

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. IV.

JULY, 1924.

No. 7.

The Laughter of God.

W. H. T. DAV, St. Louis, Mo.

"He that sitteth in the heavens shall *laugh*; the Lord shall *have them in derision*." Ps. 2, 4.

"The Lord shall *laugh* at him; for He seeth that his day is coming." Ps. 37, 13.

"But Thou, O Lord, shalt *laugh* at them; thou shalt *have* all the heathen *in derision*." Ps. 59, 8.

"I also will *laugh* at your calamity; I will *mock* when your fear cometh." Prov. 1, 26.

Vision a Tom Paine or a Bob Ingersoll with an audience of kindred spirits before these texts and try to forecast the effect. "There you have your Christian God! A fiend, a ghoul, an ogre, to whom the sorrows of men serve as occasions of merriment and their sufferings as exquisite sport; who answers the groans of the afflicted with guffaws of heartless glee and the cries of the distressed with peals of mirth. While you cringe before Him in abject misery and pour out your bruised heart in supplications that would melt a stone, He sits on His sapphire throne and splits with laughter"; etc., etc. Yes, to the infidel mind *sans* grace, *sans* fairness, and *sans* common sense, to the scornful tongue, trained to jibes and sneers and blasphemies, these texts have ever been a most valuable asset, a cherished revelation, because they seemed to confirm the blackest imaginings of godless hearts concerning Him whose existence they deny and in whom they are nevertheless intensely interested. Even the regenerate stumble at these texts, for the old *ego* still remaining in them is essentially skeptic, agnostic, and prone to lend a willing ear to the whisperings of the Father of Lies. A staunch heart of faith and a reverent and meek mind are required for a profitable study of these texts, or the idea that lies plain on their surface will prove shocking, repellent.

The language of these texts is so bold that it seems highly improbable that a mere human mind would have conceived the

thought that is here expressed. The very abnormality of the scenes depicted suggests a higher source of information. The Spirit who spoke by the prophets and who searcheth the depths of the Deity by these texts admits men to a knowledge which they could not have of themselves. These texts are one of the minor proofs for the inspiration of the Scriptures. We can rest assured that, if men had made our Bible and created a God for whom they wished to gain the affections and admiration of men, they would not have introduced to us a God who laughs at the misfortune of mortals.

Does God, then, laugh? If this is made a question of serious concern, it is best to expand it so as to take in similar phenomena. Does God smell? Gen. 8, 21; Lev. 26, 31; Amos 5, 21; Eph. 5, 2. Does God touch? Ps. 104, 32; Jer. 1, 9; Amos 9, 5. Does God walk, sit, stand, wake, sleep, feel pleasure, sorrow, anger? Does He repent, relax His purpose, etc.? Scripture predicates all these activities of God. Yet Scripture emphasizes that "God is not a man," Num. 23, 19; 1 Sam. 15, 29. The lesson taught at Jacob's Well about God establishes both the reality of God and the unreality of some men's thoughts about God. John 4, 21—24. But why does God depict Himself to men in terms of humanity? Because that is the proper way to make Himself understood by *men*. When He has angels to deal with, He most likely adopts another way, and still another way when He wants the attention of brutes. When we wish to communicate with a Chinaman, we know that we have to talk Chinese to him. A mother adopts the imperfect vocabulary of her child when speaking with him. Such adaptation, or condescension, is considered true wisdom in our earthly relationships; there is no reason why it should be regarded as something else in God's relationship to His creatures. The anthropomorphic phrases by which the sacred writers attribute to God parts, actions, and affections which properly belong to man; likewise anthropopathic expressions by which human passions and sufferings are ascribed to God, *have their source and justification in the single fact that God elects to communicate with man*. That is the primary wonder: God *speaks* to us. For a simple, uncompounded Being like the Divine Spirit, who has no parts nor organs, to do this is so great a miracle that men's amazement should begin right at the point of God's speech, or revelation, in terms of human language. *What He says is just now a minor wonder.*

As long as the essential difference between God and human beings is recognized and insisted on, as is done by Christianity, the anthropopathies of Scripture create no danger to the purity

of faith. On the contrary, they convey to us many a comforting assurance that could not come to us in any other way, as far as we can see. The well-informed Bible-student automatically interprets the anthropopathies of Scripture in a manner suitable to the majesty of the divine nature, *θεοπροπῶς*. The eye of God represents to him God's knowledge and watchful care; the arm of God, His power and strength; the ear of God, His attention to prayer; God's anger, the divine aversion to something; God's repentance, His altered mode of proceeding, etc. These matters are to the devout reader of Scripture *realities, real acts, real conditions, real happenings in God*, although he is unable to define the process of God's seeing and hearing by his physiology, or God's emotions by his psychology. He confesses with Luther: "Who knows what that is which is called God? It is superior to our body, superior to our spirit, superior to anything that we can say, hear, or think." (XX, 1005.) But when the believer declares: "Thou, God, seest me," he expresses his conviction that God really is aware of him, beholds him, follows his movements, although he does not picture to himself two keen monster eyes peering out of infinite space and riveted upon him. The most perfect Spirit sees by a most perfect spirit-vision, hears, feels, moves, expresses Himself in a most perfect spirit-fashion. God performs in His own incomprehensible and inscrutable way those very acts which men call by those names.

