

PSALM LIII

TITLE.—To the Chief Musician.—*If the leader of the choir is privileged to sing the jubilates of divine grace, he must not disdain to chant the misereres of human depravity. This is the second time he has had the same Psalm entrusted to him (see Psalm xiv.), and he must, therefore, be the more careful in singing it. Upon Mahalath. Here the tune is chosen for the musician, probably some mournfully solemn air; or perhaps a musical instrument is here indicated, and the master of the choir is requested to make it the prominent instrument in the orchestra; at any rate, this is a direction not found in the former copy of the Psalm, and seems to call for greater care. The word "Mahalath" appears to signify, in some forms of it, "disease," and truly this Psalm is THE SONG OF MAN'S DISEASE—the mortal, hereditary taint of sin. Maschil. This is a second additional note not found in Psalm xiv., indicating that double attention is to be given to this most instructive song. A Psalm of David. It is not a copy of the fourteenth Psalm, emended and revised by a foreign hand; it is another edition by the same author, emphasised in certain parts, and re-written for another purpose.*

SUBJECT.—*The evil nature of man is here brought before our view a second time, in almost the same inspired words. All repetitions are not vain repetitions. We are slow to learn, and need line upon line. David after a long life, found men no better than they were in his youth. Holy Writ never repeats itself needlessly, there is good cause for the second copy of this Psalm; let us read it with more profound attention than before. If our age has advanced from fourteen to fifty-three, we shall find the doctrine of this Psalm more evident than in our youth.*

[The reader is requested to peruse Psalm XIV., "Treasury of David," Vol. I.]

EXPOSITION.

THE fool hath said in his heart, *There is no God.* Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity: *there is none that doeth good.*

2 God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were *any* that did understand, that did seek God.

3 Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; *there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

4 Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people as they eat bread: they have not called upon God.

5 There were they in great fear, *where* no fear was: for God hath scattered the bones of him that encampeth *against* thee: thou hast put *them* to shame, because God hath despised them.

6 Oh that the salvation of Israel *were come* out of Zion! When God bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, *and* Israel shall be glad.

1. "*The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.*" And this he does because he is a fool. Being a fool he speaks according to his nature; being a great fool he meddles with a great subject, and comes to a wild conclusion. The atheist is, morally, as well as mentally, a fool, a fool in the heart as well as in the head; a fool in morals as well as in philosophy. With the denial of God as a starting point, we may well conclude that the fool's progress is a rapid, riotous, raving, ruinous one. He who begins at impiety is ready for anything. "*No God,*" being interpreted, means no law, no order, no restraint to lust, no limit to passion. Who but a fool would be of this mind? What a Bedlam, or rather what an Aceldama, would the world become if such lawless principles came to be universal! He who heartily

entertains an irreligious spirit, and follows it out to its legitimate issues is a son of Belial, dangerous to the commonwealth, irrational and despicable. Every natural man, is, more or less a denier of God. Practical atheism is the religion of the race. "*Corrupt are they.*" They are rotten. It is idle to compliment them as sincere doubters, and amiable thinkers—they are putrid. There is too much dainty dealing nowadays with atheism; it is not a harmless error, it is an offensive, putrid sin, and righteous men should look upon it in that light. All men being more or less atheistic in spirit, are also in that degree corrupt; their heart is foul, their moral nature is decayed. "*And have done abominable iniquity.*" Bad principles soon lead to bad lives. One does not find virtue promoted by the example of your Voltaires and Tom Paines. Those who talk so abominably as to deny their Maker will act abominably when it serves their turn. It is the abounding denial and forgetfulness of God among men which is the source of the unrighteousness and crime which we see around us. If all men are not outwardly vicious it is to be accounted for by the power of other and better principles, but left to itself the "No God" spirit so universal in mankind would produce nothing but the most loathsome actions. "*There is none that doeth good.*" The one typical fool is reproduced in the whole race; without a single exception men have forgotten the right way. This accusation twice made in the Psalm, and repeated a third time by the inspired apostle Paul, is an indictment most solemn and sweeping, but he who makes it cannot err, he knows what is in man; neither will he lay more to man's charge than he can prove.

