

## NINE

### On Worshipping God

#### *A Meditation on Psalm 73*

Yet had I let myself talk on in this fashion,  
I should have betrayed the family of God.  
So I set myself to think this out  
but I found it too hard for me,  
until I went into God's sacred courts;  
there I saw clearly what their end would be.  
... But my chief good is to be near thee, O God;  
I have chosen thee, Lord God, to be my refuge.  
(Ps 73:15–17, 28, NEB)

IT IS MOST SALUTARY to read Scripture and find that it at once does two things: it describes the reader, God, and the world, and then, with equal firmness and yet tenderness, it energizes and enkindles one's passion for the Good, which is God.

There is no end to books describing the state of men, and there is scarcely a lesser number of books and words calculated to stir human aspiration; but Holy Writ is somehow both. It tells us about ourselves in unmistakably clear language, and then it lights the fires of enthusiasm, of wishing, of desiring, but always for the Good, which fires are otherwise so choked and dampened by the toil of daily life. A danger that threatens one's spirit is reading the Scripture only for the true descriptions, because it then becomes easy and even alluring to let the descriptions apply only to the authors and their world, perhaps to David if we read a Psalm or to Paul if we read an Epistle. Such forgetfulness of oneself—even if it is that of the learned scholar who, for the sake of his learning, omits himself—is a religious snare.

For God is so merciful and kind that not only David and Paul are stirred and excited to a new quality of life, but the reader too. Rather must each one of us, each by himself, learn to translate the words about others into words about himself. What makes Scripture holy and edifying and earnest for me—and the emphasis is upon “me”—are not the words considered by themselves but the mode in which they are read and understood. The “how” of reading is all-important.

After King David had shamefully arranged for the death of Bathsheba’s husband so that he could possess her, Nathan the prophet came to David with a simple story of wrongdoing. His tale was about a rich man with many sheep who took the poor man’s single ewe. While the prophet spoke, David became appropriately angry and promised death to the malefactor, and, as befits a great king, fourfold recompense (2 Sam 12). Think about this for a moment. Obvious injustice was being related; wrong had been done and both prophet and king must have been deeply moved. The king promises everything that his power can rectify and then the prophet speaks. All that he says is, “You are the man.” Think now where the accent falls! How wrought up David was over the damage that had been done and then, suddenly, he must forget that drama and its wrongs and remember himself and his sin. Surely there was not less passion appropriate here but more. To be angry and distraught over injustices done and suffered is well and good, but to be appraised that the hearer himself is the actor who does not watch the role but plays it—this makes the story truly one for a prophet.

Is not this, too, the importance of Scripture? What else gives its words so much weight, so much decisiveness, than the fact that it is not simply stories to read and enjoy but that as a book it too says, “You, my reader, are the one.” Do we stand with the group of those who rail at him as he hangs on a cross? Of course, we can slip into this spectator role if we wish, just as men did of old. But to read Scripture in this way, to forget oneself, even if we might in a certain sense be learning about God—this is a most lamentable and deceptive way of treating the things of God. It is ours not only to read and to know, but it is ours to read and to become. The latter does not happen unless we give the permission to the readings both to describe us and then to stir within us the latent powers with a strength not our own.

But now we turn to the seventy-third Psalm, which is certainly stark and severe in description and yet solicitous of the deepest aspirations for the things of God. Surely it is not about the reader? But, first, we must pause and consider its words.

## I

The writer tells us something strange. His feet and his steps had “almost,” “well nigh,” stumbled and slipped. He knows his danger, and he knows furthermore the cause. There had been a conflict raging within him; and it had been severe enough to produce, almost but apparently not quite, a spectacle for others. If any reader has enjoyed the psalmist’s account as simply an interesting and acute analysis, then he must read on; for, as he describes his secret thoughts, his whims and relish perhaps otherwise hidden to everyone except the Divine Confidant, then he begins to describe the reader also. The psalmist is envious of those who are at ease, who are not afraid of other men, who have propriety and prosperity and all the self-possession that goes with resources. He has a longing for the state of those who enjoy their health and who exult in privilege. Ah! They are attractive, they wear their pride just like the poor man does his single jewel, the child his new watch, without any compunctions or remorse and just hoping others will take notice. Self-assured and victorious—what if their eyes do bulge out from their fatness and they indulge their follies—they at least are not groveling; and they let their tongues go and, of course, other people look at them—who can really help it?—“and praise them; and find no fault in them.”

