Psalm 118: An Exposition

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THE CITY of Montreal encircles the mountain from which it takes its name. Some of the taller buildinngs built against the mountain side have the pleasant architectural feature of possessing several front doors, placed on different sides of the building, and at different levels. Entrance may be gained from several roads giving access at various floors to the whole building.

So it is with the Psalter. We may enter into the structure of a psalm at any one of at least three levels of understanding. The basic level is that of seeking to determine the meaning of the psalm for the man who wrote it. Most literary productions in the ancient world had their origin in some particular "setting in life"—love songs were composed for wedding-feasts, dirges for funerals, laments for fasts, hymns for cultic occasions. It is important to grasp Gunkel's point that "free" literary composition was not natural to the ancient world, and that the differing types of literary production arose out of particular human situations. Thus the basic level of understanding with regard to any psalm is to ask: For what purpose did its author compose it? Out of what setting in life did it come? What did the author understand himself to be saying to his contemporaries in that particular social situation? These are the basic exegetical questions.

When, however, we have recognized and reconstructed the "setting in life" and thus are reasonably sure that we have grasped the meaning of the psalm for the author and his friends, we are but ready to move to a second level of understanding. As the generations handed down a poem from one to another, it often acquired a new meaning and significance, quite distinct from the author's original intention. I have previously in this journal drawn attention to such a change with regard to Ps. 45.[1] It began as an epithalamium for a king's wedding, the king in question being most probably Ahab and the bride Jezebel. It was, however, intrinsically a good song and one that could be used, with a little poetic licence, at many other marriages both royal and common. It thus acquired the canonicity of popular approval, but nevertheless it also received in time the decent dress of a religious significance. The explanation became current that the bridegroom of the song was the Messiah and his bride the New Jerusalem. It is important for us to recognize that it was with this secondary meaning that the psalm found a place in the religious anthology we call the Psalter. Had

1. Cf. S. B. Frost, "The Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," *CJT*, 5 (1959), 25–34.

it not acquired this second interpretation it might have found its way into that other anthology which we know as "The Song of Songs," but probably not into the Psalter. In the case of this psalm, then we enter biblically into the structure of the psalm at the second floor, and have to make our way down from there, if we so desire, to the *rez-de-chaussée*. This is true of all the so-called "messianic" psalms. They originally had their "setting in life" in some particular royal event or ceremony, but with the passing of the kingship, they were eschatologized and became "messianic" in the modern sense of the term, and only thus were accepted into the Psalter. This second level of understanding is what we might call "the setting in scripture." The questions by which it is reached are: Why did this composition survive? What did the psalm mean to the people who transmitted it from generation to generation? What did it signify to those who gathered it into this particular anthology of poetical pieces? This last question clearly involves our having reached an assurance that we have rightly grasped the significance of the Psalter as a whole, and that assurance is by no means easily come by. Is it, as Pfeiffer maintained, the "manifesto of the 'Pious' "[2], first and foremost a laymen's collection, brought together for use in private meditation and in unofficial conventicles, or is it, to use the popular term, "the hymn book of the Temple"?[3] We shall have to come back to this point later.

There is one further level of understanding which we must most certainly explore when we seek to expound the "Word of God." When he produced his *Readings in St. John Gospel,* William Temple wrote in the Introduction:

> It is an attempt to share with any who read it what I find to be my own thoughts as I read the profoundest of all writings. Consequently it is not chiefly concerned with the question what the writer consciously intended, though of course that question frequently arises; nor again with the question how much of what is here set down has its origin in the deeds and words of the Lord Jesus when on earth, though of that something is said later in this Introduction. I am chiefly concerned with what arises in my mind and spirit as I read; and I hope this is not totally different from saying that I am concerned with what the Holy Spirit says to me through the Gospel.[4]

The Bible has in fact lived through twenty centuries largely by the readiness of the Spirit to speak through the written Word to the hearts and consciences of ordinary men and women. But not seldom their best and finest thoughts have depended on a misunderstanding of the text. This may range all the way from the pious woman who found such comfort in the word "Mesopotamia"—she did not know what it meant but she was sure

2. R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament,* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 620.

