

GOD, OUR REFUGE

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Psalm 90: 1-4

THESE words of the Psalmist have no doubt been offered up as a prayer in many homes on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Hence it is very fitting that to-day, when we have just recently entered on the New Year, we should hear their compelling message and try to understand the truth that God wishes to convey to us through them. "*Lord, Thou. . .*" Here speaks a man, a frail and transient creature, well aware of his frailty and transience, with God his Creator. This psalm, like all the psalms, is a prayer. But this very prayer suggests to us in a peculiarly striking fashion what an extraordinary thing it is that we are able to address Him, the Eternal and the Infinite, in these terms: Thou, Lord.

Every time I pray I must repeatedly thank God because I can and may address Him in these words: Thou, Lord. For, must we not agree, this is not at all a self-explanatory state of affairs. How many men to-day are not able to do this. They cannot call, out of the deeps of the transitory, death-shadowed world, out of the confusion and nothingness of their life: Thou, Lord. They do not know what such things are about. They are self-enclosed and solitary, alone with their anxieties and fears, alone on the way—ah! how short!—in which death is ever drawing nearer to them, nearer and nearer each day with no possibility of escape. Death is coming to me and I must needs go to meet

it as in a yawning abyss which swallows me up. Such men have only this one dimension, their journey on this earth, which death must terminate. They are not aware of the third, the vertical dimension, as a result of which we can invoke the Lord: Thou, Lord, Thou eternal God. Where this third dimension is lacking, life is merely a plane surface without height or depth and becomes in the literal sense of the word "superficial". However cultured and intellectually interesting such people may be, their life is crushed and flattened to a mere superficies, without depth or height. It resolves itself into a path on which one is ineluctably confronted with death and annihilation. And therefore their life has no meaning. If death, destruction, is the end, then life is just meaningless. If the vertical dimension, the heights and the depths, are lacking, then life is confined to the horizontal plane of earth and as such is meaningless. And because it is meaningless it is ultimately engulfed by despair. It is really no accident that at a time when so many men have ceased to be able to pray, the theme of despair, meaninglessness, nihilism, stands so prominently in the foreground and meets us everywhere, in the books that we read, the plays and the films that we see. It cannot be otherwise. If the third dimension is lacking, if we cannot call upon the Lord, the Eternal, then there remains only senselessness, despair, nihilism.

But the very moment when I can pray and my heart can call out: "Thou, Lord," despair vanishes, the vertical dimension is restored, eternity is present with us. Death is not the final word, life is no longer a journey confined by the earth's surface, ever advancing towards death, beyond which there is nothing. Then some other factor is present, not inexorably limited by death, but something which transcends death, which exists eternally, God who summons me and to whom I respond, eternity which I go to meet and which comes to meet me. Thus life ceases to be meaningless and despairing. It has assumed a meaning, an eternal meaning. "*Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.*" The man who prays thus—we do not know his name any more than we know the names of the writers of other psalms—does not pray alone. He knows that many pray with him and many have prayed before him, he

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stands in a real communion—perhaps at the moment an invisible communion—with all those who have prayed with him and are still praying, whose prayer soars upward like his own, and in community with whom he knows therefore that he is engaged in a pilgrimage—the goal of which is encounter with the God who is ever seeking him and all who thus pray. This community of those who pray is called in the Bible, church, ecclesia, people of God.

Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. It is not the speciality of pious or religious men that they seek their *refuge* in God, whereas other men seek refuge elsewhere. The truth is that there is no other refuge but God, so that those who cannot believe and pray are simply without refuge. Refuge means the unshakeable ground beyond the ever-flowing stream of time. Refuge is, as it were, the accessible island in the waters of the world's life which devour all. There alone is one securely anchored, there alone can we plant our feet on firm ground, in the land of eternity encircling the earth which is ever flooded by the waters of death. There is no other unassailable ground, for all other points of refuge are themselves part of the onward rush of the time stream. All else belongs to the surface, to the horizontal, to which one is confined without hope of rescue until the moment when one becomes sensitive to the presence of God and can address Him: "Thou, Lord."

