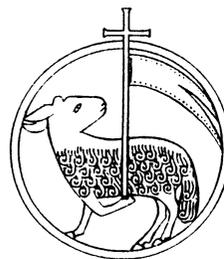


vere and to go on being faithful to the bitter end, through thick or thin.

Yet it is not all a heavy slog with no joy or good things on the way. Even in his short prayer in chapter one, Nehemiah is confident that God will keep his promise of restoration and he speaks of the faithful few who still, like himself, rejoice to reverence God's name (*verse 11*). God is himself our great reward, dearer by far than all created things.

Psalm 118, as well, is full of confident praise and rejoicing. The Feast of Tabernacles was, and still is, a joyous festival. Scholars again tell us that the psalm was most probably written for the great revival of the feast by the returned exiles, as described by Nehemiah in chapter 8 verses 13-18. There was the usual eight day celebration and, as the Jerusalem Bible version says: 'great merrymaking'. (*Nehemiah 8:17*).

We Christians also have much reason for enjoying ourselves. Indeed let us rejoice and be glad in the day the Lord has made - the day of his victory over sin and death, and hence our victory as well. What sadness if we should go back on things and try to find our happiness and prosperity in anything less than God and our promised and secured eternal fellowship with him. There won't and can't be any such fellowship without the generous giving of all we have and are to him, and to one another for his sake. The measure we give is the measure we shall get, says Jesus, pressed down, shaken together and running over (*Luke 6:38*). **That** sounds like prosperity, and without any hypocrisy on our part into the bargain - the real and authentic thing - Hosanna in the highest, alleluia!



FAITH

Praying and believing

ON THE EARTH

PROSPERITY IN CONTEXT - *psalm 118 and Nehemiah*

Worshipping God to get things out of him is hardly what we are meant to be about. Didn't Jesus sigh over the crowd who 'crossed over to the other side' to find him again after the feeding of the five thousand? "I tell you most solemnly, you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat." (*John 6:26*). Such so-called worship smacks rather of that hypocrisy which Jesus often condemned.

All the same we do ask God for things and quite blatantly at times. Scripture itself can even seem to warrant it. That's the danger with Scripture, though, isn't it. We can read into it almost anything we want to, but we know well enough that weird and strange pathways have been taken by those folk who have allowed free rein to their own whims and fancies in this field. There are some in our own time in fact who are twisting things quite a lot, trying to claim that if we get right with God he is bound in turn to see that we get along very nicely down here.

There is plenty of apparent evidence for such views in the Old Testament. Look at the first Psalm for example: 'Happy the man who follows God's law . . . not so the wicked . . . for the Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish'. But look as well at Psalm 73 which complicates the business much more, since, as is said there, it is often enough the wicked and godless, in reality, who are: 'not in trouble as other men are and who increase in riches', while the god-fearing can feel they have been wasting their time.

Maybe we feel that there's no harm in asking all the same, since Jesus actually said that if we asked we would be given, and if we were to seek

we would find. (*Matthew 7:7-11*). This is pretty strong language. Going back to the psalms too, there's an actual prayer in Psalm 118, verse 25, really and truly asking God to make us prosperous, or as other translations say, give us success. This is precisely what is being promised to us by the present-day people we spoke of above - prosperity, success and well-being, if only we will turn to Christ and really believe. It's worth, then, looking at that verse of Psalm 118, in context, to see what light it sheds on these ideas, and whether it can help us to keep properly on course in face of these rather subtle temptations that would lead us astray.

To start with there is the whole of the psalm to consider. Scholars tell us that it was written in the first place for use in Jewish temple worship. It's the last in the series known as the Hallel Psalms (*nos 113-118*) which were used year by year during the three main feasts, details of which are given us in the Old Testament (*eg Exodus 23:14-16*). It is fairly certain that Psalm 118 was used at the last of these, the Feast of Ingathering, or Tabernacles, and autumn harvest feast. Thus the psalm is liturgical, which implies the use of set forms of praise and petition, publically employed and so familiar to the worshippers, presumably, and clear in application. Verse 25, then, is not asking for any old sort of prosperity that takes our fancy. It's most likely a corporate plea for God's continuing blessing on future harvests - a prayer for the basic necessities of life.

But it is also an act of praise and confidence. The first half of the verse, with the cry 'save us we pray!' (in the original Hebrew, Hosanna!) is in fact an act of praise still used today by Jewish believers at the same Feast of Tabernacles. It was likewise used, we recall, by the crowds welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem at the approach of his Passion - 'Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord', - and so is no doubt more than familiar to us as part of our annual Palm Sunday ritual.

Thus verse 25 of Psalm 118 *is* a confident assertion that God will hear our prayer and supply our needs. It is a prayer of faith and therefore something we too can, and indeed do, use. But all the same it is not, we repeat, an open door for compelling God to give us all the latest mod-

cons, all the 'essential luxuries' with which the TV ads bombard us. God often enough 'keeps us alive in famine' and sees that 'in the days of dearth we have enough.' At least in our part of the of the world these days. But this is not always so for everyone, and the victims of hunger and want on the worldwide scale are not all unbelievers by any manner of means. Our praise and confidence, as well as our praying, must always be sober. God's ways are not our ways and without him we are all frail and helpless - in fact we wouldn't even exist but for him.

It's interesting as well to note that somebody else, in another book of the Bible, uses the same few words in prayer - someone else asking for prosperity and success. There it is in the opening chapter of the book of Nehemiah (*verse 11*). Maybe here we 'll find an excuse for broadening the scope a little so that we can ask for something more than just our daily bread? There's not much chance all the same, when again we look at the context. It's not to do with daily bread admittedly; no rather, much more to do with God's greater glory and the rebuilding of his house.

Nehemiah, still in exile in Babylon, hears from an acquaintance, newly returned from Jerusalem, that the small contingent of Israelites there are in trouble. They are bravely trying to repair the walls and restore the Temple, but the odds are against them. Nehemiah, inspired by God, wants to go and encourage the work, but as cup-bearer to the Babylonian king, how can he hope to go? He has to pluck up courage to ask, and that is the 'success' he is looking for- nothing for himself, though he is risking his life most probably - nothing for himself but all for the glory of God and the future well-being of his chosen people.

These people, note, have been chosen for a divine mission and purpose, and that means duties as well as rights. Any prosperity that comes their way will be a bonus, and most times the going will be hard, not least because of their own infidelities. Nehemiah spells some of this out in the same chapter (*1:6-9. and see also Deuteronomy 30:2-5*). It has ever been the same for God's people - for the Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah, for Jesus himself, for the Christian . . . Prayer for prosperity and success means, therefore, in the long run, asking for grace to perse-