3. Cf. E. A. Leslie, *The Psalms* (Nashville-New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), p. 18: "Sigmund Mowinckel's brilliant and extraordinarily suggestive studies in the psalms have made it appear most likely that practically every psalm in the Psalter was intended for rendition in the regular and officially constituted worship of the Temple and is rightly understood as part of that worship."

4. William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel,* First Series: Chapters I–XII (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. ix.

it was full of the mysterious wisdom of God—to the many who are misguided by the English translation of the twenty-third psalm to suppose, very reasonably, that "he leads me in paths of righteousness in order that the divine reputation should not suffer."

However much such misunderstandings will distress the biblical scholar and set him making new translations and writings further commentaries, the parish minister will not be able to deplore them to the same extent. He knows that the thoughts which arise in his people's hearts as they read their daily portion of scripture are very precious to them, and indeed are the very stuff of religion. Discount these and the life has gone from all forms of Christianity based on the primacy of scripture as a means of grace. Nevertheless the parish minister is also keenly aware of the strange aberrations into which men can stray unless he, as pastor and teacher, can instruct them in the true meaning of scripture, and his theological education will have made very clear to him the need for this third level of understanding to be based firmly and solidly on a sound knowledge of the lower levels. Exposition stands on exegesis—that is, it is only when a careful exegesis has given us the freedom of the lower floors that we can with any assurance mount up to that exposition which is the uppermost and indeed the creative level of understanding. And yet our opening illustration holds true, since many if not all of us first enter the House of the Interpreter at the top floor. We have to learn somewhat painfully how to make our way downstairs. However, it is certainly true that if anyone seeks to be "a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth," he must have a thorough knowledge of those lower floors by which the upper levels are sustained and conditioned. Exposition does indeed stand on exegesis.

I

The opening verses of our psalm (vv. 1–4) together with the closing verse (v. 29) are clearly additions made at some time when the composition of an individual was taken over and adapted for some other use. Our search for a setting in life must therefore be concerned with the original production, vv. 5–28. It is in fact a royal thanksgiving. A Judean King—commentators have inevitably suggested Hezekiah—has been gravely beset by overwhelming enemies. It appeared that he had no hope of victory over them, and that the virtue of success had departed from him. In this situation he cried to Yahweh:

> Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
> the LORD answered me and set me free.
>
> With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
> What can man do to me?
>
> The LORD is on my side to help me;
> I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in man.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.

Having received an assurance that "Yahweh was on his side," he and his men were able to face their foes with such valour that they destroyed the enemy's confidence and asserted their own. It was touch and go at one point, but so strong was the sense of victory within him that the king finally triumphed over all the opposition:

All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me; surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me like bees,
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.

The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.

He recalls how the night after battle the Judean camp was filled with song and victory-joy. His men were united in ascribing their victory to direct divine intervention. For himself, there was the surpassing happiness of an incredible reprieve. He repeated it to himself in wonderment: "I am not dead, but alive! I am not going to die, but to live! I shall live to tell the story of Yahweh's personal concern for me. He chastised me sorely, but it was only to discipline and to teach, and I shall live to talk of his goodness!"

Hark, glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:
"The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,

the right hand of the LORD is exalted,
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!"

I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

The LORD has chastened me sorely,
but he has not given me over to death.

This thanksgiving was not in the nature of a poem composed, as a modern might do it, in a quiet room and then distributed in fair copy to a few chosen friends. Rather, the ancient "setting in life" is that of a public thanksgiving by the king in the Temple. He has been standing so far in the outer precincts at the entrance to the inner court, and has been reciting his testimony on this proud and joyous occasion to a great multitude—the officers and men of his army, the state officials, the aristocracy, and all the people of Jerusalem. Having testified to all present that the virtue of success

is upon him and that the blessing of God is evident in his experience, he now turns to address the priests waiting in the inner court. Let them open the barrier that he may enter and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice:

> Open to me the gates of righteousness,
> that I may enter through them
> and give thanks to the LORD.

But they are the custodians of Yahweh's house and they must be assured of the good standing of any whom they allow to draw near to his altar. It is only the righteous who may enter, and the righteous are known by that aura of prosperity and well-being which surrounds those whom Yahweh has blessed:

> This is the gate of the LORD;
> the righteous shall enter through it.