This refuge is the sphere of peace. Men who have found refuge because they have found God, are men in whom reigns the peace of eternity. However much they may be harassed and vexed and burdened by all sorts of cares, yet in the last resort they are men who know the secret of transcendent peace, because they have their feet planted on firm ground—the ground of eternity. They have a standing ground. Whoever can call upon God and pray to Him stands unassailably amidst the sweep and eddy of the time-stream and the mighty convulsions of world history. Hence we meet constantly in the Bible the metaphor describing God as our rock and our shield. He who can invoke God is one who has built his house upon the rock. He is in touch with something which abides, to which the revolutions of time and the world wars and the collapses of history can do

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no harm. In God there is security, provided we are really in God, really standing on the ground of eternity.

Modern men long for security. This is why insurance companies are so prosperous, why the totalitarian state and communism which offer security to men have such a power of attraction and why so many to-day are going over to the Roman Catholic Church. Security! But there are pretended securities which are illusory because they do not tower beyond the flow of time into the realm of eternity, because after all they are only constructions of human power. "What men have built, men can destroy" it says in *Tell*, and the whole of human history is one single extended proof of the truth of this saying. The towers of Babel which men rear proudly to the skies collapse sooner or later with a thundering crash: the thousand-year empires break up even before two decades have passed. All this tumult belongs to the horizontal plane of this world, from which depth and the vertical dimension is lacking, for that is to be found in God alone. He alone offers real security, for He alone is from everlasting to everlasting.

We speak of the eternal hills or of the eternal thunder of the ocean. But that is an exaggeration. None of our mountains is eternal. Our geologists can tell us of each one, with a fair degree of accuracy and certainty how old it is—so many thousand or millions of years. Not even the earth is everlasting; that too came into existence at some specific date, so many—perhaps four million—years ago. God alone has no beginning; He exists eternally, transcending whatever has a beginning. God is the Creator of all things. Our thought cannot grasp this conception, however familiar the word Creator may be to us. We simply cannot imagine how God created the world out of nothing. Of course we find in the first chapter of the book of Genesis a so-called account of creation. But the object of this is not to tell us how the process occurred, one thing being created after another. The intention is to impress upon us this one truth: everything which belongs to our world was created by God and that effortlessly, without any special activity, as is suggested in Psalm 33: "He spake and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast."

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Many have supposed that this Genesis story of creation stands in contradiction to modern scientific knowledge. That is a complete mistake; for the two accounts deal with quite different things. The creation story declares that everything, heaven and earth, plants and animals, originated through the creative "fiat" of God. But the natural sciences explain to us how one thing has evolved from another in the order of temporal succession. The Bible tells you: you live in a world which God created, and you yourself are part of this divinely created process. But God stands before, beyond and above all that. He is your sovereign Lord, for He is from everlasting to everlasting.

Because God, He alone, exists beyond all that has come into being, therefore He transcends the flow of time like a rock in the midst of a rushing river, unmoved, eternally the same, unshaken and unshakeable. Hence only He can be our refuge. Everything else passes away and we pass away too, if we are not saved from being engulfed in the onward sweep of time by coming into living contact with the eternal God. Thus to encounter God is the work of faith: but the lifebreath of faith, from first to last, is prayer—the kind of prayer in which we address God thus: Thou, Lord, art our Refuge. By this faith, this calling upon God in the life of prayer, we step out of the rushing waters of time on to the firm ground of eternity. Well for him who does this and to whom it is granted to do it. Well for him who does so when he hears God's voice: I am He who has created you and named you, therefore you can call upon Me.

