

The Letter of Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms

My dear Marcellinus,

YOUR steadfastness in Christ fills me with admiration. Not only are you bearing well your present trial, with its attendant suffering; you are even living under rule and, so the bearer of your letter tells me, using the leisure necessitated by your recent illness to study the whole body of the Holy Scriptures and especially the Psalms. Of every one of those, he says, you are trying to grasp the inner force and sense. Splendid! I myself am devoted to the Psalms, as indeed to the whole Bible; and I once talked with a certain studious old man, who had bestowed much labor on the Psalter, and discoursed to me about it with great persuasiveness and charm, expressing himself clearly too, and holding a copy of it in his hand the while he spoke. So I am going to write down for you the things he said.

SON, all the books of Scripture, both Old Testament and New, are *inspired by God and useful for instruction*, as it is written; but to those who really study it the Psalter yields especial treasure. Each book of the Bible has, of course, its own particular message: the Pentateuch, for example, tells of the beginning of the world, the doings of the patriarchs, the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the giving of the Law, and the ordering of the tabernacle and the priesthood; The Triteuch describes the division of the inheritance, the acts of the judges, and the ancestry of David; Kings and Chronicles record the doings of the kings, Esdras the deliverance from exile, the return of the people, and the building of the temple and the city; the Prophets foretell the coming of the Savior, put us in mind of the commandments, reprove transgressors, and for the Gentiles also have a special word. Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some those of all the rest.

The creation, for instance, of which we read in Genesis, is spoken of in Psalm 19, *The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament shows His handiwork*, and again in 24, *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: the inhabited earth and all that dwell therein. He Himself laid the foundations of it on the seas*. The exodus from Egypt, which Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy record, is fitly sung in Psalms 78, 106, and 114. *When Israel came out of Egypt*, says this last, *the House of Jacob from among a foreign people, Judah became his holy place and Israel came under his authority. He sent Moses His servant*, Psalm 105 declares, *Aaron whom He had chosen. He showed the words of His signs among them, and of His wonders in the land of ham. Darkness He sent, and it was dark, and they were not obedient to his word. He turned their waters into blood and slew their fish: their land brought forth frogs, even in the king's apartments. He spake, and dog-flies came, and flies in all their quarters*; and so on, all through this Psalm and the next, we find the same things treated. As for the tabernacle and the priesthood, we have reference to them in Psalm 29, sung when the tabernacle was carried forth, *Bring unto the Lord, ye sons of God, bring unto the Lord young rams, bring to the Lord glory and honor.*

The doings of Joshua, the son of Nun, and of the Judges also are mentioned, this time in Psalm 105, *They built them cities to dwell in and sowed fields and planted vineyards*, for it was under Joshua that the promised land was given into their hands. And when we read repeatedly in this same Psalm, *They cried unto the Lord in their trouble and He saved them out of their distress*, the period of the judges is referred to, for then it was that, when they cried to Him, He raised up judges to deliver them from their oppressors, each time the need arose. In the same way, Psalm 20 has the kings in mind when singing, *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will gain glory by the Name of the Lord our God. They are brought down and fallen, but we are risen and stand upright*. And Psalm 126 of the Gradual Psalms speaks of that which Esdras tells, *When the Lord turned the captivity of Sion, we became as those comforted*; and similarly Psalm 122, *I was glad when they said unto me, We will go into the House of the Lord. Our feet were set in thy gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built as a city that has fellowship within itself: thither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to testify to Israel*.

You see, then, that all the subjects mentioned in the historical books are mentioned also in one Psalm or another; but when we come to the matters of which the Prophets speak we find that these occur in almost all. Of the coming of the Savior and how, although He is God, He yet should dwell among us, Psalm 49 says, *God shall come openly, even our God, and He shall not keep silence*; and in Psalm 118 we read, *Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord! We have blessed you from the House of the Lord. God is the Lord, and He has given us light*. That He Who comes is Himself the Father's Word, Psalm 107 thus sings, *He sent His Word and healed them, and rescued them out of all their distresses*. For the God Who comes is this self-same Word Whom the Father sends, and of this Word Who is the Father's Voice, Whom well he knows to be the Son of God, the Psalmist sings again in 45, *My heart is inditing of a good Word*; and also in 110, *Out of the womb, before the down, have I begotten Thee*. Whom else, indeed, should any call God's very Offspring, save His own Word and Wisdom? And he, who knows full well that it was through the Word that God said, *Let there be light, Let there be a firmament. Let there be all things*, says again in Psalm 33, *By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the Breath of His mouth*.

