

The Fifty-Sixth Psalm

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With the devout, the Psalter has always been a particularly precious portion of God's Word. It has been valued for meditation, thanksgiving, and prayer. The early Christians, as Luther mentions in his preface to the Psalter, diligent in reading Scripture, were specially fond of the Psalms. And in every age, no doubt, among Christians generally, the feeling has been the same. The Church of England, for nearly all her Services, has appointed a Psalm or Psalms; and of our private devotions words or thoughts from the Psalter form no small portion. To those who are meditating on the seashore or in the harvest-fields, to busy workers and to lonely sufferers, to travellers in strange lands shut off from the pleasures of the sanctuary, and to worshippers who chant the ever-fresh prelude to common prayer, "*O come, let us sing unto the Lord,*" the Psalms are equally welcome.

Why is the Psalter so precious? How is it that the Psalms are so suitable for private and for public use among Christians of every class?

The main answer, surely, is this: The language of the Psalms is the language of *experience*. What believers have felt concerning their own weakness and their strength in the Lord; what they have wished for, been glad about, been afraid of, been troubled about; their lyrics of praise, and their *de profundis* . . . prayers, this is the language of the Psalms.

One feature in such experience is brought before us in the Fifty-sixth Psalm—namely, *Conflict*. "What time I am afraid," says David, "I will trust in Thee."¹ Herein we realise the communion of saints. To say "I am afraid, but I trust in God," is religious experience; and this is a tie of grace. David's voice, therefore, is our own; we have the same comfort in conflict, the same confidence: "In God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me."

The notes of the Fifty-sixth Psalm are Trial, Trust, and Thanksgiving. In verse 1, *Be merciful unto (Have pity on) me, O God; man fighting daily oppresseth me*. In verse 4, *I have put my trust*. In the closing verses, *I will render praises unto Thee; Thou hast delivered*. Thus, the life of faith is a life of conflict, of varied experiences, of mingled feelings. Its songs are sometimes sad; its sadness often smiles. But the minor of timidity generally, though trust, swells into thanksgiving.

The state of mind revealed in verse 3 is complex. David saw perils, and he was afraid; with his fear, however, side by side, there was trust. It is, indeed, a triumphant trust; for in the next verse he sings "the holy boast,"² *I will not fear*. Nevertheless, for many believers, in times of trial, the revelation, in verse 3, of feelings contrary to each other is very helpful. The afflicted Christian perceives the perils which encompass him; he knows the weakness and waywardness of his own will; he is afraid—partly, perhaps, from physical weakness—and he is not ashamed to confess his fears; he is no callous Stoic; he remembers the comforting prediction of Christ, "the flesh is weak;" and he says with David, "Have pity on me, O God;" *I trust, but I am afraid.*³

Many of the most eminent Christians have gone through such experiences. Cowper, for instance, greatly feared and greatly trusted. Gerhardt, whose hymns, like Cowper's, are full of faith,—Gerhardt who sang—

Give to the winds thy fears;
Hope, and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears—
He shall lift up thy head—

had written for his epitaph—"Here lies a theologian sifted by Satan." And to very many Christians, probably, in some or other "visitation," such language as Psalm lv. 2-6 has come home with peculiar power. "Fearfulness and dread are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me." "With the healthy soul, no doubt, such complainings are brief as well as rare. The gloom quickly lifts; and the voice of Jesus, "Why are ye so fearful?" brings quietness, if not joy. The one great matter, in a time of need, is to realise His Presence,

Beautifully is this brought before believers by John Bunyan. In the closing scene of *Pilgrim's Progress*, we read:—

Then I saw in my dream that Christian was as in a muse a while. To whom also Hopeful added this word, Be of good cheer; Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: and with that Christian brake out with a loud voice, Oh! I see Him again! and He tells me, When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee.—Isa. xliii. 2. Then they both took courage, and the enemy was after that as still as a stone, until they were gone over.

To realise the Presence of Christ, according to the Fifty-sixth Psalm, is to have rest. For what, here, is the Psalmist's notion of *trust*? It is *to cling confidently* to a Person. Of David's words, for "trust," one is *finding refuge in* (as in Psalm vii. 1), and another is *clinging trustfully to*.² The latter part of the third verse, therefore, literally translated, is, *I cling confidently to Thee*.

In conclusion. This Psalm, as a whole, shows the believer's Perils, his Praise, and God's Presence.⁵ The felt Presence is our peace in the midst of perils, and the spring of our praise.

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- 1) "Nevertheless, though I am sometime afraid, yet put I my trust in Thee."—*Prayer Book*. Literally, "In the day that I fear"
- 2) Calvin. "This confidence is no proof that he was rid of all fear. . . . He was so far from yielding to fear that he rose victoriously above it."
- 3) As to fear and trust in the soul, a German commentator has taken some exception to verse 3. But this only illustrates the fact that learning is not always accompanied by common sense. A very general human experience is the conflict of fear and hope, confidence and concern. Peter was afraid, but he trusted, when he cried "Lord, save me!" The women ran from the empty sepulchre, St. Matthew records, when the angel appeared, "with fear and great joy."
- 4) Delitzsch.

- 5) “David knows that each day of his wandering, each nook in which he has found shelter, each step that he has taken . . . all have been numbered by his Heavenly Keeper. Yea, no tear that he has shed . . . in prayer” has fallen unnoticed.—*Perowne*.