2. "*God looked down from heaven upon the children of men.*" He did so in ages past, and he has continued his steadfast gaze from his all-surveying observatory. "*To see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God.*" Had there been one understanding man, one true lover of his God, the divine eye would have discovered him. Those pure heathens and admirable savages that men talk so much of, do not appear to have been visible to the eye of Omniscience, the fact being that they live nowhere but in the realm of fiction. The Lord did not look for great grace, but only for sincerity and right desire, but these he found not. He saw all nations, and all men in all nations, and all hearts in all men, and all motions of all hearts, but he saw neither a clear head nor a clean heart among them all. Where God's eyes see no favourable sign we may rest assured there is none.

3. "*Every one of them is gone back.*" The whole mass of manhood, all of it, is gone back. In the fourteenth Psalm it was said to turn aside, which was bad enough, but here it is described as running in a diametrically opposite direction. The life of unregenerate manhood is in direct defiance of the law of God, not merely apart from it but opposed to it. "*They are altogether become filthy.*" The whole lump is soured with an evil leaven, fouled with an all-pervading pollution, made rank with general putrefaction. Thus, in God's sight, our atheistic nature is not the pardonable thing that we think it to be. Errors as to God are not the mild diseases which some account them, they are abominable evils. Fair is the world to blind eyes, but to the all-seeing Jehovah it is otherwise. "*There is none that doeth good, no, not one.*" How could there be, when the whole mass was leavened with so evil a leaven? This puts an end to the fictions of the innocent savage, the lone patriarch, "the Indian whose untutored mind," etc. Pope's verse—

" Father of all, in every age,
In every clime adored,
By saint, by savage, or by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord,"

evaporates in smoke. The fallen race of man, left to its own energy, has not produced a single lover of God or doer of holiness, nor will it ever do so. Grace must interpose or not one specimen of humanity will be found to follow after the good and true. This is God's verdict after looking down upon the race. Who shall gainsay it?

4. "*Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge?*" They have no wisdom, certainly, but even so common a thing as knowledge might have restrained them. Can they not see that there is a God? that sin is an evil thing? that persecution recoils upon a man's own head? Are they such utter fools as not to know that they are their own enemies, and are ruining themselves? "*Who eat up my people as they eat bread.*" Do they not see that such food will be hard to digest, and will bring on them a horrible vomit when God deals with them in justice? Can they imagine that the Lord will allow them to devour his people with impunity? They

must be insane indeed. *"They have not called upon God."* They carry on their cruel enterprises against the saints, and use every means but that which is essential to success in every case, namely, the invocation of God. In this respect persecutors are rather more consistent than Pharisees who devoured widows' houses, and prayed too. The natural man, like Ishmael, loves not the spiritual seed, is very jealous of it, and would fain destroy it, because it is beloved of God; yet the natural man does not seek after the like favour from God. The carnal mind envies those who obtain mercy, and yet it will not seek mercy itself. It plays the dog in the manger. Sinners will out of a malicious jealousy devour those who pray, but yet they will not pray themselves.

5. *"There were they in great fear, where no fear was."* David sees the end of the ungodly and the ultimate triumph of the spiritual seed. The rebellious march in fury against the gracious, but suddenly they are seized with a causeless panic. The once fearless boasters tremble like the leaves of the aspen, frightened at their own shadows. In this sentence and this verse, this Psalm differs much from the fourteenth. It is evidently expressive of a higher state of realisation in the poet, he emphasises the truth by stronger expressions. Without cause the wicked are alarmed. He who denies God is at bottom a coward, and in his infidelity he is like the boy in the churchyard who "whistles to keep his courage up." *"For God hath scattered the bones of him that encampeth against thee."* When the wicked see the destruction of their fellows they may well quail. Mighty were the hosts which besieged Zion, but they were defeated, and their unburied carcasses proved the prowess of the God whose being they dared to deny. *"Thou hast put them to shame, because God hath despised them."* God's people may well look with derision upon their enemies since they are the objects of divine contempt. They scoff at us, but we may with far greater reason laugh them to scorn, because the Lord our God considers them as less than nothing and vanity.