And so God laughs and mocks. We hear no loud vocal explosions reverberating through the welkin, no cutting ironies, no bitter sarcasms strike our ear, but there is something going on in God which, if certain men could hear and see it, would blanch their brazen cheeks and petrify them with horror. Of far more serious import than the question: *How* does God laugh and mock at men? is the question: *Why* does He do it? Those who point with scorn at the laughing God of the Bible and can only speak with disdain of these texts seem to have no eyes and ears for those things which form the objects of divine ridicule. If they would stop to consider the cause, perhaps their amazement and indignation at the effect would vanish or be turned into awe and admiration.

The entire structure of the Second Psalm is dramatic: the conversations that are here introduced are without parallel. So is the psalmist's subject. He beholds in prophetic vision an astounding revolt against God as He has revealed Himself in Christ. The insurrection is world-wide: the nations and people of this earth, not only the *גוים* in so far as they are non-Jews, but the various

racés and nationalities of mankind, are involved in it. The rebellion is international — the one, great real *Internationale*, of which the famous red or black type which we know from history are merely species. It is not a factional uprising, as when the masses clash with the classes. In this issue the highest ranks of the social and political order are in hearty accord with the lowest: kings and rulers lead on their subjects. It is not a haphazard enterprise in which they engage without any real interest in the outcome: they “set themselves,” that is, they take a determined stand; they “take counsel,” literally “sit together” in profound deliberations. They plot and scheme with all prudence and cunning, and they are organizing the most powerful alliance in the world. The moving force in this revolt is not merely the natural perverseness, truancy, and frowardness of the carnal mind, which seeks to cast off moral restraints of the Law, stifles the voice of conscience, and sets up a practical atheism; it is not the intellectual rebellion of man’s reason against revealed truth that establishes itself as theoretical atheism, agnosticism, skepticism; it goes deeper than either of these. It is the rebellion against the divine economy of grace as exhibited and executed in the mission of the Anointed, the divinely chosen and appointed Redeemer of the world. The rebellion is not only antideistic, but antichristian. The bands and cords which the revolutionaries mean to break and cast off are the constraints of the rescuing love of God manifested in Christ, the Gospel scheme of reclaiming men from sin and eternal death by the sacrificial life and death of God’s Son unto a new life in the Spirit here and in glory hereafter. It is primarily and directly the Christology of the Scriptures against which the rebel machinations and assaults are directed. The earliest Christians were pointed to the scenes during the trial of Christ, against whom “both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were gathered together,” Acts 4, 25 ff., as the fulfilment of this prophetic vision. (Comp. Acts 13, 33.) It was on Good Friday, according to these New Testament references, that God laughed.

If the lead which the Spirit points in these texts is followed, it takes us to all the appalling scenes which men’s opposition to the preaching of Christ crucified has produced, beginning at Jerusalem in the days of the apostles, continuing through all the centuries of the Christian era, and terminating in the Armageddon of the Apocalypse. The stoning of Stephen, the sufferings of Paul, the persecutions of Christians under the Roman emperors and the

Roman popes, the ceaseless attacks upon the vital truths of Christianity attempted by innumerable individuals and sects, the anti-scriptural and antichristian program of modern theologies — all these are embraced in the vision of the psalmist. Looking at the sight which startled the prophet with our knowledge of what has happened since then, during nearly three thousand years, we almost see concrete figures rising out of the tumult which the holy writer has visioned: Arius, Pelagius, the coryphees of scholastic theology bowing to the dictation of the pagan Aristotle, the English Deists, the French Naturalists, the German Rationalists, the Russian Bolsheviks, and in this motley crowd many a renowned personage, many a far-famed name, could be mentioned. They have all labored and are still laboring for the common object of overthrowing the rule of Christ and His Gospel of grace. With a fury like the raging of the sea, and with the persistency of the constant action of its waves, they cast themselves against the Rock of Ages. Every ability of men, every invention of the times, every element of intellectual, physical, political, financial struggle is pressed into service for this mad enterprise. The great activities of the world are shot through with the revolutionary ideas which the psalmist has depicted, and some of them are put in operation purposely to achieve the ideal of a Bible-less and Christless world.

