

PSALM LII.

TITLE.—To the Chief Musician.—*Even short Psalms, if they record but one instance of the goodness of the Lord, and rebuke but briefly the pride of man, are worthy of our best minstrelsy. When we see that each Psalm is dedicated to "the chief musician," it should make us value our Psalmody, and forbid us to praise the Lord carelessly.* Maschil. *An Instructive. Even the malice of a Doeg may furnish instruction to a David. A Psalm of David. He was the prime object of Doeg's doggish hatred, and therefore the most fitting person to draw from the incident the lessons concealed within it. When Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and saith unto him, David is come to the house of Ahimelech. By this deceitful tale-bearing, he procured the death of all the priests at Nob: though it had been a crime to have succoured David as a rebel, they were not in their intent and knowledge guilty of the fault. David felt much the villany of this arch-enemy, and here he denounces him in vigorous terms; it may be also that he has Saul in his eye.*

DIVISION.—*We shall follow the sacred pauses marked by the Selahs of the poet.*

EXPOSITION.

WHY boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? the goodness of God *endureth* continually.

2 Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.

3 Thou lovest evil more than good; *and* lying rather than to speak righteousness. Selah.

1. "Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man?" Doeg had small matter for boasting in having procured the slaughter of a band of defenceless priests. A mighty man indeed to kill men who never touched a sword! He ought to have been ashamed of his cowardice. He had no room for exultation! Honourable titles are but irony where the wearer is mean and cruel. If David alluded to Saul, he meant by these words pityingly to say, "How can one by nature fitted for nobler deeds, descend to so low a level as to find a theme for boasting in a slaughter so heartless and mischievous?" "*The goodness of God endureth continually.*" A beautiful contrast. The tyrant's fury cannot dry up the perennial stream of divine mercy. If priests be slain their Master lives. If Doeg for awhile triumphs the Lord will outlive him, and right the wrongs which he has done. This ought to modify the proud exultations of the wicked, for after all, while the Lord liveth, iniquity has little cause to exalt itself.

2. "*Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs.*" Thou speakest with an ulterior design. The information given was for Saul's assistance apparently, but in very deed in his heart the Edomite hated the priests of the God of Jacob. It is a mark of deep depravity, when the evil spoken is craftily intended to promote a yet greater evil. "*Like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.*" David represents the false tongue as being effectual for mischief, like a razor which, unawares to the person operated on, is making him bald; so softly and deftly do Oriental barbers perform their work. Or he may mean that as with a razor a man's throat may be cut very speedily, under the pretence of shaving him, even thus keenly, basely, but effectually Doeg destroyed the band of the priests. Whetted by malice, and guided by craft, he did his cruel work with accursed thoroughness.

3. "*Thou lovest evil more than good.*" He loved not good at all. If both had been equally profitable and pleasant, he would have preferred evil. "*And lying rather than to speak righteousness.*" He was more at home at lying than at truth. He spake not the truth except by accident, but he delighted heartily in falsehood. "**SELAH.**" Let us pause and look at the proud, blustering liar. Doeg is gone, but other dogs bark at the Lord's people. Saul's cattle-master is buried, but the devil still has his drovers, who fain would hurry the saints like sheep to the slaughter.

4 Thou lovest all devouring words, O *thou* deceitful tongue.

5 God shall likewise destroy thee for ever, he shall take thee away, and

pluck thee out of *thy* dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living. Selah.

4. "*Thou lovest.*" Thou hast a taste, a gusto for evil language. "*All devouring words.*" There are words that, like boa-constrictors, swallow men whole, or like lions, rend men to pieces; these words evil minds are fond of. Their oratory is evermore furious and bloody. That which will most readily provoke the lowest passions they are sure to employ, and they think such pandering to the madness of the wicked to be eloquence of a high order. "*O thou deceitful tongue.*" Men can manage to say a great many furious things, and yet cover all over with the pretext of justice. They claim that they are jealous for the right, but the truth is they are determined to put down truth and holiness, and craftily go about it under this transparent pretence.

5. "*God shall likewise destroy thee for ever.*" Fain would the persecutor destroy the church, and therefore God shall destroy him, pull down his house, pluck up his roots, and make an end of him. "*He shall take thee away.*" God shall extinguish his coal and sweep him away like the ashes of the hearth; he would have quenched the truth, and God shall quench him. "*And pluck thee out of thy dwelling place,*" like a plant torn from the place where it grew, or a captive dragged from his home. Ahimelech and his brother priests were cut off from their abode, and so should those be who compassed and contrived their murder. "*And root thee out of the land of the living.*" The persecutor shall be eradicated, stubbed up by the root, cut up root and branch. He sought the death of others and death shall fall upon him. He troubled the land of the living, and he shall be banished to that land where the wicked cease from troubling. Those who will not "let live" have no right to "live." God will turn the tables on malicious men, and mete to them a portion with their own measure. "SELAH." Pause again, and behold the divine justice proving itself more than a match for human sin.