And, so far from being ignorant of the coming of Messiah, he makes mention of it first and foremost in Psalm 45, *Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever; a scepter of justice is the scepter of Thy kingdom. Thou has loved righteousness and hated lawlessness: wherefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows*. Further, lest any one should think this coming was in appearance only, Psalm 87 shows that He Who was to come should both come as man and at the same time be He by Whom all things were made. *Mother Sion shall say, A man, a man indeed is born in her: and He himself, the Most Highest, founded her*, it says; and that is equivalent to saying *The Word was God, all things were made by Him, and the Word became flesh*. Neither is the Psalmist silent about the fact that He should be born of a virgin - no, he underlines it straight away in 45, which we were quoting, but a moment since. *Hearken, O daughter, he says, and see and incline thine ear, and forget thine own people and thy father's house. For the King has desired thy beauty, and He is thy Lord*. Is not this like what Gabriel said, *Hail, thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with thee?* For the Psalmist, having called Him the Anointed One, that is Messiah or Christ, forthwith declares His human birth by saying, *Hearken, O daughter, and see*; the only difference being that Gabriel addresses Mary by an epithet,

because he is of another race from her, while David fitly calls her his own daughter, because it was from him that she should spring.

Having thus shown that Christ should come in human form, the Psalter goes on to show that He can suffer in the flesh He has assumed. It is as foreseeing how the Jews would plot against Him that Psalm 2 sings, *Why do the heathen rage and peoples meditate vain things? The kings of the earth stood up and their rulers took counsel together against the Lord and against His Christ.* And Psalm 22, speaking in the Savior's own person, describes the manner of His death. *Thou has brought me into the dust of death, for many dogs have compassed me, the assembly of the wicked have laid siege to me. They pierced my hands and my feet, they numbered all my bones, they gazed and stared at me, they parted my garments among them and cast lots for my vesture. They pierced my hands and my feet-* what else can that mean except the cross? and Psalms 88 and 69, again speaking in the Lord's own person, tell us further that He suffered these things, not for His own sake but for ours. *Thou has made Thy wrath to rest upon me*, says the one; and the other adds, *I paid them things I never took.* For He did not die as being Himself liable to death: He suffered for us, and bore in Himself the wrath that was the penalty of our transgression, even as Isaiah says, *Himself bore our weaknesses.* So in Psalm 138 we say, *The Lord will make requital for me;* and in the 72nd the Spirit says, *He shall save the children of the poor and bring the slanderer low, for from the hand of the mighty He has set the poor man free, the needy man whom there was none to help.*

Nor is this all. The Psalter further indicates beforehand the bodily Ascension of the Savior into heaven, saying in Psalm 24, *Lift up your gates, ye princes, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in!* And again in 47, *God is gone up with a merry noise, the Lord with the voice of the trumpet.* The Session also it proclaims, saying in Psalm 110, *The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on My right hand, until I make thine enemies the footstool of thy feet.* And Psalm 9 mentions also the coming destruction of the devil, crying, *Thou satest on Thy throne, Thou that judgest righteousness, Thou hast rebuked the heathen and the wicked one is destroyed.* And that He should receive all judgment from the Father, this also the Psalter does not hide from us, but foreshows Him as coming to be the judge of all in 72, *Give the King Thy judgments, O God, and Thy righteousness unto the King's Son, that He may judge Thy people in righteousness and Thy poor with justice.* In Psalm 50 too we read, *He shall call the heaven from above, and the earth, that He may judge His people. And the heavens shall declare His righteousness, that God is judge indeed.* The 82nd like-wise says, *God standeth in the assembly of gods, in the midst He judges gods.* The calling of the Gentiles also is to be learnt from many passages in this same book, especially in these words of Psalm 47, *O clap your hands together, all ye Gentiles, shout unto God with the voice of triumph;* and again in the 72nd, *The Ethiopians shall fall down before Him, His enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarsis and of the islands shall bring presents, the kings of Arabia and Saba shall offer gifts.* All these things are sung of in the Psalter; and they are shown forth separately in the other books as well.