The psalmist viewed this rebellion with horrified amazement. His opening exclamation "Why" expresses indeed "mingled surprise at the folly and indignation at the rebellion," which he witnesses. He beholds not only the astonishingly wicked end at which this surging, blustering commotion of the tumultuous anarchists is aiming, but he sees farther to another end which the blindness of the revolvers is hiding from them. He is aware of the utter uselessness of this wild endeavor, and he senses from afar its complete failure with all the ghastly consequences which that will entail. To him the whole war against God's Anointed is *קִרְיָה*, nothing, vanity. The purpose intended will never be achieved. The Father has by an irrevocable decree established the rule of His Christ so firmly that all individual and joint efforts to subvert His dominion and neutralize His authority are foredoomed as ultrafolly and hyperimpiousness. "Sit Thou at My right hand," etc., Ps. 110, 1, "Upon this rock," etc., Matt. 16, 18 — do not texts like these look out from the confident assertion of the psalmist concerning Him whom the Father calls His Only-begotten and whom He has set up forever on His holy hill of Zion, His beloved Church?

Now, it is in this connection that we hear of the laughter of

God. Above the strife that is going on below, above the din and confusion, the madness and fury, the wild shouts of unholy joy and the quaking of the pillars of the Church, the Lord God Almighty sits "enthroned in quiet dignities." Let them rebel: He is still "the Lord," that is, the Sovereign. "It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in; that bringeth the princes to nothing; He maketh the judges of the earth as vanity." Is. 40, 22 f. He views this vain rage below with supreme contempt; it only excites His derision. As they raise their shouts of triumph over their imaginary victories and sing their proud paeans, He laughs. With a word He could shatter their devices and smash all their engines of strength and themselves with them. It is an act of longanimity, of marvelous patience, that, instead of bringing His iron scepter down upon them and knocking them into potsherds, He tells them that He laughs at them, if perchance that might bring some of them to their senses.

"All this," says Luther, "is written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Rom. 15, 4. For what is here written of Christ is an example for all Christians. For every one who wants to be a sincere Christian, especially if he is also teaching the Word of Christ, must suffer his Herod and Pilate, his lords and kings, his Gentiles and peoples, to rage against him, to speak much in vain, to lift themselves up and take counsel against him. If this is not done now by men, it will certainly be done on his death-bed by the devil and, finally, by his own conscience. At that time it will be necessary to have these and similar words of consolation in remembrance: 'He that sitteth in the heavens laughs at them, and the Lord holds them in derision.' To such a hope we must cling fast, and on no account suffer ourselves to be driven from it.

"In order to strengthen still more the confidence of those in distress, he says with special emphasis: 'He will laugh and hold them in derision.' As if he would say: So certain it is that they are making useless attempts, even though their undertaking in the opinion of all men may have substantial backing, that the Lord does not consider it worth while to offer them serious resistance as if their attempt were a formidable affair, but He laughs and mocks at them as being engaged in an utterly useless task. In the same tenor He speaks in Ps. 37, 13. . . . We see, then, that our adversaries shall not only be humbled, but put to ridicule.

“Oh, how great a strength of faith is required for these words! For who could have conceived the thought that God was laughing when Christ suffered and the Jews triumphed? So, too, in times of persecution, when it looks as if we were put to ridicule and crushed both by God and men, do we ever believe that God holds our adversaries in derision?”

“This derision of God means that He has made the Jews and the Gentiles who slew Christ a laughing-stock to the whole world by raising Christ from the dead. At a time when no one could have entertained a hope that the kingdom of Christ might extend at least over one nation, He caused His everlasting dominion over all creatures to flourish mightily; He thwarted their schemes so effectually that the very opposite result was achieved, and we can sing: ‘The Lord is high above all nations, and His glory above the heavens.’ Ps. 113, 4, — the same Lord that was humbled worse than any Jew ever was, and whose ignominy was greater than any other suffered on earth. . . .

“But what purpose do these qualifying words serve: ‘He that sitteth in the heavens’? By these words he would make our hope strong, hence he pictures God to us at the same time as in serene rest and as a wonderful hidden Judge. He who takes care of us, dwells secure and quiet: when we are troubled, He who cares for us is not troubled. We are tossed about, but He sits and ‘shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.’ Ps. 55, 22.

“But all this proceeds so secretly that, unless you are in heaven, you cannot perceive it. You are suffering on land, at sea, and among all creatures. Everywhere, in all affairs, your hope of help is cut off, until by faith and hope you vault beyond all obstacles and grasp Him who dwells in heaven. Then you, too, dwell in heaven, however, by faith and hope. Here, then, our heart must cast its anchor in all tribulations, and by this method we shall arrive at a point where the evils of this world will not only become light, but even something to be laughed at.” (IV, 263 ff.)

