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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Quest of God, 1924.



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"THE QUEST OF GOD."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 27, 1924, CLEVELAND.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes, I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase,

And unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

They beat--and a Voice beat

More instant than the Feet--

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

I pleaded, out law-wise,

By many a hearted casement, curtained red,

Trellised with intertwining charities

(For, though I knew His love Who followed,

Yet was I sore adread

Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside);

But, if one little casement parted wide,

The gust of His approach would clash it to.

Fear wist not to evade as Lover wist to pursue.



Across the margent of the world I fled,  
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,  
Smiting for shelter on their clanged bars;  
Fretted to dulcet jars  
And silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon.  
I said to dawn: Be sudden; to eve: Be soon--  
With thy young skyey blossoms heap me over  
From this tremendous Lover!  
Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!  
  
Still with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
Came on the following Feet,  
And a Voice above their beat--  
"Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me."  
  
I sought no more that after which I strayed  
In face of man or maid;  
But still within the little children's eyes  
Seems something, something that replies,  
They at least are for me, surely for me!  
I turned me to them very wistfully;  
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair  
With dawning answers there,  
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.



Come then, ye other children,

Nature's--share

With me" (said I) "your delicate  
fellowship;

I in their delicate fellowship was one--  
Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies.

I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,  
Heaven and I wept together,

And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;  
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart

I laid my own to beat,

And share commingling heat;

But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.  
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.  
For ah! we know not what each other says,

These things and I; in sound I speak--  
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.  
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake by drouth;

Nigh and nigh draws the chase,

With unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

And past those noised Feet

A Voice comes yet more fleet--

"Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st  
not Me."



Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!

My harness piece by piece Thou

hast hewn from me,

And smitten me to my knee;

I am defenceless utterly.

In the rash lustihead of my young powers,

I shook the pillaring hours

And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,

I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years--

My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.

My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,

Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.

Yea, faileth now even dream

The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;

Ah! is Thy love indeed

A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,

Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?

Ah! must--

Designer infinite!--

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst

limn with it?

With glooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned;

His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.

Whether man's heart or life it be which yields



Thee harvest, must Thy harvest fields  
Be dunged with rotten death?

Now of that long pursuit  
Comes on at hand the bruit;  
That Voice is round me like a bursting sea;  
"And is thy earth so marred,  
Shattered in shard on shard?

Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!

Strange, piteous, futile thing,

Wherefore should any set thee love apart?

Seeing none but I makes much of naught" (He said),

"And human love needs human meriting:

How hast thou merited--

Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?

Alack, thou knowest not

How little worthy of any love thou art!

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,

Save Me, save only Me?

All which I took from thee I did but take,

Not for thy harms,

But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.

All which thy child's mistake

Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:

Rise, clasp My hand, and come."



Halts by me that footfall:  
Is my gloom, after all,  
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?  
"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."

Great poetry, my friends, is the noblest vehicle of great ideas. A great thought is an elemental thought, and quite naturally seeks the rhythm and the musical beat, which are elemental things, as elemental as the beat of the heart or the throb of the blood, as elemental as the innate harmony of our organs, or of nature itself.

Now, the noblest ideas of man are those which revolve around God, for God is the ultimate reality which gives meaning to everything in human life; and when a man has such thoughts concerning God, and experiences contact with divinity vividly and keenly and overpoweringly, he will express himself in song. Man sometimes reasons about God and sometimes dogmatizes about God, and such religious philosophy and religious theology will not give rise to poetry, but when man experiences God, he will sing. When man reasons about God, he produces philosophy, and when man dogmatizes about God, he produces theology, but when man experiences God, he produces poetry. The real religious mood is to be found not in a philosophic tract, nor even in an ethical tract, but in the hymn and the psalm and the



prayer.

This morning I wish to speak about a religious experience as it finds voice in three hymns--two ancient and one modern: Psalm 63, Psalm 139, and "The Hound of Heaven," by Francis Thompson, part of which I have just read. You read these three hymns, and you are struck by one fact--their remarkable similarity, their identity in thought, in subject matter - even in figures of speech, in phraseology. If you follow closely the reading of the two psalms and the selections from "The Hound of Heaven," you will perhaps have caught such phrases as these: "fleeing from God"; "hiding from God"; taking the wings of the morning to escape Him"; such phrases as "the hand of God"; "the shade of God's hand"; "the shadow of His wings."