My old friend made rather a point of this, that the things we find in the Psalms about the Savior are stated in the other books of Scripture too; he stressed the fact that one interpretation is common to them all, and that they have but one voice in the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, he went on, the opposite is true, to some extent; for, just as the Psalter includes the special subjects of all the other books, so also do they often contain something of the special feature of the Psalter. Moses, for example, writes a song; Isaiah does the same, and Habakkuk offers prayer in form of song. And in the same way in every book we see something alike of prophecy, of law-giving, and of history; for the same Spirit is in all and He, being by nature One and Indivisible, is given whole to each: yet is He diverse in His manifestations to mankind, and each one who is taught by and receives Him ministers the word according to the moment's need. Thus (as I said before) Moses is at times a prophet and a psalmist, and the Prophets on occasion both lay down laws (like *Wash you, make you clean. Wash clean your heart from wickedness, Jerusalem*), and also record history, as when Daniel relates the story of Susanna or Isaiah tells us about the Rab-shakeh and Sennacherib. Similarly the Psalter, whose special function is to utter songs, generalizes in song matters that are treated in detail in the other books, as I have shown you. It also even lays down laws at times, such as *Leave off from wrath and let go displeasure, incline thine heart from evil and do good. Seek peace and ensue it*, as well as telling us the history of Israel's journey and prophesying the coming of the Savior, as I said just now.

You see, then, that the grace of the one Spirit is common to every writer and all the books of Scripture, and differs in its expression only as need requires and the Spirit wills. Obviously, therefore, the only thing that matters is for each writer to hold fast unyieldingly the grace he personally has received and so fulfill perfectly his individual mission. And, among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Savior's coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill. Prohibitions of evil-doing are plentiful in Scripture, but only the Psalter tells you how to obey these orders and abstain from sin. Repentance, for example, is enjoined repeatedly; but to repent means to leave off sinning, and it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed. Again, Saint Paul says, *Tribulation worketh endurance, and endurance experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed*; but it is in the Psalms that we find written and described how afflictions should be borne, and what the afflicted ought to say, both at the time and when his troubles cease: the whole process of his testing is set forth in them and we are shown exactly with what words to voice our hope in God. Or take the commandment, *In everything give thanks*. The Psalms not only exhort us to be thankful, they also provide us with fitting words to say. We are told, too, by other writers that all who would live godly in Christ must suffer persecution; and here again the Psalms supply words with which both those who flee persecution and those who suffer under it may suitably address themselves to God, and it does the same for those who have been rescued from it. We are bidden elsewhere in the Bible also to bless the Lord and to acknowledge Him: here in the Psalms we are shown the way to do it, and with what sort of words His majesty may meetly be confessed. In

fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.

And herein is yet another strange thing about the Psalms. In the other books of Scripture we read or hear the words of holy men as belonging only to those who spoke them, not at all as though they were our own; and in the same way the doings there narrated are to us material for wonder and examples to be followed, but not in any sense things we have done ourselves. With this book, however, though one does read the prophecies about the Savior in that way, with reverence and with awe, in the case of all the other Psalms it is as though it were one's own words that one read; and anyone who hears them is moved at heart, as though they voiced for him his deepest thoughts. To make this clear and, like Saint Paul not fearing somewhat to repeat ourselves, let us take some examples. The patriarchs spoke many things, all fitting to themselves; Moses also spoke, and God answered; Elijah and Elisha, seated on Mount Carmel, called upon the Lord and said, *The Lord liveth, before Whom I stand*. And the other prophets, while speaking specially about the Savior, addressed themselves also at times to Israel or to the heathen. Yet no one would ever speak the patriarchs' words as though they were his own, or dare to imitate the utterance of Moses or use the words of Abraham concerning the great Isaac, or about Ishmael and the home-born slave, as though they were his own, even though like necessity oppressed him. Neither, if any man suffer with those that suffer or be gripped with desire of some better thing, would he ever say as Moses said, *Show me Thyself, or If Thou remittest their sin; then remit it; but if not, then blot me out of Thy book that Thou hast written*. No more would any one use the prophets' words of praise or blame as though they were his own, or say, *The Lord lives, in Whose sight I stand today*. For he who reads those books is clearly reading not his own words but those of holy men and other people about whom they write; but the marvel with the Psalter is that, barring those prophecies about the Savior and some about the Gentiles, the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up. Not as the words of the patriarchs or of Moses and the other prophets will he reverence these: no, he is bold to take them as his own and written for his very self. Whether he has kept the Law or whether he has broken it, it is his own doings that the Psalms describe; everyone is bound to find his very self in them and, be he faithful soul or be he sinner, each reads in them descriptions of himself.