To this the king replies with a strong assertion of his own well-being and of his own consciousness that the virtue of success is upon him. The assertion takes the form of a thanksgiving, which is an idiomatic formula of very strong asseveration.[5] It is coupled with a well-known proverb, which reflects a common experience during dry-walling or of building with undressed stone—the awkward, useless piece, often picked up and as often dropped again, turns out at the end to be just the piece for "topping off." So the king, who appeared to be a rejected and fallen man, is now seen to be the one for whom Yahweh has a particular care and affection:

> I thank thee that thou hast answered me
> and hast become my salvation.
>
> The stone which the builders rejected
> has become the chief corner-stone.

To this royal assertion of divine approval the priests reply with the ready acknowledgement that they can see Yahweh's hand in these remarkable events, and that this day is a momentous occasion for which Yahweh alone is responsible. They therefore call on all men to recognize his power and worship him with joy and humble dependence:

> This is the LORD'S doing;
> it is marvelous in our eyes.
>
> This is the day which the LORD has made;
> let us rejoice and be glad in it.
>
> Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD!
> O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success!

They then turn to the king and by virtue of their priestly authority they call down upon him afresh on this joyful day the blessing of Yahweh:

> Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD!
> We bless you from the house of the LORD.
> The LORD is God, and he has given us light.

5. Cf. S. B. Frost, "Asseveration by Thanksgiving," *Vetus Testamentum*, 8 (1958), 380f.

The second half of v. 27 seems simply to be a stage-direction or rubric which has wandered into the text, but in the remaining verse we have the king's heartfelt acceptance of the blessing and his renewed expression of humble dependence on God. Presumably it was at this point that the king and his retinue entered the inner court and offered sacrifice, making visible and concrete their sense of gratitude and thanksgiving.

> Thou art my God, and I will give thanks to thee;
> thou art my God, I will extol thee.

II

This then was the original "setting in life," but why should the thanksgiving produced on such an occasion happen to live, and why should it become part of the common heritage of the Hebrew people? To answer this question we must attempt to enter upon the second level of interpretation, and to do this we must first revert to the question of the nature of the Psalter as a whole. Is it the "manifesto of the 'Pious' " or is it "the hymnbook of the temple"?

It is important to recognize that "the Temple" is an ambiguous phrase. When Jesus taught "in the Temple," or the New Testament church was daily "in the Temple" or Hananiah accosted Jeremiah "in the house of the LORD," the reference is not to the separated inner court where the altar of burnt-offering stood, and in which the priestly rituals were magnificently conducted. Rather, the reference is to the outer courts,[6] where the Temple money-changers sat and where the pigeon and lamb sellers had their stalls, and where little groups of like-minded men could gather in a *sodh* or circle, for spiritual conversation, for fellowship and for teaching the young. As Gunkel rightly insisted, the core of the Psalter is the "Laments of the Individual," and their "setting in life" is that of the conversation-group or *sodh*. It is essentially a layman's group or conventicle of the pious. In the inner court, on the other hand, the liturgy of the great Temple occasions was enacted, and the daily seasonal sacrifices of Israel were offered on the great altar. Here the events of national significance and the high moments of the king's reign gave rise to compositions which persisted in the Temple treasury of devotion long after the original occasion and even the royal line itself had passed away. Here also the "occasional" sacrifices of the private individual, the sacrifices of thanksgiving or vow-fulfilment or penitence, were accompanied by prayers and hymns which tended to be used on successive similar occasions and so were in some instances preserved for the great anthology of Israel's devotion.

Thus when we say the Temple was a locale of the "setting in life" of much if not all of the Psalter, we need to recall this ambivalence of the term "Temple." It embraced both the cultus and the conventicle within its scope. Moreover, there was no doubt a good deal of traffic

6. Cf. "Solomon's Portico" (Acts 3:11; 5:12).

between the two aspects of Temple religion—the liturgical composition from the inner court was borrowed for recitation and discussion by the *sodh* and the individual lament found its way into the levitical choirs' repertoire.

Our psalm then is itself the product of the inner court. It was the thanksgiving of the king for victory in battle and for his vindication in the eyes of his people. But when the kingship departed it was taken over for use with a wider reference and adapted to congregational use. The "I" of the psalm now became not the king but the nation. It was used to express the perennial sense of the people of God that "Zion with Babylon must cope," and she survives in her warfare only by the sheer grace of God, and that as constantly renewed. In order to make this new application of the psalm evident, the liturgical versicles and responses were added at the beginning and end of the psalm;

> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
> his steadfast love endures for ever!
>
> Let Israel say,
> "His steadfast love endures for ever."
>
> Let the House of Aaron say,
> "His steadfast love endures for ever."
>
> Let those who fear the LORD say,
> "His steadfast love endures for ever." . . .
>
> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
> for his steadfast love endures for ever!