Now, the common use of these images and phrases is not an accidental one; nor for that matter a deliberate one. I mean conscious or unconscious imitation. These phrases and these words are the word-pictures, the ideograms, the technical key words and symbols of religious experience of all races and of all peoples. These words are the closest approximation of the inadequate human sphere to certain profound, overwhelming religious experiences, which man struggles to express and can only express in the most primitive and elementary imagery--that of pictures: the hand of God; the shadow of God; seeking God; fleeing from God. There is a spiritual experience there, somewhere, very real and intense, which cannot be expressed otherwise



than in these inadequate but suggestive phrases.

The Psalms and "The Hound of Heaven" were written twenty-five hundred years apart. The Psalms were written somewhere in the hills of Judea, perhaps; "The Hound of Heaven" was written amidst the fog and the misery of London. The Psalms were written by some pious Israelites; "The Hound of Heaven" was written by a devout Catholic. And yet the difference of place and time and race seems to make no effect at all upon the essential oneness and identity in content and spirit of these two literary creations. And that is an observation worthy of note.

I may just as well have selected a Hindu hymn, or a Chinese hymn, or a hymn from the religious poetry of any people or any race, and you will have found that same similarity and that same basic identity. Why? Simply because when it comes to religious experiences all religions are one. Outwardly religions differ; and these differences are not unimportant or insignificant; they have importance and they have significance. All religions differ as to creed, as to doctrine, as to ritual, as to symbol, even as to ethics; but inwardly as these religions touch the mainsprings of human life and human longing and human needs; inwardly as these religions try to bridge the gulf between man and God, between the finite and the infinite, between what we are and what we aspire to be, these religions are one, for their source is one and their goal is one.

I call this address The Quest of God. And I



say that these three hymns or psalms are expressive of man's quest of God. And what do I mean by the quest of God? What does man seek when he seeks God? And when does he seek God? Why, the quest of God, friends, is simply the quest of the ultimate reality. Here is the universe open to our five senses. The universe is imperfect; our five senses are imperfect. The universe seems to be torn and racked by a remorseless process of growth and decay, growth and decay, life and death. Everything changes, and man most of all.

Now, surely, in the midst of this sea of endless change, this flux and transitoriness, there must be something abiding, something which partakes of the quality of the permanent and the enduring and the eternal. Here is life, human life. We experience life which is the highest form of life upon the earth because it is linked with intelligence. We experience that life in us, and yet that life brings with it pain and suffering and sorrow and disillusionment and discord. Now, surely, in this discord which pervades the whole world of man, and apparently the whole world of nature, there must be somewhere a basic theme with which this apparent discord is in consonance; surely, there must be some ultimate beneficence towards which this pain and sorrow and deprivation guides the human race; surely, somewhere there must be a perfection, a completeness, visible only to the invisible eye of the soul; surely, somewhere beneath, within, there must be a wisdom and a oneness, a charity and a goodness, which, fashioned out of



spiritual qualities, are made known and revealed only to one who seeks in spirit.

Now, one who finds this inner harmony, this organizing and sustaining purpose and plan--I mean one who senses it, for no one can apprehend it perfectly--that man has found God. And not everyone finds Him, and, having found Him, not everyone holds Him. For the realization of God comes like a flash, like a sudden, brilliant illumination; it is swift and passing, like an ecstasy. One must realize God ever anew in his life to have Him.

Now, this is what the pious man calls the quest of God. The writer of Psalm 63 had had some time in his life just such a revelation. He had in a moment of spiritual insight and exaltation caught a glimpse of this underlying beauty and harmony, this unifying theme of the universe, and from that day on his life was filled with a glow and a warmth. His hunger was stilled, he says. "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness." He had found something in life which was sweeter than life. "Thy loving kindness," he says, "is better than life." Because a life without an overpowering love and a great confidence is, after all, a very sorry affair, indeed.

The anonymous poet and singer from the hills of Judea who gave voice to Psalm 63 knew that he was no longer alone in the world; that he was not a plaything of a blind, cruel, heedless, mechanical scheme of things; he knew that he was not adrift on an aimless sweep of flotsam



and jetsam of a racked world, drifting upon a moving sea of change; he knew that mighty and invisible wings were sheltering the universe. And so he said, "In the shelter of thy wings do I rejoice. Thou hast been my help; thy right hand holdeth me up." In the midst of his doubts and his confusions and the uncertainties of mortal life, he had discovered the real strength--the right hand of God which holds him up at all times; the mighty kinsman, the great friend who walks by his side singing in his ears. He had found the supreme confidence which comes with supreme faith.