It seems to me, moreover, that because the Psalms thus serve him who sings them as a mirror, wherein he sees himself and his own soul, he cannot help but render them in such a manner that their words go home with equal force to those who hear him sing, and stir them also to a like reaction. Sometimes it is repentance that is generated in this way, as by the conscience-stirring words of Psalm 51; another time, hearing how God helps those who hope and trust in Him, the listener too rejoices and begins to render thanks, as though that gracious help already were his own. Psalm 3, to take another instance, a man will sing, bearing his own afflictions in his mind; Psalms 11 and 12 he will use as the expression of his own faith and prayer; and singing the 54th, the 56th, the 57th, and the 142nd, it is not as though someone else were being persecuted but out of his own experience that he renders praise to God. And every other Psalm is spoken and composed by the Spirit in the selfsame way: just as in a mirror, the movements of our own souls

are reflected in them and the words are indeed our very own, given us to serve both as a reminder of our changes of condition and as a pattern and model for the amendment of our lives.

This is the further kindness of the Savior that, having become man for our sake, He not only offered His own body to death on our behalf, that He might redeem all from death, but also, desiring to display to us His own heavenly and perfect way of living, He expressed this in His very self. It was as knowing how easily the devil might deceive us, that He gave us, for our peace of mind, the pledge of His own victory that He had won on our behalf. But He did not stop there: He went still further, and His own self performed the things He had enjoined on us. Every man therefore may both hear Him speaking and at the same time see in His behavior the pattern for his own, even as He himself has bidden, saying, *Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart.* Nowhere is more perfect teaching of virtue to be found than in the Lord's own life. Forbearance, love of men, goodness, courage, mercy, righteousness, all are found in Him; and in the same way no virtue will be lacking to him who fully contemplates this human life of Christ. It was as knowing this that Saint Paul said, *Be ye imitators of me, even as I myself am of Christ.* The Greek legislators had indeed a great command of language; but the Lord, the true Lord of all, Who cares for all His works, did not only lay down precepts but also gave Himself as model of how they should be -carried out, for all who would to know and imitate. And therefore, before He came among us, He sketched the likeness of this perfect life for us in words, in this same book of Psalms; in order that, just as He revealed Himself in flesh to be the perfect, heavenly Man, so in the Psalms also men of good-will might see the pattern life portrayed, and find therein the healing and correction of their own.

Briefly, then, if indeed any more is needed to drive home the point, the whole divine Scripture is the teacher of virtue and true faith, but the Psalter gives a picture of the spiritual life. And, just as one who draws near to an earthly king observes the formalities in regard to dress and bearing and the correct forms of words lest, transgressing in these matters, he be deemed a boor, so he who seeks to live the good life and learn about the Savior's conduct in the body is by the reading of this holy book first put in mind of his own soul's condition and then supplied with fit words for a suppliant's use. For it is a feature of this book that the Psalms which compose it are of many different sorts. Some such as 73, 78, 114, and 115, are narrative in form; some are hortatory, like 32, 97, and 103; some are prophetic, for example, 22, 45, 47, and 110; some, in whole or part, are prayers to God, as are 6, 16, 54, 102; some are confessions, notably the 51st, some denounce the wicked, like 14; while yet others, such as 8, 98, 117, 125, and many more, voice thanksgiving, praise, and jubilation, Psalm 66 alone of these having special reference to the Resurrection of the Lord.

It is possible for us, therefore, to find in the Psalter not only the reflection of our own soul's state, together with precept and example for all possible conditions, but also a fit form of words wherewith to please the Lord on each of life's occasions, words both of repentance and of thankfulness, so that we fall not into sin; for it is not for our actions only that we must give account before the judge, but also for our every idle word. Suppose, then, for example, that you want to declare anyone to be blessed; you find the way to do it in Psalm 1, and likewise in 32, 41, 112, 119, and 128. If you want to rebuke the conspiracy of the Jews against the Savior, you have Psalm 2. If you are persecuted by your own family and opposed by many, say Psalm 3; and when you would give thanks to God at your affliction's end, sing 4 and 75 and 116. When you

see the wicked wanting to ensnare you and you wish your prayer to reach God's ears, then wake up early and sing 5; and if you feel yourself beneath the cloud of His displeasure, you can say 6 and 38. If any plot against you, as did Ahithophel against David., and someone tells you of it, sing Psalm 7, and put your trust in God Who will deliver you.

Contemplating humanity's redemption and the Savior's universal grace, sing Psalm 8 to the Lord; and with this same Psalm or the 19th you may thank Him for the vintage. For victory over the enemy and the saving of created things, take not glory to yourself but, knowing that it is the Son of God Who has thus brought things to a happy issue, say to Him Psalm 9; and, if any wishes to alarm you, the 11th, still trusting in the Lord. When you see the boundless pride of many, and evil passing great, so that among men (so it seems) no holy thing remains, take refuge with the Lord and say Psalm 12. And if this state of things be long drawn out, be not faint-hearted, as though God had forgotten you, but call upon Him with Psalm 27. Should you hear others blaspheme the providence of God, do not join with them in their profanity but intercede with God, using the 14th and the 53rd. And if, by way of contrast, you want to learn what sort of person is citizen of heaven's kingdom, then sing Psalm 15.