Probably, however, the adoption of the psalm and its adaptation for national as distinct from royal worship were not the only reason for its survival and inclusion in the Psalter.[7] It seems clear from the Hebrew psalm-titles and the identification of many psalms with particular events in the life of David (and this in the post-exilic period when messianic interest was noticeably lacking in the priesthood) that the final selection and editing of the psalter was the work of the laymen of the *sodh*. In this sense, Pfeiffer is right with his tag the "manifesto of the 'Pious'." With such a psalm as this, characterized as it is by an intensely personal conviction of God's care for the individual, we may be quite sure that it was taken over for use in the conventicle for those occasions when a member wanted to praise God for vindication. He had perhaps been under suspicion of leprosy; some his acquaintances were already concluding that he was thus pre-eminently a sinner; his own horror was beginning to rise up and choke him—but the skin eruption cleared up, he was not a leper, he was not branded a sinner in the eyes of all men, he was not going to die a horrible living death, but to live in the full sense of the word! Here then was a psalm of vindication which pretty well suited the occasion and when he returned to the *sodh*, his recitation of that psalm that day thanked God,

7. Cf. Pss. 51, 52, 54.

rebuked his critics and announced his vindication, all in unmistakable and triumphant terms. A psalm which could so speak for the inner heart of a man was not one that could be allowed to die. It must be preserved and given an honoured place in the anthology of devotion. True, it was originally the psalm of a king, but the democratization of religion is a steady factor in the life of the ancient east.

Here, then, is the second level of interpretation of the psalm. It is the level at which it became the expression, for the congregation and for the individual alike, of those powerful feelings of spiritual release when, after a season of pressure and threat and condemnation, the moment of salvation and vindication comes gloriously upon us.

III

The third level of interpretation is the one in which we have the greatest freedom. Some even of those who are acquainted with the rest of the structure choose to remain on this upper level more or less permanently and seldom descend to the lower floors. The views are so distant, the light so pervasive, the rooms themselves so unconfined and so constantly refreshed by the visiting winds of the Spirit. It is, however, just because those winds tend to blow wildly, and just because the sense of freedom and light is inebriating, that sometimes the perspective of our viewing proves deceptive and our sense of relative values becomes confused. It is then that a return to look out upon God's truth from a lower level can be so sobering and restorative. But if, despite the subjective character and the personal nature of any such description, the present writer were to be asked to describe what he sees of God's truth from this vantage point, he would reply at this present time as follows.

Remembering that the psalm is originally a king's psalm, we cannot ignore its messianic character. The royal psalms were messianized by the Jews, and Jesus read and taught this psalm as applying to himself. He was, he said, the stone which the builders had rejected, which was now to become the head of the corner;[8] it was by his permission, if not at his invitation, that the crowds greeted him on Palm Sunday, with the quotation of the verse: "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."[9] It is therefore a messianic psalm, and the messianic psalms speak of Jesus. As the Christian reads this psalm, or sings it in church, the theme of vindication which runs so steadily through it is for him the theme of the vindication of Jesus. The Palm Sunday recognition and acceptance was proleptic of that other recognition, when, his task accomplished, Jesus should rise from the experience of shame and suffering and death, to be recognized by God and man as Lord of life and King of Kings. The Christian understanding of Scripture is that this psalm was used at the one event in order that it might point more clearly to the other.