Have you noticed that the Psalmist does not say: "Before the mountains and the world were made, Thou *wast*", but "Thou *art* God, from everlasting to everlasting"? He means by this: the being of God transcends the forms of time, it has neither past nor future, it is eternal Present. Perhaps you recollect that in the Revelation of St. John we find the words: "He who was, and is, and is to come." To be correct, this is an allusion to Jesus Christ, the Revealer of God, who comes to us from eternity into time in order to draw us from our transient and fleeting mode of being into the plenitude of eternity. But here in the Psalm the subject is God as He is in Himself. He transcends all the spans of time: He is eternal Presence. For Him nothing that

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is past is past; nothing that is future is future. As He is omnipresent and all-encompassing, so everything is always present to Him. His eyes saw you when as yet you were not, and His eyes see you as you will be when you are dead. Hence there is no forgetfulness in God as likewise there is no remembrance: both past and future are present to Him in the eternal "Now".

Hence for God there are no divisions and measurements of time. A thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past, i.e. a mere nothing. *We* are conscious of time as measurable. Many a time-period seems to us painfully long, ah! too long, and many a one seems all too short, ah! but a fleeting moment. How agonizingly long the night drags on for the sick man tossing in pain in the hospital. How short the meeting between two human beings who love each other, and have not seen each other for years and to-morrow must part again—how swiftly gone are those few hours of reunion! How long does a nation feel a period of twenty years' subjugation to a foreign power which causes it suffering: how short a century or two centuries spanning a flowering period of human culture like that of ancient Athens or that of the Renaissance! How diverse and relative are our impressions of periods of time! But for God such measurements of time do not exist. Even a thousand years are for Him but as yesterday when it is gone, even a million years but a fleeting moment.

Of what use can it be to us to make this clear to ourselves? Still the night of pain drags out its weary length for us, and the day of happiness vanishes. Certainly: but if you pray when you are in sorrow, if you in faith lift up your heart to the eternal and ever-living God, a change comes over your experience of pain, as also your experience of fleeting joys is transformed. A ray of eternal peace and blessedness steals into your night of bitter sorrow and weeping: the light of eternal holiness imparts new meaning to your brief day of happiness. You are no longer simply the victim of the human consciousness of time. You are freely given a secret participation in the eternity of God. You know then that your pain will ultimately be dissolved in the eternal blessedness of God. You realize then that your earthly happiness is not the final end and meaning of your life.

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Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. We are somewhat surprised to note that the same man who says that, continues: "*Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest: Return, ye children of men.*" Is death then the ultimate reality? If so, how can God be our refuge? Here, it is relevant to observe that we are in the twilight dispensation of the Old Testament, in the period when God has vouchsafed part but not the whole of His revelation. He has revealed of course His omnipotence, His wisdom, His righteousness; but not yet the fullness of His love, in its counsel and operation. That happens only in the New Testament, in Jesus Christ. In the eternal radiance of Christ, we may thus understand the words, "Return, ye children of men": I, your heavenly Father, who have created you—you who have succumbed to sin, death and sorrow—I call you forth out of your wretchedness and restore you to My eternity where sin, death and sorrow are no more. Hence only in Jesus Christ can we without hesitation or qualification say to God: "Lord, Thou art our refuge."

No doubt the Psalmists already knew something of the grace of God who forgives us our sins and redeems us from corruption. "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits. For He forgiveth thy sins and healeth all thy diseases." Thus Psalm 103. But the Word has not yet become flesh; the Saviour has not yet been born; the redemptive plan of God has not yet been fully disclosed. For only through Him, Jesus, the Saviour, do we know that God does not remain aloof from us in His eternity. He comes to us clothed in temporality in order to bestow upon us eternity. He the eternal God has become man in order to invest us creatures of time with eternity. Hence we do not advance inexorably and irredeemably towards death, as they suppose who do not know God. It is our faith that "Who-soever believeth on Me will live though he die."

For this reason we need not have any serious fear about anything which may happen to us in this world of time. We do not know what the New Year may bring. But bring what it may, one thing we know: we are moving not towards death but towards eternal life.