When, again, you need to pray against your enemies and those who straiten you, Psalms 17, 86, 88, and 140 will all meet your need; and if you want to know how Moses prayed, you have the 90th. When you have been delivered from these enemies and oppressors, then sing Psalm 18; and when you marvel at the order of creation and God's good providence therein and at the holy precepts of the Law, 19 and 24 will voice your prayer; while 20 will give you words to comfort and to pray with others in distress. When you yourself are fed and guided by the Lord and, seeing it, rejoice, the 23rd awaits you. Do enemies surround you? Then lift up your heart to God and say Psalm 25, and you will surely see the sinners put to rout. If they persist, their murderous intent unslaked, then let man's judgment go and pray to God, the Only Righteous, that He alone will judge according unto right, using Psalms 26 and 35 and 43. If your foes press yet harder and become a veritable host, that scorns you as not yet anointed, be not afraid, but sing again Psalm 27. Pay no attention either to the weakness of your own humanity or to the brazeness of their attack, but cry unceasingly on God, using Psalm 28. And when you want the right way of approach to God in thankfulness, with spiritual understanding sing Psalm 29. And finally, when you dedicate your home, that is your soul in which you receive the Lord and the house of your senses, in which corporeally your spirit dwells, give thanks and say the 30th and, from the Gradual Psalms, the 127th.

Again, when you find yourself hated and persecuted by all your friends and kinsfolk because of your faith in Christ, do not despair on this account nor be afraid of them, but go apart and, looking to the future, sing Psalm 31. And when you see people baptized and ransomed from this evil world, be filled with wonder at the love of God for men, and in thanksgiving for them sing the 32nd. And whenever a number of you want to sing together, being all good and upright men, then use the 33rd. When you have fallen among enemies but have escaped by wise refusal of their evil counsel, then also gather holy men together and sing with them the 34th. And when you see how zealous are the lawless in their evil-doing, think not the evil is innate in them, as some false teachers say, but read Psalm 36 and you will see they are themselves the authors of their sin. And if you see these same wicked men trying, among other evils, to attack the weak

and you wish to warn their victims to pay no heed to them, nor envy them, since they will soon be brought to naught, both to yourself and others say the 37th.

When, on the other hand, it is your own safety that is in question, by reason of the enemy's attacks, and you wish to bestir yourself against him, say the 39th; and if, when he attacks, you then endure afflictions, and wish to learn the value of endurance, sing Psalm 40. When you see people in poverty, obliged to beg their bread, and you want to show them pity, you can applaud those who have already helped them and incite others to like works of mercy by using 41. Then again, if you are aflame with longing for God, be not disturbed at the reviling of your enemies but, knowing the immortal fruit that such desire shall bear, comfort your soul and ease your pains with hope in God, and say the 42nd. When you wish to recall in detail the loving-kindnesses which God showed to the fathers, both in their exodus from Egypt and in the wilderness, and to reflect how good God is and how ungrateful are men, you have the 44th, the 78th, the 89th, the 105th, 106th, 107th, and also the 114th and 115th. And the 46th will supply your need when after deliverance from afflictions you flee to God, and want to give Him thanks and tell of all His loving mercy shown towards yourself.

But suppose now that you have sinned and, having been put to confusion, are repenting and begging for forgiveness, then you have the words of confession and repentance in Psalm 51. Or you have been slandered, perhaps, before an evil king, and you see the slanderer boasting of his deed: then go away and say Psalm 52. And when they persecute and slander you, as did the Ziphites and the strangers to King David, be not disturbed but with full confidence in God sing praise to Him, using Psalms 54 and 56. If still the persecution follows hard on you, and he who seeks your life enters (though he knows it not) the very cave in which you hide, still you must not fear; for even in such extremity as this you have encouragement in Psalm 57 and also in the 142nd. The plotter, it may be, gives orders that a watch be kept over your house, and yet you manage to escape; give thanks to God, then, and let Psalm 59 be written on your heart, as on a pillar, as a memorial of your deliverance. And if not only your enemies cast you in the teeth but those also whom you thought to be your friends reproach and slander you and hurt you sorely for a time, you can still call upon God for help, using Psalm 55. Against hypocrites and those who glory in appearances, say for their reproach the 58th. But against those whose enmity is such that they would even take away your life, you must simply oppose your own obedience to the Lord, having no fear at all but all the more submitting to His will as they grow fiercer in their rage, and your form of words for this will be the 62nd Psalm. Should persecution drive you to the desert, fear not as though you were alone in it, for God is with you, and there at daybreak you may sing to Him the 63rd. And if even there the fear of foes and their unceasing plots pursues you, be they never so many or so insistent in their search for you, still you must not yield; for the toy arrows of a child will be enough to wound them, while Psalms 64, 65, 70, and 71 are on your lips.

