selfish cravings, and waits in stillness on God, finding its satisfaction in his mere presence, resting peacefully in his arms." Or, rather he conceives of his soul as distinct from himself, and as lying in his own arms. Once it was restless and fretful, a mere burden, exhausting him with its incessant

demands, distracting him with its peevish and opposed desires; but, now, it has come back to him quiet, peaceful, gentle, and lies upon him as the weaned child on its mother's breast.

In these two verses David condenses the secret of his spiritual life; and, in the third verse, he bids Israel, the whole nation, learn that secret and live by it. Through a long weary conflict with self-will and the impulses of passion and pride, he has entered into the peace of a humble and loving dependence on God. Let them also learn to wait on God and to hope in Him, and they also shall be at rest. Weaned from self-will, from the passionate cravings and strifes of a will incorrect to Heaven, they shall repose in the calm tender will of God, and find all things working together for their good.

It is easy to see why this little gem of song was included in the Pilgrims' Psalm-book. For the great danger of the elect

The Humility of David commended to Israel.

The Psalm suitable to the Pilgrims,

people of God, and their great sin, was spiritual pride,—the very sin this Psalm was designed to correct. Chosen before all other races, lifted high above them by spiritual gift and privilege, they were tempted to forget that they were elected for the sake of the world, and to look down on all other men as mere sinners of the Gentiles. They were Israelites; to them pertained the sonship, and the Shekinah, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of the Sanctuary, and the promises. Nothing is harder than for men to persuade themselves that, if they have special gifts, it is because they are called to special service; that it is no more creditable to have many gifts than few; that what distinguishes man from man is the use each makes of his gifts, whether they be few or many. And hence it is not wonderful that the Jews never mastered this lesson, but walked their high path of privilege with haughty heart and uplifted eyes, for

—since Pride was their besetting Sin,

ever aiming at a greatness beyond their reach, and so missing the true and Divine greatness which might have been theirs. The weaned child lying happily and peacefully on his mother's breast is very far from being the symbol of the Hebrew race; their symbol is, rather, the austere, haughty, intolerant Pharisee, standing on a pedestal, drawing his flowing robe closely around him lest it should be contaminated by an alien touch, and crying to all the world, "Stand aside, I am holier than you!" And yet their Sacred Literature is full of the praises of humility. Their Jehovah has but two abodes——al- though Humility was enforced on them constantly, and by the highest Sanctions; heaven and the humble heart; and these two are one, since the humble heart is heaven. And surely the Psalmist, whether David or another, could hardly have more impressively urged humility upon them than he has done in these verses. For David was the darling and hero of his race, the Hebrew whom all Hebrews were fain to resemble. And David's

characteristic virtue was a sweet and noble humility. His heart was not haughty, nor were his eyes lifted up. In constant and loving dependence he lay as on the breast of God, craving nothing but his Father's guidance and good-will. It was, therefore, a most judicious wisdom that selected this Psalm for the use of the Hebrew pilgrims, as they went up to Jerusalem. There they would find much to flatter their national pride—in the beautiful city, the spacious costly Temple, the throngs that filled its crowded streets, and in all the symbols of a special Divine presence and favour. Let them remember, then, that the humble spirit is the chosen home of God; that of all their strain the humble David was the man who was most after God's heart.

—and in their visits to Jerusalem they would find much to excite Pride.

It is no less suitable to Us,

Are *we* of so lowly and catholic a spirit that we no longer need to sing this Song of Humility? We are Englishmen; and if we listen to any other voices than our



own, we shall be told the whole world over that we are the proudest, the haughtiest, the most self-sufficient, and overbearing race under the sun. If we resent the world's judgment, let us change it. And we shall not change it by mere resentment, for that, too, is the offspring of pride. We shall only change it as we breathe, and get our neighbours to breathe, a spirit more just, considerate, and lowly.

*We* humble! We are proud of our very pride, and think it to be in the mere course of Nature that all other races should bow down, or "go down," before us. I doubt whether I ever saw an Englishman—even in the looking-glass—who really felt in his heart of hearts that a Frenchman, or a German, or even an American, was really as good a man as an Englishman. And yet, in every land, how many men must there be of a courage as high, and a temper as noble, as our own; how many tender patient souls

—since we are, and are reputed to be, one of the proudest Races under the Sun.

there must be, in quiet places, who worship the God and Father of all with a simplicity, a constancy, a retiring modesty, which might well put most of us to the blush! The bile of the Pharisee is in our very blood; and only the Great Physician can cure us of the taint. Only David's Son and Lord can enable us to say with David, "My heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lifted up."

—and find much Food for Pride in our Discoveries and Speculations.

Never was the gift of humility more needed than now. For how many of us do habitually busy ourselves in great things and wonderful, which are beyond us! If we do not attack the loftiest themes, and the insoluble problems which have exercised the minds of men ever since they began to think, yet how little humility and patience do we shew in forming the conclusions we reach, and the judgments we are so ready to pronounce! Even in the Church of Christ, where one might hope to find a little modesty and lowliness of spirit, how often

do we, who are at home in it, frame opinions without thought and impose them without charity! Ask almost any man you meet what the constitution of a Church should be, or what the contents of a creed, or what the forms of service; and lo, he has a confident and authoritative reply at your service, and thinks you but a heretic, or a fool, if you differ from him, although these are points on which the holiest and wisest men have differed for centuries, and are likely to differ for centuries to come. As for his opinions of his neighbours and the motives by which they are actuated, you need hardly *ask* him for them, so ready is he to impart them. He knows that his own heart is a subtle and complex mystery, that his own motives are so strangely blended that even he himself can hardly analyze and define them; but his neighbours' motives and characters are plain enough, and he can read them at a glance.

Our hearts *are* haughty, and our eyes

No Rest  
for us but  
in Humi-  
lity.

lifted up. We do too commonly busy ourselves with things too great and wonderful for us. And hence it is that we are so restless and perturbed. There is no peace but in the humility which leans on God, which trusts in Him, which confesses weakness and ignorance and guilt; which is not ashamed to say, "I do not know," "I cannot tell;" which rejoices not in the faults and defects of others, but rejoices in whatever is true in them and good and kind. Only as we recover the spirit of a little child, of a weaned child, and rest in simple lowly faith in God shall we enter into the peace which passeth all understanding.