

PSALM 41

COMMENTED BY RICHARD ROLLE

[St Augustine used this psalm to describe most deeply the nature of his mystic experience, as Abbot Butler says in *Western Mysticism*. It is interesting to compare the commentary of St Augustine (cf. *Like as the Hart*, Blackfriars Publications, 1s. 6d.) with these short notes of the English mystical writer. It will be seen that Rolle owes much to St Augustine. The commentary is modernised from the text in Bramley's edition of Rolle's Psalter collated with MS. Hatton 96.—C.K.]

AS the hart yearneth to the wells of waters, so my soul yearneth to thee, God.

This psalm is of all perfect men that are burning with the flame of God's love, and pass into contemplative life. And therefore it is sung in the office for the dead; for then have they that they yearned [for], that is the sight of God. Therefore saith he, as the hart that has eaten the adder, greatly yearns to come to the wells of waters for to drink and wax young again,¹ so when vices and uncleanness are destroyed in me, my soul desires with burning yearning to come to thee, God.

2. My soul thirsted to God, [the] well of life: when shall I come and I shall appear before the face of God?

He showeth that his yearning is to drink, that is, to come and appear before God. For this he says, 'when shall I come', as who says, 'I covet to die and be with Christ; me thinks that aught until then is long.' Me thirsteth in my yearning: I shall be filled in my coming. And when shall I appear? For what is soon to God, to my yearning it is late. Such a heart in his race suffers scorn and says:

3. My tears was to me bread, day and night: whilst it is said to me day by day: 'Where is thy God?'

That is, anguish or tribulation was not to me bitterness, but bread, that is, delight and food; for in afflictions we are taught. [The] cause of those tears is the scorn of wicked men, that say to me: 'Where is thy God?' Each man that thing he maketh his God, that he most loves. For they may show their God with their finger and my God may not be seen, that suffers me be in pain and them in wealth. Therefore make they scorn as [if] I had no God or that he would not help me.

4. There I have umthought (i.e. bethought me), and I halt in me my soul: for why, I shall pass in [the] stead of a wonderful tabernacle, into the house of God.

¹ An early legend from St Augustine, *In Enarrationes Psalmorum*.

There I remembered: that is reproofs and scorns, I think that they shall be needful and therefore I poured my soul into myself, that is I enlarged it to [the] love of God and mine enemy. I let it not rake in idle thoughts. For in this manner I shall pass through holy Church. There are wonderful lovers coming in with thought into God's house in heaven, taken with no yearning of this world. How comest thou to the privy of this house:

5. In voice of joying and of shrift,² sound of eating.

Of the feast of heaven sounds in his heart a sweet note, that maketh him to burst into voice of joying, for the wonderful softness of mirth and song in his soul. And of shrift, that is of endless loving; and sound of eating, that is joying in ghostly dainties; for he is taken in the melody of angels praising, that is in his thought, as the Master says in the Gloss.³

6. Why art thou sorry, my soul: and why troublest thou me? Since thou hast thus mickle comfort in Christ's love and doubtest not that thou feelest God, why art thou sorry or why angerest thou my reason? as who says: 'If thou behold well, nothing is in the world wherefore thou shouldst be stirred to sorryness'.

7. Hope in God, for yet I shall shrive to him: health of my face and my God.

If thou say, 'Therefore am I sorry because I am not there whither I am ravished passing; and I am heavied here in flesh.' Lo! the remedy: 'hope in God for yet I shall shrive to him', that is, I shall love him perfectly in his bliss: for he is 'health of my face', that is our form that he took; and 'my God, my maker'.

8. To myself troubled is my soul: therefore I shall be mindful of thee, from the land of Jordan and from the little hill of Hermon.

'To myself', that is I set it to my own slowness that my soul is stirred or sorry; for turning me to God I am gladdened. Were it not the vices of our body, our soul should aye be in rest and delight. Therefore, that is, for lettings of my soul (i.e., hindrances to my soul), 'I shall be mindful of thee'. That is, I haste me to thee in all my heart, for thou dost away all ill. And my mind shall be 'from the hand of Jordan', that is from my baptism, or from penance, where thou forgavest me my sin, and meeked me and madest me earth, to bear fruit. He that thinketh this is not troubled in angers. And I shall be mindful of thee 'from Hermon, the little hill', that is for thou made me to mispay (i.e., despise) myself and forsake the devil, and high in virtues and little in meekness. Jordan is as much to say, as down lighting (i.e., descending) and Hermon as wearying (i.e., cursing).

9. Deepness incalleth deepness: in voice of thy gutters.

I am letted (i.e., hindered) and dreary for deepness, that is the doom that

² Shrift—not only confession of sin, but all confession of God.

³ The Master—perhaps Peter Lombard.

thou punishedst Adam with, wherefore we are in travail and die. 'Incalls deepness', that is shows another doom in the which ill (i.e., evil) men shall be damned. For if he punished Adam so hard for one sin, what hopest thou he shall do to those that will no penance do for their sins, but choose rather to die therein, than that they will leave it? For that, these two dooms trouble a rightwise man. And that 'in the voice of thy gutters', that is, through the love of thy lovers, that show them to men.

10. All thy high things and thy streams, on me passed.

That is, the more pains and the less, that overcome my body, so passed—that is they shall pass away all, at the least when I die.

11. In day [the] Lord bade his mercy: and in night the song of him.

That is, when we are in weal God bids that we bear gladly anguish, that is of his mercy that we be safe. And so in the night, that is when we are in that like anger (anxiety), he bids us sing and joy in him.

12. Anent me prayer to God of my life; I shall say to God: Mine uptaker thou art.

That is, in me I have that I may offer to my God, devotion and good will, that giveth me life; me there not seek⁴ calf nor sheep. For in that he is my uptaker to set me in his bliss. Therefore:

13. Why hast thou forgotten me? and why sorried I go whilst the enemy tormenteth me?

That is, why sufferest thou me so long [to] be travailed in this wretchedness? He this felt of the sweetness of heaven and ugged (feared) the perils of the world, and he went to God sorried, while his enemy the devil tormented him, tempting and vexing him, that he makes so many cool from God's love.

14. Whilst my bones are broken, [they] upraided to me; that anger me, my foes.

Our bones are broken when the virtue of patience faileth, that (when) ill men scorn on this manner:

15. Whilst they say to me day by day: Where is thy God?

As who say, 'either none is or he recketh not of thee, or if he reck, deliver he thee, if he may!' But not therefore:

16. Why art thou sorry, my soul? And why troublest thou me?

Thee there not be sorry for their sake,⁵ for they are false and wot not what they say.

17. Hope in God, for yet I shall shrive to him: health of my face and my God.

Here he says the shrift⁶ and rehearses confirming of hope.

⁴ I shall not seek there.

⁵ Be not thou sorry in this on their account.

⁶ Confesses unto God.