The 65th Psalm will meet your need, whenever you desire to sing praise to God: and if you want to teach any one about the Resurrection, sing the 66th. When asking mercy from the Lord, praise Him with the 67th. When you see wicked men enjoying prosperity and peace and good men in sore trouble, be not offended or disturbed at it but say Psalm 73. When God is angry with His people, you have wise words of comfort in Psalm 74. When you have occasion to testify concerning God, 9, 71, 75, 92, 105 to 108, 111, 118, 126, 136, and 138 all fit the case; and Psalm 76, when used intelligently, provides you with an answer for the heathen and the heretics,

showing that the knowledge of God is not with them at all, but only in the Church. And when the enemy takes possession of your place of refuge, even though sorely harassed and afflicted, do not despair but pray: and when your crying has been heard, give thanks to God, using Psalm 77. And if they have profaned the house of God and slain the saints, throwing their bodies to the birds of prey, do not be crushed or frightened at such cruelty, but, suffering with those that suffer it, plead you for them with God, using Psalm 79.

Psalms 81 and 95 are suitable if you want to sing on a festival, together with other servants of the Lord; and when the enemy once more muster round you, threatening God's House and joining forces against His holy ones, do not you be frightened of either their numbers or their strength, for you have a very anchor of hope available in Psalm 83. If, moreover, you behold the House of God and His eternal dwelling, and have a longing for them, as the Apostle had, then say the 84th; and when at length their anger is abated and you are free again, voice your thanksgiving in the 85th and in the 116th. To see the difference between the Church and schism and to confound schismatics, you can say 87. To encourage yourself and others in the fear of God and to show how fearless is the soul that hopes in Him, say 91.

Do you want to give thanks on the Lord's Day? Then say the 24th; if on a Monday, then the 95th; and if on a Friday, your words of praise are in the 93rd, for it was when the Crucifixion was accomplished that the House of God was built, for all the enemy attempted to prevent it, so it is fitting we should sing on Friday a song of victory, such as that Psalm is. Psalm 96 is apt, if God's House has been captured and destroyed and then re-built; and when the land has rest from war and peace returns, sing that *The Lord is King* in 97. You want to sing on Wednesday? The Psalm then is 94; for it was on the fourth day from the Sabbath that the Lord through His betrayal entered on His Passion, by which He should redeem us and by which He triumphed gloriously. So when you read in the Gospel how on the Wednesday the Jews took counsel against the Lord, seeing Him thus boldly challenging the devil on our behalf, sing the words of this Psalm 94. And again, when you see the providence and power of God in all things and want to instruct others in His faith and obedience, get them first to say the 100th Psalm. And when you have yourself experienced His power in judgment (for always His justice is tempered by His mercy) the next Psalm will express your need.

If through the weakness of your nature and the strain of life you find yourself at times downcast and poor, sing for your consolation Psalm 102, and use the two that follow it to lift your heart in thankful praise to God, as in and through all circumstances we should always do. Psalms 105, 107, 113, 117, 135, and 146 to 150 not only show the reasons why God should be praised, but tell you how to do it. Have you faith, as the Lord bade, and believe in the prayers you utter? Then say the 116th Psalm, from the tenth verse on. You feel that, like the Apostle, you can now press forward, forgetting all the things that lie behind? Then you have the fifteen Gradual Psalms for every step of your advance.

Another time, perhaps, you find you have been led astray by others' arguments-well, then, the moment you perceive it, stop your sinning, sit down and weep, as they did of old by Babylon's waters, using the words of Psalm 137. Since it is precisely by being tempted that one's worth is proved, Psalm 139 will meet your need when you thank God for testing safely past. And if the enemy once more gets hold of you and you desire to be free, then say 140. For prayer and

supplication, sing Psalms 5, 141 to 143, and 146. Has some Goliath risen up against the people and yourself? Fear not, but trust in God, as David did, and sing his words in Psalm 144. Then, marveling at God's kindnesses to everyone and mindful of His goodness to yourself and all, praise Him, again in David's words, with Psalm 105. You want to sing to Him? Use 96 and 98. If, weak as you are, you yet are chosen for some position of authority among the brethren, you must not be puffed up as though you were superior to them, but rather glorify the Lord Who chose you and sing Psalm 151, which is especially the Psalm of David. And for Psalms in praise of God, having some of them the title Alleluya, you have all these, 105 to 107, 111 to 118, 135, 136, 146, 147, 148, 149, and 150.