Truly the story of human history is not one that encourages the meek. Even though Jesus promised that they shall inherit the earth, they are not running it in the present hour. It does not take much living to turn a man’s thoughts as it did the psalmist’s; for he saw as we do that praise goes to the proud and the defiantly brave. He even admits that these people who have no pangs of conscience about their recklessness, who are so disregarding of consequences, who dare to act as if God could not really know about them, these allure him. Certainly they are wicked, let us admit the fact with the psalmist; but don’t we too, as he said, really want to be always at ease and also to

increase our riches? Adulation, enough money, no anxiety, a liberal dose of the “go hang” attitude—do not these fit our needs too? With all of the above, do not religious scruples seem a little taxing, a little too romantic and far-fetched, just a trifle distracting for busy men? What does a clean heart amount to anyway? Where does it get you? Suppose your hands are innocent? Suppose you have kept them like that for a long while—what does it get you besides your innocence?

One does not have to be a flagrant violator of law in order to understand the psalmist at this point. He is talking about a quality of inner life that lurks within the most benign of humans. If one is patient with the words and their thought, it becomes clear that it is the wish, the innermost purposing of a human’s heart, that is the agent for the most important decisions we ever make. Other men may be fooled by us, for we may have our defenses and our inhibitions, which, unlike the psalmist’s, will never be overcome sufficiently to reveal our inwardness in another Psalm. We may break no laws and violate no sacredness, but still the issue is not here. For the question is, instead: is this not the way with us sometimes? Do we not have such longings, and are not these the springs that feed the sparse growth that our daily life evinces?

## II

Doubtless the reader who has sought to understand this internal conflict, and who has recognized while he experienced it that all is not well, can again agree with the author of the Psalm who says that such understanding seemed a wearisome task. What a fine human touch that is! A simple admission, it would seem, but how revealing. What is so tiring and so trying as to repair the damage, to heal the breach, with the very tools by which it was done in the first place. One rehearses each step, states and restates each possibility, retraces each wish, compares, wishes again, and compares. Every twist and turn of a thought led by passion is so simple the first time, so natural and even, but to do it again, ay, the way becomes rough and slow! With every attempt one loses the will and power to think it again. And with all of one’s thought about one’s inner conflict, is it not true that every thought seems only to carry us over the ground again instead of away

from it? People who live behind dikes cannot use the sea to repair the damage done by the sea. If one's thought has led one to envy the proud and to a nagging dismay with meekness and purity and lowliness, then it is not likely that more thought will do anything different than state the contrast and even reinforce the conflict.

But then comes a strange word. All of this was wearisome and a task—"until I went into God's sacred courts." One must not assume too easily nor too much. This phrase is not, as such, an unqualified recommendation for church attendance. For such a statement can be appropriated by the spirit of worldliness that sometimes grips the community of believers, too, and maximizes the importance of the church while minimizing the inner conflict. No, first the conflict and then the importance of the church, not the sanctuary first and then no conflict. There can be no religiousness of the kind noted in the Old Testament and the New without the inner conflict; and even a church, a sanctuary, a court of the Lord, is a triviality if it is not entered in a spirit of seriousness and need. Likewise, it must be remembered that not everything in every sanctuary speaks to the human need. Sometimes the sermons incite envy, sometimes disgust, sometimes they induce another kind of weariness, sometimes they reflect nothing in the listener's life but only what is most apparent to the speaker; and this may be neither significantly divine nor human.

Granted all this, do we not have to return to the thought that here again the issue is ours—and not alone the psalmist's? We can read all the Psalms and all the rest of Scripture and agree that for each person there talked about, that irresolution came to an end, yes, also in the sanctuary as this Psalm says. Historical facts are always at least historical, but the actual religious issue does not lie here. It is rather: has anything ever happened to me in the sanctuary? Not for others, mind you, but for myself? That many things go on there of varying kinds cannot be doubted—a meeting perhaps every night of every week. It is so important to remember what the psalmist says, because he seems to be convinced that if it does not happen of God—and where God is worshiped, there is a sanctuary—it will never happen at all. Where God meets a man there is the sanctuary, and in the sanctuary there is no substitute for meeting one's God.

It is easy enough to talk on behalf of God as men do, when they praise the church against other institutions in society or the Bible against other pieces of literature, by saying that both are God's. Such words are deceptively easy to repeat—"God's word" and "the Church of God." But the Word when spoken in the religious spirit in the Church warns us that God is not a simple part of speech that lends grace, as an adjective does to a noun. It is a mistaken and misplaced piety that stresses that a book or a place is God's and then forgets that God's place really is between the book and the reader, between the place and the worshiper. Both the book and the place become God's, of God, when a newness is effected in the lives of men. Luther spoke beautifully of this when he said that the preacher ought not to speak only of Jesus' historical life, deeds, and death, but also of the Christ within the human heart. And so it is—the sanctuary and the worship becomes of God when the transition is made that says: "It is you."