6. *"Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion."* Would God the final battle were well over. When will the Lord avenge his own elect? When will the long oppression of the saints come to its close, and glory crown their heads? The word "salvation" is in the plural, to show its greatness. *"When God bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad."* Inasmuch as the yoke has been heavy, and the bondage cruel, the liberty will be gladsome, and the triumph joyous. The second advent and the restoration of Israel are our hope and expectation.

We have attempted to throw into rhyme the last two verses of this Psalm :—

The foes of Zion quake for fright,
Where no fear was they quail;
For well they know that sword of might
Which cuts through coats of mail.

The Lord of old defiled their shields,
And all their spears he scorn'd;
Their bones lay scatter'd o'er the fields.
Unburied and unmourn'd.

Let Zion's foes be filled with shame;
Her sons are bless'd of God;
Though scoffers now despise their name,
The Lord shall break the rod.

Oh! would our God to Zion turn,
God with salvation clad;
Then Judah's harps should music learn,
And Israel be glad.

EXPLANATORY NOTES AND QUAIN T SAYINGS.

Whole Psalm.—Probably the two Psalms refer to different periods ; the fourteenth to the earlier portion of the world, or of Jewish history ; the fifty-third to a later, perhaps a still future time. Jehovah, through Christ, is frequently said to turn to the world to see what its condition is, and always with the same result. "All flesh had corrupted its way" in the days of Noah, and, "when the Son of Man cometh" again, it is intimated that he will scarcely "find faith on the earth." The two Psalms also apply to different persons. The former refers to the enemies of God, who tremble when his presence is made known ; "they are in great fear," because vengeance is about to be inflicted on them for their sins. Here the Supreme Being is called Jehovah. In the fifty-third Psalm the interests of God's people are principally kept in view. The ungodly are regarded as plotting against the righteous, and it is in this relation their case is considered. The fear that was just and reasonable, in the fourteenth Psalm, because it concerned the unrighteous under a sense of impending judgment, is said to be unfounded in the fifty-third, because God was in the midst of his people, "scattering the bones of their enemies," and showing himself, not as Jehovah, but as the Elohim of his redeemed children. The fourteenth Psalm contemplates judgment ; the fifty-third deliverance ; and thus, though seemingly alike, a different lesson is conveyed in each.

The Psalm, then, descriptive of the universal and continuous corruption of man's nature, very properly occupies an introductory place in a series intended to represent the enemies of Messiah, who oppose his church during his absence, and who are to attempt to resist his power when he comes again. Before entering upon an examination of the character of these opponents, this Psalm teaches that, until changed by grace, all are gone astray ; "there is none righteous, no, not one," and that for all there is but one remedy, "the Deliverer coming out of Zion, who shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob."—R. H. Ryland, M.A., in "The Psalms restored to Messiah," 1853.

Whole Psalm.—The state of earth ought to be deeply felt by us. The world lying in wickedness should occupy much of our thoughts. The enormous guilt, the inconceivable pollution, the ineffably provoking Atheism of this fallen province of God's dominion, might be a theme for our ceaseless meditation and mourning. To impress it the more on us, therefore, the Psalm repeats what has been already sung in Psalm xiv. It is the same Psalm, with only a few words varied ; it is "line upon line, precept upon precept ;" the harp's most melancholy, most dismal notes again sounded in our ear. Not that the Lord would detain us always, or disproportionately long, amid scenes of sadness ; for elsewhere he repeats in like manner that most triumphant melody, Psalm lx. 6—12 ; cviii. 6—13 ; but it is good to return now and then to the open field on which we all were found, cast out in loathsome degradation.—Andrew A. Bonar, in "Christ and his Church in the Book of Psalms," 1859.

Whole Psalm.—A second edition of the fourteenth Psalm, with variations more or less important, in each verse. That either of these compositions is an incorrect copy of the other is highly improbable, because two such copies of the same Psalm would not have been retained in the collection, and because the variations are too uniform, consistent, and significant, to be the work of chance or mere traditional corruption. That the changes were deliberately made by a later writer is improbable, because such a liberty would hardly have been taken with a Psalm of David, and because the later form, in that case, would either have been excluded from the Psalter or substituted for the first form, or immediately connected with it.