If, again, you want to sing Psalms that speak especially about the Savior, you will find something in almost all of them; but 45 and 110 to relate particularly to His Divine Begetting from the Father and His coming in the flesh, while 22 and 69 foretell the holy cross, the grievous plots He bore and how great things He suffered for our sakes. The 3rd and 109th also display the snares and malice of the Jews and how Iscariot betrayed Him; 21, 50, and 72 all set Him forth as judge and foretell His Second Coming in the flesh to us; they also show the Gentiles' call. The 16th shows His resurrection from the dead, in flesh, the 24th and 47th His ascension into heaven. And in the four Psalms 93, 96, 98, and 99, all the benefits deriving to us from the Savior's Passion are set forth together.

Such, then, is the character of the Book of Psalms, and such the uses to which it may be put, some of its number serving for the correction of individual souls, and many of them, as I said just now, foretelling the coming in human form of our Savior Jesus Christ. But we must not omit to explain the reason why words of this kind should be not merely said, but rendered with melody and song; for there are actually some simple folk among us who, though they believe the words to be inspired, yet think the reason for singing them is just to make them more pleasing to the ear! This is by no means so; Holy Scripture is not designed to tickle the aesthetic palate, and it is rather for the soul's own profit that the Psalms are sung. This is so chiefly for two reasons. In the first place, it is fitting that the sacred writings should praise God in poetry as well as prose, because the freer, less restricted form of verse, in which the Psalms, together with the Canticles and Odes, are cast, ensures that by them men should express their love to God with all the strength and power they possess. And, secondly, the reason lies in the unifying effect which chanting the Psalms has upon the singer. For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect; and he is thus no longer to be found thinking good and doing evil, as Pilate did when, though saying *I find no crime in Him*, he yet allowed the Jews to have their way; nor desiring evil though unable to achieve it, as did the elders in their sin against Susanna - or, for that matter, as does any man who abstains from one sin and yet desires another every bit as bad. And it is in order that the melody may thus express our inner spiritual harmony, just as the words voice our thoughts, that the Lord Himself has ordained that the Psalms be sung and recited to a chant.

Moreover, to do this beautifully is the heart's desire and joy, as it is written, *Is any among you happy? Let him sing!* And if there is in the words anything harsh, irregular or rough, the tune will smooth it out, as in our own souls also sadness is lightened as we chant, *Why then art thou so heavy, O my soul, why dost thou trouble me?* and failure is acknowledged as one sings, *My feet*

were almost gone, and fear is braced by hope in singing, *The Lord is my helper, I will not fear what man can do to me.*

Well, then, they who do not read the Scriptures in this way, that is to say, who do not chant the divine Songs intelligently but simply please themselves, most surely are to blame, for *praise is not befitting in a sinner's mouth*. But those who do sing as I have indicated, so that the melody of the words springs naturally from the rhythm of the soul and her own union with the Spirit, they sing with the tongue and with the understanding also, and greatly benefit not themselves alone but also those who want to listen to them. So was it with the blessed David when he played to Saul: he pleased God and, at the same time, he drove from Saul his madness and his anger and gave back peace to his distracted spirit. In like manner, the priests by their singing contributed towards the calming of the people's spirits and helped to unite them with those who lead the heavenly choir. When, therefore, the Psalms are chanted, it is not from any mere desire for sweet music but as the outward expression of the inward harmony obtaining in the soul, because such harmonious recitation is in itself the index of a peaceful and well-ordered heart. To praise God tunefully upon an instrument, such as well-tuned cymbals, cithara, or ten-stringed psaltery, is, as we know, an outward token that the members of the body and the thoughts of the heart are, like the instruments themselves, in proper order and control, all of them together living and moving by the Spirit's cry and breath. And similarly, as it is written that *By the Spirit a man lives and mortifies his bodily actions*, so he who sings well puts his soul in tune, correcting by degrees its faulty rhythm so that at last, being truly natural and integrated, it has fear of nothing, but in peaceful freedom from all vain imaginings may apply itself with greater longing to the good things to come. For a soul rightly ordered by chanting the sacred words forgets its own afflictions and contemplates with joy the things of Christ alone.

