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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Psalms

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF

THE BOOK OF

PSALMS

We have now before us one of the choicest and most excellent parts of all the Old Testament; nay, so much is there in it of Christ and his gospel, as well as of God and his law, that it had been called *the abstract*, or *summary, of both Testaments*. The History of Israel, which we were long upon, let us to camps and council-boards, and there entertained and instructed us in the knowledge of God. The book of Job brought us into the schools, and treated us with profitable disputations concerning God and his providence. But this book brings us into the sanctuary, draws us off from converse with men, with the politicians, philosophers, or disputers of this world, and directs us into communion with God, by solacing and reposing our souls in him, lifting up and letting out our hearts towards him. Thus may we be in the mount with God; and we understand not our interests if we say not, *It is good to be here*. Let us consider,

I. The title of this book. It is called,

1. The *Psalms*; under that title it is referred to, ^{<244>}Luke 24:44. The Hebrew calls it *Tehillim*, which properly signifies *Psalms of praise*, because many of them are such; but *Psalms* is a more general word, meaning all metrical compositions fitted to be sung, which may as well be historical, doctrinal, or supplicatory, as laudatory. Though singing be properly the voice of joy, yet the intention of songs is of a much greater latitude, to assist the memory, and both to express and to excite all the other affections as well as this of joy. The priests had a mournful muse as well as joyful ones; and the divine institution of singing psalms is thus largely intended; for we are directed not only to praise God, but to teach and admonish ourselves and one another *in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs*, ^{<516>}Colossians 3:16.

2. It is called the *Book of Psalms*; so it is quoted by St. Peter, ^{<411>}Acts 1:20. It is a collection of psalms, of all the psalms that were divinely inspired,

which, though composed at several times and upon several occasions, are here put together without any reference to or dependence upon one another; thus they were preserved from being scattered and lost, and were in so much greater readiness for the service of the church. See what a good master we serve, and what pleasantness there is in wisdom's ways, when we are not only commanded to sing at our work, and have cause enough given us to do so, but have words also put in our mouths and songs prepared to our hands.

II. The author of this book. It is, no doubt, derived originally from the blessed Spirit. They are spiritual songs, words which the Holy Ghost taught. The penman of most of them was David the son of Jesse, who is therefore called the *sweet psalmist of Israel*, ^{<403>}2 Samuel 23:1. Some that have not his name in their titles yet are expressly ascribed to him elsewhere, as Psalm 2 (^{<402>}Acts 4:25) and Psalm 96 and 105 (1 Chronicles 16). One psalm is expressly said to be *the prayer of Moses* (Psalm 90); and that some of the psalms were penned by Asaph is intimated, ^{<403>}2 Chronicles 29:30, where they are said to *praise the Lord in the words of David and Asaph*, who is there called a *seer* or *prophet*. Some of the psalms seem to have been penned long after, as Psalm 137, at the time of the captivity in Babylon; but the far greater part of them were certainly penned by David himself, whose genius lay towards poetry and music, and who was raised up, qualified, and animated, for the establishing of the ordinance of singing psalms in the church of God, as Moses and Aaron were, in their day, for the settling of the ordinances of sacrifice; theirs is superseded, but his remains, and will to the end of time, when it shall be swallowed up in the songs of eternity. Herein David was a type of Christ, who descended from him, not from Moses, because he came to take away sacrifice (the family of Moses was soon lost and extinct), but to establish and perpetuate joy and praise; for of the family of David in Christ there shall be no end.

III. The scope of it. It is manifestly intended,

1. To assist the exercises of natural religion, and to kindle in the souls of men those devout affections which we owe to God as our Creator, owner, ruler, and benefactor. The book of Job helps to prove our first principles of the divine perfections and providence; but this helps to improve them in prayers and praises, and professions of desire towards him, dependence on him, and an entire devotedness and resignation to him. Other parts of

scripture show that God is infinitely above man, and his sovereign Lord; but this shows us that he may, notwithstanding, be conversed with by us sinful worms of the earth; and there are ways in which, if it be not our own fault, we may keep up communion with him in all the various conditions of human life.

2. To advance the excellencies of revealed religion, and in the most pleasing powerful manner to recommend it to the world. There is indeed little or nothing of the ceremonial law in all the book of *Psalms*. Though sacrifice and offering were yet to continue many ages, yet they are here represented as things which God did not desire (³⁹⁰⁶Psalm 40:6, 51:16), as things comparatively little, and which in time were to vanish away. But the word and law of God, those parts of it which are moral and of perpetual obligation are here all along magnified and made honourable, nowhere more. And Christ, the crown and centre of revealed religion, the foundation, corner, and top-stone, of that blessed building, is here clearly spoken of in type and prophecy, his sufferings and the glory that should follow, and the kingdom that he should set up in the world, in which God's covenant with David, concerning his kingdom, was to have its accomplishment. What a high value does this book put upon the word of God, his statutes and judgments, his covenant and the great and precious promises of it; and how does it recommend them to us as our guide and stay, and our heritage for ever!