The only satisfactory hypothesis is, that the original author afterwards re-wrote it, with such modifications as were necessary to bring out certain points distinctly, but without any intention to supersede the use of the original composition, which therefore still retains its place in the collection. This supposition is confirmed by the titles, which ascribe both Psalms to David. . . . As a general fact, it may be stated, that the variations in the Psalm before us are such as render the expression stronger, bolder, and in one or two cases more obscure and difficult.—J. A. Alexander 1850,

Whole Psalm.—This Psalm is a variation of Psalm xiv. In each of these two Psalms the name of God occurs seven times. In Psalm xiv. it is three times *Elohim*,

and four times *Jehovah* ; in the present Psalm it is seven times *Elohim*.—*Christopher Wordsworth*, 1868.

Whole Psalm.—God, in this Psalm, “ speaketh twice,” for this is the same almost verbatim with the fourteenth Psalm. The scope of it is to convince us of our sins, to set us a-blushing, and to set us a-trembling because of them ; there is need of “ line upon line ” to this purpose. God, by the Psalmist, here shows—

I. The *fact* of sin. God is a witness to it. He looks down from heaven and sees all the sinfulness of men’s hearts and lives. All this is open and naked before him.

II. The *fault* of sin. It is iniquity (verses 1, 4) ; it is an unrighteous thing ; it is that in which there is no good (verses 1, 3) ; it is going back from God (verse 3).

III. The *fountain* of sin. How comes it that men are so bad ? Surely, it is because there is no fear of God before their eyes ; they say in their hearts, *there is no God* at all to call us to account, none that we need to stand in awe of. Men’s bad practices flow from their bad principles.

IV. The *folly* of sin. He is a *fool* (in the account of God, whose judgment we are sure is right) who harbours such corrupt thoughts. The “ workers of iniquity,” whatever they pretend to, “ have no knowledge ; ” they may truly be said to know nothing that do not know God. Verse 4.

V. The *filthiness* of sin. Sinners are “ corrupt ” (verse 1) ; their nature is vitiated and spoiled ; their iniquity is “ abominable ; ” it is odious to the holy God, and renders them so ; whereas, otherwise he “ hates nothing that he has made.” What neatness soever proud sinners pretend to, it is certain that wickedness is the greatest nastiness in the world.

VI. The *fruit* of sin. See to what a degree of barbarity it brings men at last ! See their cruelty to their brethren ! They “ eat them up as they eat bread.” As if they had not only become beasts, but beasts of prey. See their contempt of God at the same time—they have not called upon him, but scorn to be beholden to him.

VII. The *fear and shame* that attends sin (verse 5). “ There were they in great fear ” who had made God their enemy ; their own guilty consciences frightened them and filled them with horror. This enables the virgin, the daughter of Zion, to put them to shame and expose them, “ because God hath despised them.”

VIII. The *faith* of the saints, and their hope and power touching this great evil (verse 6). There will come a Saviour, a great salvation, a salvation from sin. O that it might be hastened ! for it will bring in glorious and joyful times. There were those in the Old Testament times that looked and hoped, that prayed and waited for this redemption. Such salvations were often wrought, and all typical of the everlasting triumphs of the glorious church.—*Condensed from Matthew Henry*, 1662—1714.

Verse 1.—“ *The fool hath said is his heart,* ” etc. It is in his heart he says this ; this is the secret desire of every unconverted bosom. If the breast of God were within reach of men, it would be stabbed a million of times in one moment. When God was manifest in the flesh, he was altogether lovely ; he did no sin ; he went about continually doing good : and yet they took him and hung him on a tree ; they mocked him and spat upon him. And this is the way men would do with God again. Learn—1st. The fearful depravity of your heart. I venture to say there is not an unconverted man present, who has the most distant idea of the monstrous wickedness that is now within his breast. Stop till you are in hell, and it will break out unrestrained. But still let me tell you what it is—you have a heart that would kill God if you could. If the bosom of God were now within your reach, and one blow would rid the universe of God, you have a heart fit to do the deed. 2nd. The amazing love of Christ—“ While we were enemies, Christ died for us.”—*Robert Murray M’Cheyne*, 1813—1843.