8. Matt. 21:42.
9. Matt. 21:9; cf. Ps. 118:25f. (Hebrew).

Here all the questions of mythology pour in upon us. What reality in Jesus does this parable of kingship point us to? This cultic, almost forensic term, "vindication," what is it really saying about him? My own understanding is as follows. The birth, maturation, ministry, passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth, if he was truly the Son of God, are eloquent of all those values which we term Christian. It is in his self-denial, humility, and out-going love that we see and comprehend the nature of those values, and become inspired to express them in our own lives. But when we practise humility and self-denial and seek to express a love for our fellows, we are told we are fools, idealists, visionaries. Life, we are warned, is not like that. Life is a struggle for existence, and its prizes are for the self-assertive and the self-regarding. We reply: No, it is you who are wrong. It is you who have the perverted view of reality. Jesus came from God, and lived this life and died this death, because these values are God's values, and he is expressing God's humility, God's self-denial, God's all-embracing love. The Christian values are not visionary dreams, but have metaphysical reality in this universe, because this is God's universe, and this is the way he has made it. To live in this universe, careless of and contrary to these values, is to invite disaster and to call down nemesis upon yourself; whereas to live in reverence of them and to seek to express them in daily choices leads to personal maturity and well-being. So we assert, and so the world denies; and we can only cling to our faith and wait. We wait until such time as the spiritual values inherent in the birth and life and death of Jesus are made evident to all men, so that all must acknowledge, to their joy or to their utter confusion, that these things are so. How God will do this, in what sense the myth of the Second Coming will be translated into reality, we do not know. But every eye shall see him, and the knave shall no longer be called noble, and the metaphysical realities shall be revealed, and the Christian values shall be asserted, and Jesus shall be vindicated. It is of this that the psalm speaks in its messianic significance.

But the psalm is not only messianic. It was taken into the cultic worship of the Temple, and the "I" of the psalm became the corporate personality of Israel. Just as the royal figure of the Old Testament points forward to Jesus, so the Israel of the Old Testament points forward to the Church. Here then the psalm speaks of the vindication of the Church. Straightway I am sorely tempted to seize this opportunity to defend that much maligned mother of us all—and that, not as *ecclesia invisibilis* or as *ecclesia triumphans* but simply as the empirical twentieth-century institution at which all men are so ready to poke fun. For I love the Church, the Church I know, the Church which holds faith-teas, and runs jumble-sales for charities, and gives with amazing, constant generosity of time and money which no other corporate body on earth can begin to parallel; the Church which stumbles about on Sunday in liturgies far too big for it, and shamefully abuses its sacraments because it does not grasp their meaning; the Church which is woefully ignorant of its own faith and is time and time again its own worst

advocate; which is ignored, ridiculed and despised by the self-styled intelligentsia, and yet often more cruelly hurt from within by shallow would-be reformers who say things calculated to wound because they have been taken in by the phrase "shock-therapy"; but nevertheless the Church which continues, the Church which has survived the greatest social upheavals in human history, the veritable ship of salvation, riding a little water-logged over the tempestuous seas of intellectual revolution, battered but still afloat and *gaily* so. Who so knowing the Church could not but love it, and rush to its defence at the first opportunity? But this is a temptation to be resisted, for the vindication of which we are to speak is not of that kind.

In the psalm, the Church in the character of Israel presents itself at the entrance at the inner court of the Temple and cries, "Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may go in and worship the Lord," but the custodians reply that these are indeed the gates of righteousness, and therefore only the righteous may enter. Has the Church that righteousness which alone can permit her to enter? Without holiness no man may see the Lord! To this she replies in asseverative thanksgiving that the evident signs of God's blessing are upon her. She has been met by his goodness and mercy, *tobh wāhesedh*, and these only are her communion-tokens of entrance. Her warfare has been stern and her enemies many, but she has by God's help overcome them all. Her victory is the sign of her acceptance with God. Therefore she may enter and worship.

Jesus said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The one true vindication of the Church is in its ability to overcome the world. It must take social change, intellectual revolution, scientific discoveries and atom bombs in its stride. The Church must live in Nazi Germany, in Soviet Russia, in Communist China, in affluent Western Society, unsubdued, uncorrupted and unashamed. It may at times falter and become identified with its social milieu, as in medieval Europe or in pre-revolution Russia, and as it is even now in grave danger of becoming in North America today, but it is only its true self and only vindicated by God when it stands apart from the world, over against the world and overcoming the world. And the Church overcomes the world when it refuses to conform in its thinking and practice to the ethos of the society in which it finds itself and when it accepts its scale of values not from society but from Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnate Son of God, in whose birth, life and death the humility, self-denial and outgoing love of God is made apparent to her. Whenever the Church so lives, whether in prosperity or persecution, in strength or in weakness, the fact that she is overcoming the world sets the seal of divine approval upon her, and she is vindicated. This is the Church which not only on Sunday but on every day may begin its worship with words of continual significance: "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." For *these* days, these days of her living in the world and overcoming the world, these are the days of her salvation and every one of them is marvellous in her eyes.