And the memory of that sudden revelation of his comes back to him during those slow days and nights when a man wanders without vision, because we cannot always live on that high pitch of religious exaltation; we sink down to the level, the monotony, the dullness, and the uninspired ways of life. We seem to find ourselves as the Psalmist did--in a dry and wearied land; and in that dry and wearied land he seeks for another glimpse of that land of beatitude, he thirsts for it. "O God, thou art my God; and earnestly will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, and my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and weary land, land where no water is."

Now, the author of Psalm 139 never had such a revelation, and therefore his psalm lacks that ring of confidence, that lift of the music of an exquisite melody that Psalm 63 has. He also sought God, this second poet, but he sought Him as most men seek Him--by trying to escape



Him. That, too, is a way of finding God--by fleeing from Him; just as a man who rows a boat has his back to the shore, but every stroke of his brings him nearer to the shore; so many a man with his back to God seeking to escape God is, nevertheless, approaching Him, nearer and nearer.

He wanted to flee God, this writer. And why? Because he thought that, having God, he must have naught else; because he thought that having discovered the ideal beauty, he will have to surrender the baser and lowlier beauty; because he realized that God is an asking God, that God does not tolerate a divided allegiance; he was afraid that he will have to surrender all the intimate pastimes of the average man, the things that mean pleasure and joy to us; that he will have to lead a life of asceticism and deprivation, a life of gloom and emptiness. And so he sought to flee from God, but he found, as most men find, strange enough, that one cannot escape Him. You cannot flee from God. For even as you flee from Him you are running towards Him. Your path may seem to take you away from Him to the utmost ends of the earth, but by devious and tortuous ways, that same wrong and sinful path will bring you back as sure as destiny, back to the focal point and the redound center--God.

You may set forth arrogantly and proudly in a thousand enterprises, denying God, but you will be brought crushed and kneeling ultimately at the feet of God. And so the psalmist says, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or



whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in the nether world, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and roll them to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there would thy hand lead me, and thy right hand would hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall envelope me; even the darkness is naught too dark for thee."

And the psalmist, too, seems to be irritated at the thought that God is not only around him everywhere, but that He has, somehow, placed a guardian at the very gates and portals of his life. We call it conscience--the guardian of the Almighty standing at the very door of our life, watching every one of our actions--nay, more--watching everyone of our thoughts, of our impulses, measuring us, searching us. You cannot escape God because you cannot escape this. And so he comes, broken and humble, to this conclusion: "O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me; thou knowest my down-sitting and my uprising; thou understandest me that far off; thou measureth me going about and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways; for there is not a word in my tongue but lo, Lord, thou knowest it altogether. And so thou hast hemmed me."

He feels himself hemmed. The author of Psalm 63 felt himself upheld by the hand of God. This author simply feels the overcrowding, overwhelming presence of God. "Thou hast hemmed me behind and before, and laid thy hand upon me to hold me." This man cannot and does not reach to



that playing of sunshine and of peace, the supreme beatitude which that author of Psalm 63 reached. He knows that God is about him, but he does not know God.

Now, the Hound of Heaven is Psalm 139 in the twentieth century version. The author of the Hound of Heaven likewise sought God by fleeing from him, and after a long and turbulent and tempestuous career, he, however, catches a glimpse of that land of sunshine and peace which, in all its resplendent glory, opened before the eyes of the psalmist of Psalm 63. Francis Thompson belonged to those most wretched men whom Shelley said "are cradled in poetry by wrong, and who learn in suffering what they teach in song."

His life was a tragedy. In his earlier life he quarrelled with his father and left home. For five years he wandered around, a beggar and a tramp on the streets of London, sleeping under the arches of bridges; he hung around theaters to call cabs and sold matches to earn tenpence so that he could buy bread and opium. By the time he was discovered he at once attempted suicide, without success, and he was in the last stages of a disease which was tearing and racking him. He died in 1907, comparatively a young man, and this underlying tragedy of his life fed the flames of his genius. He was a poet by divine right.

The Hound of Heaven, then, is the ascendancy, the going up--the ascendancy of the human soul, the pilgrimage of the human soul to the dwelling place of light and of



God. He fled God, he said. "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind." He would not acknowledge God in his mind; he would not acknowledge God in his experiences, in his hopes, in his sorrows, in his tears, in his laughter; he was going to build a world which was Godless, which had no room for God. But he soon found how utterly impossible, and utterly, utterly sad a task that was. He thought at first that he could escape God by sinking himself into the pleasures and the lusts and the loves, the carnal loves of the world. "I pleaded, out law-wise, by many a hearted casement, curtained red, trellised with intertwining charities." He thought that he could find the meaning and the satisfaction of life in the carnal pleasures of life, but soon he found that naught shelters one who does not shelter God.