6 The righteous also shall see, and fear, and shall laugh at him:

7 Lo, *this is* the man *that* made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, *and* strengthened himself in his wickedness.

8 But I *am* like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.

9 I will praise thee for ever, because thou hast done *it*: and I will wait on thy name; for *it is* good before thy saints.

6. "*The righteous*"—the object of the tyrant's hatred—shall outlive his enmity, and "*also shall see,*" before his own face, the end of the ungodly oppressor. God permits Mordecai to see Haman hanging on the gallows. David had brought to him the tokens of Saul's death on Gilboa. "*And fear.*" Holy awe shall sober the mind of the good man; he shall reverently adore the God of providence. "*And shall laugh at him.*" If not with righteous joy, yet with solemn contempt. Schemes so far-reaching all baffled, plans so deep, so politic, all thwarted. Mephistopheles outwitted, the old serpent taken in his own subtlety. This is a goodly theme for that deep-seated laughter which is more akin to solemnity than merriment.

7. "*Lo.*" Look ye here, and read the epitaph of a mighty man, who lorded it proudly during his little hour, and set his heel upon the necks of the Lord's chosen. "*This is the man that made not God his strength.*" Behold the man! The great vainglorious man. He found a fortress, but not in God; he gloried in his might, but not in the Almighty. Where is he now? How has it fared with him in the hour of his need? Behold his ruin, and be instructed. "*But trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness.*" The substance he had gathered, and the mischiefs he had wrought, were his boast and glory. Wealth and wickedness are dreadful companions; when combined they make a monster. When the devil is master of money bags, he is a devil indeed. Beelzebub and Mammon together heat the furnace seven times hotter for the child of God, but in the end they shall work out their own destruction. Wherever we see to-day a man great in sin and substance, we shall do well to anticipate his end, and view this verse as the divine *in memoriam*.

8. "*But I,*" hunted and persecuted though I am, "*am like a green olive tree.*" I am not plucked up or destroyed, but am like a flourishing olive, which out of

the rock draws oil, and amid the drought still lives and grows. "*In the house of God.*" He was one of the divine family, and could not be expelled from it; his place was near his God, and there was he safe and happy, despite all the machinations of his foes. He was bearing fruit, and would continue to do so when all his proud enemies were withered like branches lopped from the tree. "*I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.*" Eternal mercy is my present confidence. David knew God's mercy to be eternal and perpetual, and in that he trusted. What a rock to build on! What a fortress to fly to!

9. "*I will praise thee for ever.*" Like thy mercy shall my thankfulness be. While others boast in their riches I will boast in my God; and when their glorying is silenced for ever in the tomb, my song shall continue to proclaim the loving-kindness of Jehovah. "*Because thou hast done it.*" Thou hast vindicated the righteous, and punished the wicked. God's memorable acts of providence, both to saints and sinners, deserve and must have our gratitude. David views his prayers as already answered, the promises of God as already fulfilled, and therefore at once lifts up the sacred Psalm. "*And I will wait on thy name.*" God shall still be the Psalmist's hope; he will not in future look elsewhere. He whose name has been so gloriously made known in truth and righteousness, is justly chosen as our expectation for years to come. "*For it is good before thy saints.*" Before or among the saints David intended to wait, feeling it to be good both for him and them to look to the Lord alone, and wait for the manifestation of his character in due season. Men must not too much fluster us; our strength is to sit still. Let the mighty ones boast, we will wait on the Lord; and if their haste brings them present honour, our patience will have its turn by-and-by, and bring us the honour which excelletlh.

EXPLANATORY NOTES AND QUAIN T SAYINGS.