IV. The use of it. All scripture, being given by inspiration of God, is profitable to convey divine light into our understandings; but this book is of singular use with that to convey divine life and power, and a holy warmth, into our affections. There is no one book of scripture that is more helpful to the devotions of the saints than this, and it has been so in all ages of the church, ever since it was written and the several parts of it were delivered to the chief musician for the service of the church.

1. It is of use to be sung. Further than David's psalms we *may* go, but we *need* not, for hymns and spiritual songs. What the rules of the Hebrew metre were even the learned are not certain. But these psalms ought to be rendered according to the metre of every language, at least so as that they may be sung for the edification of the church. And methinks it is a great comfort to us, when we are singing David's psalms, that we are offering the very same praises to God that were offered to him in the days of David

and the other godly kings of Judah. So rich, so well made, are these divine poems, that they can never be exhausted, can never be worn thread-bare.

2. It is of use to be read and opened by the ministers of Christ, as containing great and excellent truths, and rules concerning good and evil. Our Lord Jesus expounded the psalms to his disciples, the gospel psalms, and opened their understandings (for he had the key of David) to understand them, ⁴²⁴Luke 24:44.

3. It is of use to be read and meditated upon by all good people. It is a full fountain, out of which we may all be drawing water with joy.

(1.)The Psalmist's experiences are of great use for our direction, caution, and encouragement. In telling us, as he often does, what passed between God and his soul, he lets us know what we may expect from God, and what he will expect, and require, and graciously accept, from us. David was a man after God's own heart, and therefore those who find themselves in some measure according to his heart have reason to hope that they are renewed by the grace of God, after the image of God, and many have much comfort in the testimony of their consciences for them that they can heartily say *Amen* to David's prayers and praises.

(2.)Even the Psalmist's expressions too are of great use; and by them the Spirit helps our praying infirmities, because we know not what to pray for as we ought. In all our approaches to God, as well as in our first returns to God, we are directed to *take with us words* (³⁴⁴Hosea 14:2), these words, words which the Holy Ghost teaches. If we make David's psalms familiar to us, as we ought to do, whatever errand we have at the throne of grace, by way of confession, petition, or thanksgiving, we may thence be assisted in the delivery of it; whatever devout affection is working in us, holy desire or hope, sorrow or joy, we may there find apt words wherewith to clothe it, sound speech which cannot be condemned. It will be good to collect the most proper and lively expressions of devotion which we find here, and to methodize them, and reduce them to the several heads of prayer, that they may be the more ready to us. Or we may take sometimes one choice psalm and sometimes another, and pray it over, that is, enlarge upon each verse in our own thoughts, and offer up our meditations to God as they arise from the expressions we find there. The learned Dr. Hammond, in his preface to his paraphrase on the Psalms (sect. 29), says, "That going over a few psalms with these interpositions of mental devotion, suggested, animated, and maintained, by the native life and

vigour which is in the psalms, is much to be preferred before the saying over the whole Psalter, since nothing is more fit to be averted in religious offices than their degenerating into heartless dispirited recitations." If, as St. Austin advises, we form our spirit by the affection of the psalm, we may then be sure of acceptance with God in using the language of it. Nor is it only our devotion, and the affections of our mind, that the book of Psalms assists, teaching us how to offer praise so as to glorify God, but, it is also a directory to the actions of our lives, and teaches us how to *order our conversation aright, so as that, in the end, we may see the salvation of God*, ^{<41E>}Psalm 1:23. The Psalms were thus serviceable to the Old-Testament church, but to us Christians they may be of more use than they could be to those who lived before the coming of Christ; for, as Moses's sacrifices, so David's songs, are expounded and made more intelligible by the gospel of Christ, which lets us within the veil; so that if to David's prayers and praises we all St. Paul's prayers in his epistles, and the new songs in the Revelation, we shall be thoroughly furnished for this good work; for the scripture, perfected, makes the man of God perfect.

As to the division of this book, we need not be solicitous; there is no connexion (or very seldom) between one psalm and another, nor any reason discernable for the placing of them in the order wherein we here find them; but it seems to be ancient, for that which is now the second psalm was so in the apostles' time, ^{<413>}Acts 13:33. The vulgar Latin joins the 9th and 10th together; all popish authors quote by that, so that, thenceforward, throughout the book, their number is one short of ours; our 11 is their 10, our 119 is their 118. But they divide the 147th into two, and so make up the number of 150. Some have endeavoured to reduce the psalms to proper heads, according to the matter of them, but there is often such a variety of matter in one and the same psalm that this cannot be done with any certainty. But the seven penitential Psalms have been in a particular manner singled out by the devotions of many. They are reckoned to be Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. The Psalms were divided into five books, each concluding with *Amen, Amen, or Hallelujah*; the first ending with Psalm 41, the second with Psalm 72, the third with Psalm 89, the fourth with Psalm 106, the fifth with Psalm 150. Others divide them into three fifties; others into sixty parts, two for every day of the month, one for the morning, the other for the evening. Let good Christians divide them for themselves, so as may best increase their

acquaintance with them, that they may have them at hand upon all occasions and may sing them in the spirit and with the understanding.