These pleasures leave ashes behind them--cold ashes; disillusionment and degradation of body and soul. And then he thought perhaps he could find the meaning of life and the complete fulfillment of life in innocence, in the eyes of little children, but he soon finds that the angel plucks them from him before they could answer him. Not having God in his life, he cannot understand them; they cannot understand him. There is an impassible gulf between them. And so he turns to nature--nature's children. He seeks fellowship, companionship in nature; he seeks fulfillment of life in an esthetic appreciation of nature; he



responds to all the moods of nature; he tries to be one with nature; he tries to understand nature, to read his life into nature. And so he built up his world. But he finds, alas, that nature cannot ease the smart and the ache of his soul; because he cannot understand nature. Their speech is different; man speaks in sound, nature speaks in silences, and as long as man does not possess a consciousness of God, who dwells in nature, of that same God who dwells in man, there has not been established that link between man and nature which enables man to understand nature. Only God gives man the key by which he can read and understand nature. The materialist, even if he has a sense of beauty, can find only a surface beauty; he cannot pluck or suck divinity from the flower, because he cannot go beneath the surface of things and seek the soul of the world.

And so the poet finds, as we all sooner or later find, that we carry all the wonders which we seek in the world within us. If we haven't these wonders, these ecstasies, these enthusiasms within us, we shall never discover them in things without us. And after his long journey the poet finds himself naked, beaten, thirsted, alone; and even his dreams are beginning to leave him. And then on the brink and margin of his world, truth begins to come to him; he begins to catch a glimpse of some eternal truths, and the first of these truths which he begins to sense is this: that God first chars the wood before He can use it; that the olive must first be crushed before it



yields the oil for the lighting; that in prosperity man does not seek God; in his pride of place and power and position man feels that he does not need God; and so God must first break his spirit--char and mar and wound and pain--before man will open the door to the invisible hand which knocks upon it. Then he begins to realize, this suffering man, because of his suffering, that the very gloom of his life is only the shade of the hand of God.

Most of us begin to first sense the presence of God when we come into the shadows, when we have lost someone, when we stand before an open grave, when we begin to ache for the touch of a vanished hand or the sound of a voice that is stilled; when we have entered the shadows, then we begin to hear the beating of the wings of God.

That is the first truth that comes to the poet. God does not mock the Godless man. God chars him, so that he may be then limned with the more glorious picture of the soul's transfiguration.

And then comes the second truth; a profound truth dawns upon him: there is no love like the love of God. Human love needs human meriting. A man has to pay for the love of his fellowmen. Men are fickle, men are thoughtless, men forget, men forsake; and when one sins one quickly loses the affection, the love of God, the esteem of his fellowmen. None are so ready to hurl the first stone, oftentimes, than one's own friends. Only God loves the unworthy. "Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, save



me, save only me?"

When men forget us and forsake us, when we are outcasts from the affection and the love of those whom we love, there is but one bosom to whom we can come for shelter, for love, for comfort and solace, and that is the very one whom we, in our prosperity and in our strength and power, think last of.

And then there comes to him the third truth, namely, that God's deprivations are not deprivations at all. God does not deprive us of anything. "All which I took from thee I did but take, not for thy harms, but just that thou might'st seek it in My arms. All which thy child's mistake fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home: Rise, clasp My hand, and come." To have God is not to be compelled to surrender all this; to have God in one's life is not to be compelled to live a life of dullness and monotony and asceticism and self-denials. God does not deprive us of our pleasures; God only transfigures them, God only translates them, God only takes the dross and the baser metal of our life and turns them into pure gold. God brings fulness and richness and abundance into the life of man; and those that seek Him, as the Psalmist says, are more satisfied than if they had partaken of the very marrow and fatness of this world.

And lastly, the poet comes to the most profound truth. "Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest." You may think you are escaped from Him;



you may think that because you sin, and because you blaspheme, and because you drag your soul through the mire and filth and corruption, you flee from Him. Ah, no. "Blindly, weakly, confusedly, you are really seeking Me. With your groping, feeling hands and torn feet you are groping, groping, lost in the labyrinths of this world, groping to find Me. Nay, more; when you least honor Me I am most with thee. You are not only seeking Me, but I am seeking thee. I am following thee; I am following thee."

With unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they follow, follow after, and a Voice which beats louder than the feet of those that follow tells you, "Naught shelters thee who wilt not shelter Me."

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