In the outer courts of the Temple, our psalm passed into the hands of those who identified the "I" of its testimony with the "I" of their own religious experience. In its delineation of danger and deliverance they found mirrored their own experience of peril and salvation. So, too, as we read the psalm today we find here one of the classic biblical accounts of the plain man's experience of salvation. For one reader, at least, it unfolds itself after this manner.

The enemies of the religious man are legion. One of the many compensations which those of us who live in the twentieth-century West receive from our present situation, is that these enemies are not so easily confused with a number of deceptive decoys. In the earlier age it was possible for a man to think that his foes were men of another nation with whom his own was at war; or that they were men of another faith; or even that they were other Christians who were persecuting the group to which he himself belonged. In some lands it is today still possible to be misled—indeed, it is the rare and noble Christian who can readily distinguish between persecutors and the true enemy of his soul. But here in the West, where we have no personal adversaries or opponents, the enemies of the soul cannot shelter behind such decoys, nor use them as scapegoats. Nor again is the modern Christian likely to be grievously misled when the forces of evil within and without are brought together and personalized as the Devil; certainly he is not to be deceived into thinking that some elements in his behaviour-patterns can be capitalized and reified as Fear or Greed or Pride, and that these are the enemies with whom he must contend. What gives the lie to all these camouflages is that when the Christian presents himself at the inner shrine asking to be admitted into the Presence, his right of entry is that he has battled and overcome his enemy. This, however, means that he is victorious, *he* has been brave and strong, *he* is praiseworthy, *he* is to be commended, and therefore he comes proudly, asking for the entry into the inner shrine as of right. Yet no Christian ever feels that he can come before God in such a vain-glorious mood. Here, then, is a paradox—he comes as victor, and by reason of conquest he asks for admittance, and yet he comes humbly, broken and dependent. The paradox is resolved only when the enemy over whom he triumphed is seen to be himself. The temptation to externalize, to personify, to identify the enemy without, is always present, but the real enemy is the enemy within, the self. When self has been conquered we can come humbly, broken, defeated and victorious, and in thankful penitence we ask, not of right, but of God's grace, that we may enter the kingdom. For in the conquest of self, our dependence on the Holy Spirit is such that we sing the song of victory which was heard in the tents of the victorious king:

> The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,
> the right hand of the LORD is exalted,
> the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

Before whom then is man vindicated? Not before men; this would be to

reintroduce the element of vain-glory. Nor before God; the falsity of the forensic metaphor lay just there, that it transformed the Father into the Judge before whom man must be vindicated as innocent. But man is not innocent, and God is not Judge, but Father, a father who knows his sons as they are and loves them for what they are, and for what they may become. Man has no need to be vindicated before God. His need is to be vindicated before himself. Since his enemy is himself it is in the sight of himself that he must be vindicated. He is his own enemy in that his sense of failure, his helpless frustration, his awareness of his isolated individuality and his knowledge of his own mortality, all combine to hold him in the grip of *Angst*, the ultimate and basic despair. By the conquest of his self-hood, his desire no longer to assert his own worth and value, he is brought to acknowledge and to love himself. He no longer condemns himself, but accepts himself for what he is—sinful, impotent and mortal. Such he always will be apart from divine grace: his salvation can never be his own accomplishment, and therefore the responsibility for it is his no longer. Here is the ground of Christian hope. Surrendered to divine grace, he can now accept himself, he can now live with himself, he is vindicated, not with pride but by the very loss of it, in his own eyes. For one reader, this psalm says: "Who is my enemy? It is myself. Who is my judge? It is myself. Who is my saviour? It is the Lord!" It is because of this that he can say in wondering amazement:

> I shall not die but I shall live,
> and recount the deeds of the LORD.

VI

The structure of the psalm stands tall and lofty on the hillside of God's truth, and we may enter upon it at many levels. But it is those who have gained the freedom of the lower floors who may mount most surely to the uppermost story. There like the prophet Habakkuk they take their stand to watch, and station themselves on the tower, and look forth to see what the Holy Spirit will say to them, and what they will answer concerning what is revealed to them.