Title.—That *Maschil* means a sacred composition, is evident from the seventh verse of the 47th Psalm, where the passage which we render, "Sing ye praises with understanding," is literally, "Sing ye a *Maschil.*" or song of instruction. This word occurs as a title in thirteen places; and six times is prefixed to compositions of David's. In several instances it occurs in consecutive Psalms; *i.e.*, in the 42nd (of which the 43rd is the sequel), the 44th and 45th, the 52nd, 53rd, 54th, and 55th, the 88th and 89th. A circumstance which favours the notion that the term was one peculiarly used by some particular editor or collector of a certain portion of the Psalter.—*John Jebb.*

Verse 1 (first clause).—*Why doth he glory in malice that is mighty?* that is, he, that in malice is mighty, why doth he glory? There is need that a man be mighty but in goodness, not in malice. Is it any great thing to glory in malice? To build a house doth belong to few men, any ignorant man you please can pull down. To sow wheat, to dress the crop, to wait until it ripen, and in that fruit on which one has laboured to rejoice, doth belong to few men: with one spark any man you please can burn all the crop. . . . What art thou about to do, O mighty man, what art thou about to do, boasting thyself much? Thou art about to kill a man: this thing also a scorpion, this also a fever, this also a poisonous fungus can do. To this is thy mightiness reduced, that it be made equal to a poisonous fungus!—*Augustine.*

Verse 1.—By "*mischief*" is understood not simply what evil he had done, but the prosperity which he now enjoyed, obtained through mischief; as is clear both from the word *boasting* and from the seventh verse. . . . Formerly he was the chief of Saul's shepherds (1 Sam. xxi. 8), but by that wicked destruction of the priests of God by Saul, and the execution of the cruel sentence, he obtained the chief place near to the king (*ibid.* xxii. 9).—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 1.—"O mighty man." These words may be added either by way of irony, as if he had said, A great deal of valour and prowess you have shown in slaying a company of unarmed men, the priests of the Lord, yea, women and children, no way able to resist you; or else to imply the ground of his vain boasting, to wit,

either his present greatness, as being a man in great place, and of great power with Saul; or the great preferments he expected from Saul.—*Arthur Jackson.*

Verse 1.—“*The goodness of God endureth continually.*” He contrasts the *goodness* of God with the wealth and might of Doeg, and the foundation of his own confidence as widely different from that of Doeg, his own placed upon the goodness of God, enduring for ever and showing itself effectual. It is as if he had said, The *goodness* of God to which I trust, is most powerful and the same throughout all time, and in it I shall at all times most surely rejoice that *goodness* of God, since now it sustains me, so it will exalt me in its own good time; it therefore *is*, and *will be above me*. . . . Not without emphasis does he say the goodness לֵאמֹן of the strong God, a contrast to Doeg the *hero*, and the ruinous foundation of his fortune.—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 2.—“*Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs, like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.*” Thus our version. But I do not very well understand the propriety of the *tongue’s* devising mischief, and devising it *like a sharp razor*. But we may easily avoid this harsh comparison by rendering the words: *Thou contrivest mischiefs with thy tongue, as with a sharp razor, O thou dealer in deceit: i.e., Thou contrivest with thy smooth and flattering tongue to wound the reputation and character of others, as though thou wast cutting their throats with a smooth razor.*—*Samuel Chandler.*

Verse 2.—“*Like a sharp razor,*” that instead of shaving the hair lanceth the flesh; or missing the beard cutteth the throat.—*John Trapp.*

Verse 2.—The smooth, adroit manner of executing a wicked device neither hides nor abates its wickedness. Murder with “*a sharp razor*” is as wicked as murder with a meat-axe or a bludgeon. A lie very ingeniously framed and rehearsed in an oily manner, is as great a sin, and in the end will be seen to be as great a folly as the most bungling attempt at deception.—*William S. Plumer.*

Verse 3.—“*Thou lovest evil more than good.*”—“*Thou hast loved evil,*” he says, “*more than good,*” not by simply preferring it, but by substituting it; so that in the stead of good he hath done evil, and that from the inmost love of his soul, bent upon evil; wherefore he does not say that he *admitted*, but *loved evil*, not *moral* only, but *physical*, for the destruction of his neighbours; so *to have loved* it, that he willed nothing but *evil*, being averse to all good.—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 4.—“*Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue.*”—He was all *tongue*; a *man of words*: and these the most deceitful and injurious.—*Adam Clarke.*

Verse 5.—“*God shall destroy thee for ever,*” etc. There are four words the Psalmist makes use of to denote the utter vengeance that awaited this deceitful and bloody wretch, all of them having a very strong meaning. The first, פָּרַס from פָּרַס , signifies to *pull down*, and break utterly into pieces; as when an altar is demolished. (Judges vi. 30; viii. 9.) The second, סָבַב from the root סָבַב , which signifies to *twist* anything, or *pluck it up by twisting it round*, as trees are sometimes twisted up. The third, נָסַח from נָסַח , which properly signifies *utterly to sweep away anything like dust or chaff*; and the expression $\text{נִסַּחְתָּ מִן־אֹהֶל־עֵדוּתְךָ}$ means not *sweep thee away from thy tent*, but, *sweep thee away, that thou mayest be no longer a tent*; thyself, thy family, thy fortune, shall be wholly and entirely swept away, and dissipated for ever; to which the fourth word, אֶרְבֵּץ , answers, *eradicabit te*, he shall root thee out *from the land of the living*. ’Tis impossible words can express a more entire and absolute destruction.—*Samuel Chandler.*

