

Martin Luther's Preface to the Psalms

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Many of the holy fathers praised and loved the Psalter above all other books of Scripture; and although the work itself gives praise enough to its master, nevertheless we must give evidence of our own praise and thanks.

In past years very many books have been peddled around, legends of the saints and passionals, books of examples and stories, and the world has been filled with them, so that the Psalter lay, meanwhile, under the bench and in such darkness that not one Psalm was rightly understood; and yet it gave off such a fine and precious fragrance that all pious hearts felt the devotion and power in the unknown words, and loved the book for them.

I hold, however, that no book of examples or legends of the saints finer than the Psalter has ever come, or can come, to the earth. If one were to wish that, from all the examples, legends and histories, the best should be selected and brought together and put in the best form, the result would have to be the present Psalter. For here we find not only what one or two saints have done, but what He has done who is the head of all saints, and what the saints still do — the attitude they take toward God, toward friends and enemies, the way they conduct themselves in all dangers and sufferings; all this, beside the divine and wholesome and commandments of every kind that are contained there.

The Psalter ought to be a dear and beloved book, if only because it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly, and so typifies His kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom that it might well be called a little Bible. It puts everything that is in all the Bible most beautifully and briefly, and is made an Enchiridion, or handbook, so that I have a notion that the Holy Ghost wanted to take the trouble to compile a short Bible and example-book of all Christendom, or of all saints. Thus, whoever could not read the whole Bible would here have almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.

But above all this, the Psalter has this fine virtue and quality: — other books make great ado over the works of the saints, but say very little about their words; but the Psalter is a pattern; it gives forth so sweet a fragrance, when one reads it, because it tells not only the works of the saints, but also their words, how they spoke with God and prayed, and still speak and pray. The other legends and examples, when compared to the Psalter, present to us only dumb saints; but the Psalter pictures really bold, living saints.

Compared with a speaking man, a dumb man is to be thought a half-dead man; and there is no mightier or nobler work of man than speech, since it is by speech, more than by his shape or by any other work, that man is most distinguished from other animals. By the carver's art a block of wood can be given the shape of a man, and a beast, as well as a man, can see, hear, smell, sing, walk, stand, eat, drink, fast, thirst, and suffer from hunger, frost, and a hard bed.

Moreover, the Psalter does still more than this. It presents to us not the simple, common speech of the saints, but the best of their language, that which they used when they talked with God Himself, with

great earnestness, on the most important matters. Thus it lays before us, not only their words, rather than their works, but their very hearts and the innermost treasure of their souls, so that we can look down to the foundation and source of their words and works, that is, into their hearts, and see there what kind of thoughts they had, and how their hearts were set and how they acted in all kinds of cases, in danger and in need. The legends, or examples, which speak only of the works and miracles of the saints, do not and cannot do this; for I cannot know how a man's heart is, even though I see or hear of many great works that he does. And just as I would rather hear what a saint says than see the works he does, so I would far rather see his heart, and the treasure in his soul, than hear his words. And that is the richest thing about the saints that the Psalter gives us, — we can be certain of how their hearts were toward God, and what words they used to God and every man.

A human heart is like a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm-winds from the four quarters of the world. Here it is struck with fear, and worry about coming disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and of expectation of happiness to come; there blows security and joy in present blessings. These storm-winds teach us to speak with earnestness, and open the heart, and pour out what lies at the bottom of it. He who sticks in fear and need speaks of misfortune very differently from him who floats on joy; and he who floats on joy speaks and sings of joy quite differently from him who sticks in fear. It is not from the heart, men say, when a sad man laughs or a glad man weeps; that is, the depths of his heart are not open, and what is in them does not come out.

What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm-winds of every kind? Where does one find such words of joy as in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, nay, as into heaven, and see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from fair and happy thoughts of every kind toward God, because of His benefits. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, nay, as into hell. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled outlooks on the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict fear or hope, and no Cicero, or orator, so portray them.

And, as was said, it is the best thing of all that they speak these words to God and with God. This gives the words double earnestness and life, for when men speak with men about these matters, what they say does not come so strongly from the heart, and burn and live and press so greatly. Hence it comes that the Psalter is the book of all saints, and everyone, in whatever case he is, finds in it psalms and words that fit his case and suit him exactly, as though they were put thus for his sake only, so that he could not put it better himself, or find better words, or wish for better. And this, too, is good; for when these words please a man and suit him, he becomes sure that he is in the communion of saints, and that it has gone with all the saints as it goes with him, since they all sing one song with him.

It is especially so, if he can speak to God as they have done, which must be done in faith, for their words have no flavor to a godless man.

Finally, there is in the Psalter security and a well-tried escort, so that one can follow all saints in it without peril. The other examples and the legends of the dumb saints bring forward many works that

one cannot imitate; but they also bring forward many more works which it is dangerous to imitate, and which commonly start sects and disturbances, and lead away from the communion of saints, and tear it apart. But the Psalter holds you to the communion of saints and away from sects for it teaches you to be of like mind in joy, fear, hope, sorrow, and to think and speak as all the saints have thought and spoken.

In a word, would you see the holy Christian Church painted in living color and form and put in one little picture? Then take up the Psalter and you have a fine, bright, pure mirror that will show you what the Church is; nay, you will find yourself also in it and the true gnothi seauton , and God Himself, besides, and all creatures.

Let us see to it, then, that we thank God for these unspeakable blessings, and let us receive them and use them, and exercise ourselves in them to God's praise and honor, lest we earn something worse. Heretofore, in the time of darkness, what a treasure it would have been thought if one were able rightly to understand a Psalm, and to read or hear it in intelligible German; and we did not have that treasure. But now blessed are the eyes that see what we see and the ears that hear what we hear; and yet I fear - nay, sad to say, we see it! — that things are going with us as with the Jews in the wilderness, when they said of the bread from heaven, "Our soul loatheth this poor food." We should remember, however, that alongside of this story stands the story of how they were plagued and died, lest the same thing happen to us.

To this may God, the Father of all grace and mercy help us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be praise and thanks, honor and glory, for this German Psalter and for all His numberless, unspeakable benefits to all eternity. Amen, Amen