### III

What happened to the psalmist? It is quite clear that the equilibrium of passions, the inner stalemate, was suddenly over. What transpired in the sanctuary, thought had previously only made more wearisome. Strangely enough, those feelings and joys he had wanted for himself, those attributes he had admired with such intensity, were suddenly without their attractiveness. But they had not changed; instead, he had. Nothing bound him now to an emulation of that which faith decried. Now it seems as if the former objects of admiration are like phantoms in a dream, which now in the wakened state are but to be despised. What contrast can be more vivid than that? All of us who dream know full well that there is even a kind of logic, a kind of system, a semblance of order, within the dream. Nothing happens within the dream that breaks the continuity of it except waking up, and then one no longer dreams. With full awareness the entire dream becomes ridiculous; even its order and sequence is somehow out of focus. In God's sanctuary one must really wake up. It is as if all of the world and the qualities of inwardness it produces are like a dream. The transition is qualitative and sharp. Just as sleep and waking are opposites that one cannot share simultaneously, so, too, does the

psalmist learn—but not until the sanctuary gives the occasion—how much God means to exclude.

Even his judgments and evaluations change. Though the proud seemingly remain that way, assured, tough, and praiseworthy in the eyes of men, yet the psalmist's enthusiasm and his passion for such qualities disappears. He remembers what another passion had caused him to forget, namely, that their place is not only high and arrogant but also slippery. Besides, those who are so high have a long way to fall. And their grasp—is it not tenuous? Can it not all be swept away in a moment and even because of a failure of nerve? But who is the fool except the psalmist? His stupidity and ignorance he now acknowledges, and he confesses to behaving like a beast towards God. The resentful envy that caused him to wish for the bravado exemplified by others, he now understands to have been a hidden quality of his own life. Of course, the men were there whom he envied, but was his envy their fault or his? Now, it is clear that the locus of difficulty is not in others but in himself. However wide the stage in history upon which we live, it behooves us to remember that God always makes Himself known on the small stage where the struggle between the qualities of passions takes place. When anyone discovers the importance of the quality of his own life, when he feels the conflict to be decisive, then God is indeed near. So it was for the psalmist, and so it is for every man.

But the stress must be laid by each man himself. The psalmist's life found an expression in literature that has been remembered for many centuries. As pious as is the memory of the great ones among the dead who lived and died for God, still the memory of their lives and deeds is for the sake of our lives and deeds. Their deeds and even their deaths are never ours, but they can nonetheless remind us of the sanctuary and all that God is gracious enough to resolve. It may be tempting to accept the victory of which the writer has spoken without ever really having struggled. It is an inducement to light-mindedness to believe and to say that "God is my strength," or to ask, "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" if we say this only on the credit of the psalmist. For all of us, including the psalmist, there is a middle term. On one side, there was and is the envy of the rich and the proud and a corresponding chagrin concerning the pursuit of holiness; on the other side, there was and is the desire for God and the acceptance of

His portion forever. But how does one move from one to the other? All the thinking we can muster does not supply the motives powerful enough to turn us from one to the other. Verily, there is no victory, no resolution, until each goes into the court seeking God.

Neither the Scripture nor the Church is for our amusement. Scripture tells us many stories about the relations between God and men. Everything human bears upon it, and almost everything human is found in Holy Writ. Yet men have read it and pondered it, some for many years, without letting it transform them. The most serious difficulty it describes is the familiar one each of us faces in his own life. But there is another difficulty, which, familiar as it is, does not become easier from much retelling. All of us must make the transition from the third person to the first. The Church is God's when it helps a man to do this. This is why it exists. No man has strength enough to fight alone. It is the sign of stern humanness, biblical manliness, genuine personality, to conduct one's life in such a manner that God's help becomes essential. To see the world and all that is within it, to have one's passion aroused and a contrariety within, to know that this has happened before and many times—all of this is to be human and to know one's common humanity. But the Church is a sanctuary of God where the focus becomes proper and human beings are awakened. The passion for God and holiness is strengthened and the passion for worldliness, which otherwise has no name but what the common sense of the world gives it, is seen in a new light. What the Church does is really very little, but it is most important—it tells the same story so that it includes me. Nothing can be so glorious when it is God's story in the first place.