Verse 5.—“*God shall likewise destroy thee for ever.*” Here are *quoi verba tot tonotrua*, so many words, so many thunderclaps. As thou hast destroyed the Lord’s priests, and their whole city, razing and harassing it; so God will demolish and destroy thee utterly as an house pulled down to the ground, so that one stone is not left upon another (Lev. xiv. 45); so shall God pull down Doeg from that high preferment, which he by sycophancy hath got at court.—*John Trapp.*

Verse 5.—Wonderful is the force of the verbs in the original, which convey to us the four ideas of *laying prostrate, dissolving as by fire, sweeping away as with a besom, and totally extirpating root and branch*, as a tree is eradicated from the spot on which it grew. If a farther comment be wanted, it may be found in the history of David’s enemies, and the crucifiers of the Son of David; but the passage will

be fully and finally explained by the destruction of the world of the ungodly at the last day.—*George Horne.*

Verse 5.—The poet accumulates dire and heavy words, and mingles various metaphors that he might paint the picture of this man's destruction in more lively colours. Three metaphors appear to be joined together, the first taken from a *building*, the second from a *tent*, the third from a *tree*, if attention is given to the force and common acceptation of the words.—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 5.—" *He shall take thee away ;*" or, *seize thee*, as coals are taken with the tongs.—*J. J. Stewart Perowne.*

Verse 6.—" *The righteous also shall see,*" etc. That is, to use the apt words of Gejerus, " *This shall not be a secret judgment, or known only to a few, but common fame shall spread throughout the kingdom, or city, the notable punishment of the ungodly. The righteous also shall not pass by such an event with indifference but with earnest eyes shall contemplate it,*" etc. I add, and hence shall they take joy, and turn it to their own use, to the greater fearing of God. . . . *The righteous*, upon whose destruction the ungodly man was intent, shall survive and spend their lives safe in the favour of God ; *they shall see* with attentive mind, they shall consider ; nor, as worldlings are accustomed, shall they pass it by without reflection or improvement, they shall see and *fear*, namely, God the just judge ; and instructed in his judgment by this instance, they shall be the more careful to abstain from all designs and crimes of the kind.—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 6.—" *And shall laugh at him ;*" or *over him*—over the wicked man thus cast down—*they shall laugh.* Such exultation, to our modern sensibilities, seems shocking, because we can hardly conceive of it, apart from the gratification of personal vindictiveness. But there is such a thing as a righteous hatred, as a righteous scorn. There is such a thing as a shout of righteous joy at the downfall of the tyrant and the oppressor, at the triumph of righteousness and truth over wrong and falsehood.—*J. J. Stewart Perowne.*

Verse 7.—" *Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength.*" David having showed (in verses 5, 6) the wicked man, by the righteous judgment of God rooted out of the land of the living, shows us in the next verse, the righteous man at once fearing and laughing at this sight, as also pointing at him saying, " *Lo this is the man that made not God his strength.*" The words are a divine but cutting sarcasm. The original is *geber*, which signifieth a strong, valiant man : as we say in English, *Lo, this is the brave and gallant man you wot of !* But who was this for a man ? He was one, saith he, that " *trusted in the abundance of his riches.*" Oh ! 'tis hard to abound in riches and not to trust in them. Hence that caution (Psalm lxii. 10) : " *If riches increase, set not your heart upon them.*" Now, what is the setting the heart upon riches but our rejoicing and trusting in them ? And because the heart of man is so easily persuaded into this sinful trust upon riches, therefore the apostle is urgent with Timothy to persuade all rich men—not only mere worldly rich men, but godly rich men—against it ; yea, he urgeth Timothy to persuade rich men against two sins, which are worse than all the poverty in the world, yet the usual attendants of riches—pride and confidence : " *Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded.*" 1 Tim. vi. 17.—*Joseph Caryl.*

Verses 7, 8.—Perhaps some of you have been long professors, and yet come to little growth in love to God, humility, heavenly-mindedness, mortification ; and it is worth the digging to see what lies at the root of your profession, whether there be not a legal principle that hath too much influenced you. Have you not thought to carry all with God from your duties and services, and too much laid up your hopes in your own actings ? Alas ! this is as so much dead earth, which must be thrown out, and gospel principles laid in the room thereof. Try but this course, and try whether the spring of thy grace will not come on apace. David gives an account how he came to stand and flourish when some that were rich and mighty, on a sudden withered and came to nothing. " *Lo,*" saith he, " *this is the man that made not God his strength ; but trusted in the abundance of his riches.*" " *But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God : I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.*" While others trust in the riches of their own righteousness and services, and make not Christ their strength, do thou renounce all, and trust in the mercy of God in Christ, and thou shalt be like a green olive when they fade and wither.—*William Gurnall.*

Verse 8 (*first clause*):—

“ But I an olive charged with fruit
In fertile soil that grows.”