The other texts cited at the head of this paper deal with similar situations in the lives of individual believers and of the entire Church of Christ in her conflicts with the forces of evil. The Thirty-seventh Psalm was composed to teach believers how to wrestle with the riddles of life as they present themselves to the godly in a world full of sin and wicked men. The pious person who endeavors to walk in integrity is confronted with seeming inequalities when he compares his fortunes with those of the ungodly. These inequalities reflect on the wisdom and justice of

God's providence: they excite cavils on the part of the wicked and distrust on the part of the pious. To vindicate the divine government of the world, the psalmist invites the believer to view the malice and meanness of the wicked as God views them, vv. 12—15. "You are being derided by your worldly adversaries, and your misfortunes," the psalmist says in effect, "are charged by them against your religion, your composure and uniform trust in God. But the laugh is really on your side, if we should care to make this serious business a laughing matter. God smiles at the beastly rage of your enemies; for He sees that in their blindness, not heeding the kind warnings extended to them, they are rushing into fearful misery, which has been long delayed to give them room for repentance, but is surely coming, yea, may be impending in the very moment of their triumph. Therefore, do as God does: laugh at the scorn of the world, its specious prosperity and successes, its resourcefulness and aggressiveness. The utter desolation of your oppressors is at hand. The laughter of God assures you of the impotence of your enemies' rage."

The scope of Psalm 59 is "prayer in view of malicious and violent foes, and joy in prospect of relief." The people who have placed themselves outside of the covenant relation which God holds to His people are as ravening dogs — who belong outside — and in the pursuit of their animal instincts seek prey. Like impudent dogs barking at good people that pass them, they belch out slanders against the godly, and the louder they bark, the more important they consider themselves. Not only the proverbial man in the moon laughs at their yelpings, but Jehovah holds them in derision.

For Prov. 1, 26 the context begins at v. 24 and extends to v. 32. God has with great earnestness sought the conversion of the ungodly and has sued for their heart with the intense devotion of a lover and a very affectionate friend (v. 24 comp. Job 11, 13; Ps. 68, 31; 88, 9). But His approaches were all ruthlessly repelled: they "would none of it," there was not the least willingness or inclination in them towards heeding God's counsel and reproof. Then there came a time when God gave them over to a reprobate mind, and their desolation, confusion, perplexity, anguish, dread, distress, being all still evidences of their rebellious heart which finds itself balked of its aim, is viewed by God with utter contempt. They are not crying to Him for advice or help, for they still "will none of it"; they carry their wicked infatuations into their misery and despair, and think of God merely to accuse Him. Therefore, they deserve at God's hand nothing but derision.

The Christ-hatred that forms such a melancholy chapter in the history of our race is diabolical in origin and character. Kaestner, the German epigrammatist, laid bare the satanic motive of the rebellion against Christ in one of his cutting satires. At a social gathering the renowned professor of natural history at Goettingen was asked by the jurist Boehmer what he thought of Voltaire. Without saying a word, Kaestner picked up a card and wrote:—

Den Legionen in der Hoelle
 Las Beelzebub Voltaire's *Pucelle*,
 Und jeder Teufel war ganz Ohr.
 "Ihr schmeichelt keinem Adamssohne,"
 Sprach Lucifer vom Flammenthrone,
 "Er schrieb nur, und ich sagt's ihm vor."

This he handed his questioner. (*Lutheraner*, I, 36.) This is a correct view for Christians to take of every manifestation of the mad opposition to the rule of Christ. Those manifestations which occurred during the last days of our Lord's sojourn on earth are directly called diabolical operations in Luke 22, 53: "This is your hour and the power of darkness." John 14, 30: "The prince of this world cometh"; comp. John 13, 27, etc. By the resurrection of Christ the scheme of Satan was defeated, but Satan was not converted. He carries on his evil work as the god of this world through the children of disobedience, whose minds he has blinded until at the Second Coming of Christ he shall be cast into the abyss. Until then he is raving in madness like a chained prisoner. Out of the wreckage of his works he is constructing ever new engines of assault upon the kingdom of Christ. The feverish activity of the opponents of Christ and His everlasting Gospel does not deceive any true follower of Christ.

He's judged; the deed is done.

Let the pens of Christ-haters, coarse or refined, speed over miles of manuscript, let learned men burn oceans of midnight oil in efforts to break down the divine origin of the Scriptures and explode the teaching of the deity of Jesus of Nazareth and the expiatory quality of His living and dying, let the groaning presses spout forth mountains of antichristian literature, let mammon make supreme sacrifices to finance this rebellious war, it is all *והי*. The whole mutinous gang is working for a lost cause. Heaven laughs at their frenzy, and the children of God join in the laugh.

When their worst is done,
 Yet have they nothing won;
 The kingdom ours remaineth.

(Comp. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book*, St. Louis, 218, 5. 6; 220, 9; 82, 3. 6.)