So then, my son, let whoever reads this Book of Psalms take the things in it quite simply as God-inspired; and let each select from it, as from the fruits of a garden, those things of which he sees himself in need. For I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in man. For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, whether you have been set free from plots and snares or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.

There is, however, one word of warning needed. No one must allow himself to be persuaded, by any arguments what-ever, to decorate the Psalms with extraneous matter or make alterations in their order or change the words them-selves. They must be sung and chanted in entire simplicity, just as they are written, so that the holy men who gave them to us, recognizing their own words, may pray with us, yes and even more that the Spirit, Who spoke by the saints, recognizing the selfsame words that He inspired, may join us in them too. For as the saints' lives are lovelier than any others, so too their words are better than ever ours can be, and of much more avail, provided only they be uttered from a righteous heart. For with these words they themselves pleased God, and in uttering them, as the Apostle says, *they subdued kingdoms, they wrought righteousness, they obtained promises, they stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped*

the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens, women received their dead by resurrection.

Let each one, therefore, who recites the Psalms have a sure hope that through them God will speedily give ear to those who are in need. For if a man be in trouble when he says them, great comfort will he find in them; if he be tempted or persecuted, he will find himself abler to stand the test and will experience the protection of the Lord, Who always defends those who say these words. By them too a man will overthrow the devil and put the fiends to flight. If he have sinned, when he uses them he will repent; if he have not sinned, he will find himself rejoicing that he is stretching out towards *the things that are before* and, so wrestling, in the power of the Psalms he will prevail. Never will such a man be shaken from the truth, but those who try to trick and lead him into error he will refute; and it is no human teacher who promises us this, but the Divine Scripture itself. For God commanded Moses to write the great song and to teach the people, and him whom He had appointed leader He bade also to write Deuteronomy, to have it ever in his hand and to meditate unceasingly upon its words; because these are sufficient in themselves both to call men's minds to virtue and to bring help to any who ponder them sincerely. It is a certain fact that when Joshua, the son of Nun, entered the land of promise and saw the ordered ranks of the heathen and the Amorite kings all drawn up against him, in face of all these swords and weapons he read Deuteronomy in the ears of all and reminded them of the words of the Law, and then, having thus armed the people, he overcame the foe. King Josiah also, when the book was found, and had been read through to all, no longer feared his enemies. And at any time when war was threatening Israel, the Ark in which the tables of the Law were kept was carried out before the host, and was sufficient help against any array, except when there was among those who bore it or, elsewhere among the people, any prevailing hypocrisy or sin; for faith and an honest state of mind are always necessary if the Law is to be an effectual ally in the fulfillment of man's vows.

And I have heard, said the old man, from wise men, that in old days in Israel they put daemons to flight by reading of the Scriptures only, and in the same way uncovered plots made by them against men.

For this reason he rebuked as being worthy of the utmost condemnation people who neglect the Scriptures, while making use of impressive words from other sources for the purposes of exorcism so-called. Those who did that were playing with the sacred words, he said, and offering themselves as to daemons, as did those Jews, the sort they tried in that way to exorcise the man at Ephesus. On the other hand, daemons fear the words of holy men and cannot bear them; for the Lord Himself is in the words of Scripture and Him they cannot bear, as they showed when they cried out to Christ, *I pray you, torment me not before the time*. In the same way Paul commanded the unclean spirits, and daemons were subject to the disciples. The hand of the Lord was on Elisha the prophet also, and he prophesied about the waters to three kings, when the minstrel played and sang according to His bidding. So also is it with us today: if any one have at heart the interests of those who suffer, let him use these words, and he will both help the sufferer, let him use these words, and he will both help the sufferers more and at the same time prove his own faith to be true and strong; thus God, perceiving it, will grant the suppliants perfect health. Well knew the holy Psalmist that, when he said in Psalm 119, *I will meditate in Thy judgments: and I will not forget Thy words;* and again, *Thy statutes were my songs in the place of my*

sojourning. For with these words they all worked out their own salvation, saying, *If Thy law were not my meditation, then had I perished in my humiliation.* Paul also strengthened his disciple with like words, saying, *Ponder these things, abide in them, that thy progress may be manifest.*

And so you too, Marcellinus, pondering the Psalms and reading them intelligently, with the Spirit as your guide, will be able to grasp the meaning of each one, even as you desire. And you will strive also to imitate the lives of those God-bearing saints who spoke them at the first.