Verse 1.—“ *There is no God.* ” פֶּן is properly a noun, and means nonentity, or non-existence : “ nothing of God,” or “ no such thing as God.” It cannot be explained as a wish—“ No God ! ” *i.e.*, O that there were no God !—because פֶּן in usage always includes the substantive verb, and denies the existence, or at least the presence of the person or thing to which it is prefixed. This is also clear from the use of the same word in the last clause, where its sense is unambiguous.—*J. A. Alexander on Psalm XIV*.

Verse 1.—“ *There is no God.* ” Thus denying the agency of Providence, for the

word *Elohim*, here translated *God*, means *judge* (compare Exodus xxii. 28), and has reference not to the *essence*, but to the *providence* of the Deity.—*Daniel Cresswell*, 1776—1814.

Verse 1.—It is to be noted that Scripture saith, “The fool hath *said* in his heart,” and not “*thought* in his heart;” that is to say, he doth not so fully think it in judgment, as he hath a good will to be of that belief. for seeing that it makes not for him that there should be a God, he doth seek by all means accordingly to persuade and resolve himself, and studies to affirm, prove, and verify it to himself as some theme or position, all which labour, notwithstanding that sparkle of our creation light, whereby men acknowledge a Deity, burneth still within; and in vain doth he strive utterly to alienate it or put it out, so that it is out of the corruption of his heart and will, and not out of the natural apprehension of his brain and conceit, that he doth set down his opinion, as the comical poet saith, “Then came my mind to be of my opinion,” as if himself and his mind had been two diverse things; therefore, the atheist hath rather said, and held it in his heart, than thought or believed in his heart that there is no God.—*Francis Bacon* (1560—1626), in “*Thoughts on Holy Scripture.*”

Verse 2.—“*That did seek God.*” Although all things are full of God, yet is he to be *sought for* of godly men, by reason of the darkness which compasseth our minds through original sin. For both the flesh, and the senses, and earthly affections do hinder us from knowing of him, yea, though he be present—*Peter Martyr*, 1500—1562.

Verses 2, 3.—Their sin is described in gradation. They do *not understand*, because a true knowledge of things divine forms the basis of proper conduct towards God; they do *not ask for God*, because they only care for him whose clear and sure insight apprehends him as their highest possession; they are *gone aside*, because he who cares not for him is sure to get estranged from him, and to deviate from his paths; and they are *altogether become filthy* (i.e., worthless), because man’s proper strength and fitness for virtue must well from the fountain of communion with God.—*Augustus F. Tholuck*, 1856.

Verse 3.—“*They are altogether become filthy.*” מְלִיץ neelachu. They are become *sour and rancid*; a metaphor taken from milk that has fermented and turned sour, rancid and worthless.—*Adam Clarke*, 1760—1832.

Verse 3 (second clause).—The word מְלִיץ, rendered “*they are become filthy*,” might be read, *they have become rotten or putrid.*—*John Morison*, 1829.

Verse 3 (last clause).—Evil men are not only guilty of sins of commission, having done abominable iniquity, but they are guilty of many sins of omission. In fact, they have never done one holy act. They may be moral, decent, amiable, they may belong to the church; but “*there is none that doeth good, no not one.*”—*William S. Plumer*, 1867.

Verse 4.—“*Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge?*” Conscience is a means to curb and restrain, control and rebuke corrupt nature, and the swelling forms of it. It is not there as a native inhabitant, but as a garrison planted in a rebellious town by the great Governor of the world, to keep the rebellion of the inhabitants within compass, who else would break forth into present confusion. David, speaking of the corruption of man by nature after this question, *Whether there be not some knowledge to discover their evil doings to them?* yes, says he, “*Have they no knowledge, who eat up my people as bread?*” Yes; and therefore (verse 5) “*They are often in fear,*” God having placed this there to overcome them with fear; and by that to restrain them from many outrages against God’s people, whom in their desires, and sometimes practice, they eat up as bread. Therefore this knowledge is put in as a bridle to corrupt nature, as a hook was put into Sennacherib’s nostrils (Isa. xxxvii. 29) to rule and tame men, and overcome them with fear. If they had no knowledge they would eat up one another, and the church, as bread; but there is their fear, says he, that is, thence it comes to pass they are kept in awe.—*Thomas Goodwin*, 1600—1679.