This appears to express the meaning of the Hebrew words, which our translators render, “ *like a green olive tree*,” but which in reality have no reference to the colour, but to the flourishing, vigorous, and thriving state of the plant; just as Homer gives it the epithet of “ *luxuriant*,” and “ *flourishing* ;” and Ovid that of “ *ever-flourishing*.” The fact is, the colour of the leaves of this tree is not a bright, lively green; but a dark, disagreeable, or yellowish one. Scheuchzen describes the leaves, as “ *superne coloris atrovirentis, vel in viridi flavescents*.” An English traveller, writing from Italy, thus expresses his disappointment about the olive tree:—“ The fields, and indeed the whole face of Tuscany, are in a manner covered with olive trees; but the olive tree does not answer the character I had conceived of it. The royal Psalmist and some of the sacred writers, speak with rapture of the ‘ *green olive tree*,’ so that I expected a beautiful green; and I confess to you, I was wretchedly disappointed to find its hue resembling that of our hedges when they are covered with dust.” I have heard other travellers express the same feeling of disappointment. “ The true way of solving the difficulty,” as Harmer properly remarks, “ is to consider the word translated ‘ *green*,’ not as descriptive of colour, but of some other property; youthfulness, vigour, prosperity, or the like.”—*Richard Mant*.

Verse 8.—“ *Green olive tree in the house of God*.”—Several expositors fancifully imagine that olive trees grew in certain of the courts of the Tabernacle; but the notion must not be endured, it would have been too near an approach to the groves of the heathen to have been tolerated, at least in David’s time. The text should surely be read with some discretion; the poet does not refer to olive trees in God’s house, but compares *himself in the house of God* to an olive tree. This reminds us of the passage, “ Thy children like olive plants around thy table,” where some whose imaginations have been more lively than their judgments, have seen a table surrounded, not with children, but with olive plants. Whoever, in the realms of common sense ever heard of olive plants round a table? If, as Thrupp supposes, Nob was situated upon the Mount of Olives, we can, without any conjecture, see a reason for the present reference to a flourishing olive tree.—*C. H. S.*

Verse 9.—He compares himself (1) With an *olive tree*, a tree always green, lasting long and fruitful, whose fruit is most useful and grateful: so he paints his future state as joyful, glorious, lasting, and useful and pleasing to men: plainly a reference is made to the *royal and prophetic* office, in both of which he represents himself as an *olive tree*, by supplying others with *oil* through his rule and instruction: (2) With *the olive* growing luxuriantly, and abounding in spreading boughs, and so spacious and large. . . . (3) But why does he add *in the house of God*? That he might indicate, unless I am deceived: (a) That he should possess a dwelling in that place where the *house of God* was, whence he was now exiled through the calumnies of Doeg and the attacks of Saul stirred up thereby: (b) That he should perform distinguished service to the house of God, by adorning it, and by restoring religion, now neglected, and practising it with zeal: (c) That he should derive from God and his favour, whose that house was, all his prosperity: (d) That he, like a son of God, should rejoice in familiarity with him, and should become heir to his possessions and promises.—*Hermann Venema*.

HINTS TO PREACHERS.

Verse 1.—The confidence of faith. I. *The circumstances were distressing.* 1. David was misjudged. 2. David exiled. 3. A bad man in power. 4. God's priests slain. II. *The consolation was abiding.* 1. There is a God. 2. He is good. 3. His goodness continues. 4. Good will, therefore, overcome. III. *The rejoinder was triumphant, "Why boastest thou?"* 1. The mischief did not touch the main point. 2. It would be overruled. 3. It would recoil. 4. It would expose the perpetrators to scorn.

Verse 3.—In what cases men clearly love evil more than good.

Verses 7, 8.—The worldling like an uprooted tree, the believer a vigorous, well-planted olive.

Verse 8.—The believer's character, position, confidence, and continuance.

Verse 9.—The double duty, and the double reason: the single heart and its single object.

Verse 9.—What God has done, what we will do, and why.