Verse 4.—“*Who eat up my people as they eat bread.*” *C’est, n’en font non plus de conscience, que de manger un morceau de pain.* [That is, they have no more scruple in doing this than in eating a morsel of bread.]—*French Margin.*

Verse 4.—“*My people.*” David may call the serious *his people*, because of his

regard for them, and because they were his supporters and friends. They adhered to him in all his afflictions. ["Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Ruth i. 16.]—*Benjamin Boothroyd*, 1836.

Verse 5.—"There were they in great fear, where no fear was." There is a fond and superstitious fear, when men are afraid of their shadows, as Pisander was afraid of meeting his own soul; and Antenor would never go forth of the doors, but either in a coach closed upon all sides, or with a target borne over his head, fearing, I guess, lest the sky should fall down upon it, according to that in the Psalm, "They fear where no fear is."—*John King*, 1559—1621.

Verse 5.—"There were they in great fear, where no fear was." Behold how fearful a hell a wounded conscience is! For why is Cain afraid to be killed, seeing there is none living to perform it, but his father and mother, and perhaps some women children which the Scripture nameth not? It is God's just judgment, that they that will not fear the Lord who is only to be feared, should stand in fear of them who are justly no cause of fear. He that lately feared not to kill his brother, is now made a terror to himself. Hereby also we may consider what is the repentance of the wicked; they see perhaps the fault together with the punishment, but they admit the fault and lament the punishment.—*Nicholas Gibbens*, 1602.

HINTS TO PREACHERS.

[See the Hints of Psalm XIV.]

Verse 1.—The fool's inside and outside.

Verse 1.—I. The folly of atheism. He who says there is no God is a fool. 1. No reason for the assertion. 2. All reason against it. II. The seat of atheism is the heart; it is a moral unbelief not an intellectual, the language of the will not of the understanding. III. Cause of atheism. 1. Loving evil. 2. Hating good.—*G. R.*

Verse 2.—I. God has not left the world to itself. II. He takes particular notice of all that is in it. III. The only thing he values in it is the knowledge of himself.—*G. R.*

Verse 4.—How far knowledge is and is not a restraint upon ungodliness.

Verse 4.—It is a sin not to call upon God. I. What is it to call upon God? Three things required in it. 1. A drawing near to him. 2. A speaking to him. 1 Sam. i. 12, 13. 3. A praying to him. II. How should we call upon God? 1. Reverently, considering (1) God's holiness and greatness; (2) our own sin and weakness. Gen. xviii. 27. 2. Understandingly. 1 Cor. xiv. 15. (1) Of what we ask. (2) Of whom we ask it. 3. Submissively. 4. Believingly. Mark xi. 24; James i. 6. 5. Sincerely. James iv. 3. 6. Constantly. (1) So as to be always in a praying frame. (2) So as to take all occasions of pouring forth our souls in prayer to God. (3) So as to let no day slip without prayer. III. How it appears to be a sin not to call upon God. 1. He hath commanded it. Isa. lv. 6; 1 Tim. ii. 8. 2. Because praying is one of the principal parts of worship we owe to God. IV. Who are guilty of this sin? 1. All who pray to any one else but God. 2. All who neglect either public, private, or family prayer. 3. All who pray, but not aright.—*William Beveridge* (1636—1708), in "*Thesaurus Theologicus*."

Verse 5.—I. What persecutors are to themselves—their own tormentors, full even of groundless fears. II. What they are to one another—though in concert here, their bones are scattered hereafter. III. What they are to those whom they persecute—made ashamed before them. IV. What they are to God—a contempt and derision.—*G. R.*

Verse 6.—I. There is salvation for Israel. II. That salvation is in Zion. III. Their salvation remains there when they are banished from it. IV. Their joy becomes greater when they return.—*G. R.*