

# UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

**STUDY BOOK**

**WINTER 2023-24**



**SONGS OF  
THE HEART**

The Book of  
Psalms



Thru-the-Bible  
*Book by Book*

# UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

is organized according to a systematic, sensible plan that will take you through every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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**Next quarter:**  
Galatians, Ephesians

# ***The Book of Psalms***

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# The Book of Psalms

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The Psalms are songs and prayers capturing, in Alexander Maclaren's words, "the heart's echo to the speech of God." Perhaps more than any other part of Scripture, the Psalms tell us what it feels like to walk in the way of the Lord.

The traditional Hebrew title of the Book of Psalms is *Sepher Tehillim*,

meaning "Book of Praises." But the title "Psalms" had become attached to the book by the first century A.D.

The Greek words translated "Psalm" and "Psalter" once referred to stringed instruments. In time, though, the terms came to mean songs accompanied by those instruments.

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## Hebrew Poetry

The Psalms arose from a long tradition of Hebrew poetry. We can observe this because most books of the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis, contain at least some fragments of poetry.

Hebrew poetry is flexible in form and rhythm. However, most Hebrew poetry exhibits a distinguishing characteristic called *parallelism*. This term simply means that two (or sometimes three) lines of the poetry are, in one way or another, parallel in meaning.

Parallelism takes many different forms. Three of the common kinds of parallelism may be termed *equivalent*, *contrasting*, and *amplified* parallelism.

In equivalent parallelism the second line essentially repeats the thought of the first. For example:

"He does not treat us as our sins  
deserve  
or repay us according to our  
iniquities" (Ps. 103:10).

In contrasting parallelism the second line supplies a matching but opposite truth as a balance to the first line. Thus:

"The LORD watches over the way  
of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will  
perish" (1:6).

In amplified parallelism the second line advances the thought of the first. For instance:

"My enemies turn back;  
they stumble and perish before  
you" (9:3).

Through the Hebrew poets and their skillful use of literary techniques—such as rhythm and personification—God spoke His truth in a wonderfully expressive and meaningful way. No wonder this truly inspired poetry has remained powerful throughout the ages.



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## Psalm Titles

All but thirty-four psalms are preceded by titles (also called superscriptions). These titles were not originally part of the psalms. They were added later, probably by the people who compiled the Psalms.

Many of the titles have meanings that are no longer understood. Other

titles, however, clearly contain musical instructions or refer to historical events and people.

Commentators disagree over how reliable these titles are. But certainly they are ancient and they provide valuable information about the psalms and those who wrote them.

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## Authors

The outpourings of many poets, living over a period of hundreds of years, flow together to make up the Book of Psalms. Probably groups of these psalms were collected at different times. By the third century b.c. the book had received its final form, presumably through the efforts of temple musicians.

The best-known author of psalms was David. More psalms—nearly half the book—are attributed to David than to any other author. Furthermore, historians recorded that David was “Israel’s singer of songs”

(2 Sam. 23:1) and that he organized the temple music program (1 Chron. 15:3-28).

In addition to David, several other people are by the psalm titles as authors. These are Moses, Solomon, Asaph (a Levite choir director), the Sons of Korah (a group of Levite musicians), Heman the Ezrahite (founder of the Sons of Korah), and Ethan the Ezrahite (probably also called Jeduthun).

Of the several authors, only David is represented in each of the book’s major divisions.

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## Arrangement

From ancient times Psalms has been divided into five “books” of unequal length. Each of these books closes with a doxology, or passage, praising God. The last psalm serves as a concluding doxology to the whole Book of Psalms.

Many commentators see a relationship between the five “books” of Psalms and the five books of Moses (Genesis—Deuteronomy).

- Book I (Pss. 1—41) corresponds to Genesis. Generally speaking this book begins by showing humanity

in a state of blessedness, then traces human rebellion and restoration.

- Book II (Pss. 42—72) corresponds to Exodus. This book opens with a cry of distress and ends with the portrait of a righteous ruler.

- Book III (Pss. 73—89) corresponds to Leviticus. Many of these psalms show the counsels of God in relation to the temple sanctuary.

- Book IV (Pss. 90—106) corresponds to Numbers. This book starts with a prayer about Israel’s unfaithfulness in the wilderness, and then

provides the contrast of the Messiah's faithfulness.

- Book V (Pss. 107—150) corresponds to Deuteronomy. The last psalms focus on God's Word and ways.

In addition to the five major divisions of the Book of Psalms, other

patterns in the arrangement appear. For instance, Psalms 93—100 all have the same theme: the worldwide kingship of the Lord. Such groupings of psalms suggest those groupings existed as independent collections before the Book of Psalms was finally compiled.

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## Psalm Types

Noting the similarity of forms and themes among many of the psalms, Old Testament scholars have tried to classify them according to type. Not all scholars agree about psalm types, but the following are some of the most commonly mentioned types:

1. Wisdom psalms (for example, Psalm 1). Such psalms provide instruction about living as the people of God.

2. History psalms (Ps. 78). These psalms summarize Israel's history and point to God as the source of blessing.

3. Praise psalms (Ps. 111). Some scholars make a distinction between psalms of declarative praise and psalms of descriptive praise.

4. Repentance psalms (Ps. 51). Confession of sin is the most obvious feature of this psalm type.

5. Supplication psalms (Ps. 86). In psalms of this kind, psalmists poured out their hearts to God for a personal need or for another's need.

6. Acrostic psalms (Ps. 119). In acrostic psalms the letters of the Hebrew alphabet serve as the initial letters of succeeding verses or sections of the psalms.

7. Nature psalms (Ps. 8). These psalms find evidence of God's attributes in earth, sky, and sea.

8. Messianic psalms (Ps. 110). Such psalms portray the coming Messiah as a suffering Servant or as a royal Ruler.

9. Pilgrim psalms (Ps. 120). These were probably sung by Israelites on pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

10. Curse psalms (Ps. 35). These psalms express indignation at enemies and appeal to God for justice.

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## How to Use the Study Book

The study book is meant to be used with a Bible open beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then read back and forth between your Bible and the study book

until you get the meaning of the passage. Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

# 1

## Respect for the Lord and His Will

**Psalms 1—8**

### **a** The Way of the Righteous (1:1-3)

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.  
—Psalm 1:1

Psalm 1 is an appropriate introduction to the Book of Psalms. That is because the first psalm is a map showing two roads: the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness. And the Book of Psalms is for those who are on the way of righteousness.

The lifestyle of the righteous should include what the sportsminded might call a strong offense and a solid defense. Verse 1 describes the “defense”; verse 2 describes the “offense.”

The first verse offers three images, each showing a different degree of involvement in sin. To “walk in step with the wicked” means to follow advice that goes against God’s will. To “stand in the way that sinners take” means to adopt the values and habits of unbelievers. To “sit

in the company of mockers” means to adopt the point of view held by cynical freethinkers. The righteous person resists all such temptations.

It would be a mistake to interpret Psalm 1:1 to mean that Christians should always avoid unbelievers. Jesus moved in the circles of sinners because they needed His ministry. We should do the same. But Psalm 1:1 recognizes our responsibility to avoid participating in the evil others do.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *In what situations am I most easily influenced to adopt the standards and practices of the ungodly?*

The righteous person’s “defense” is his or her resistance to evil temptations. That person’s “offense” is to delight in the law, meditating on it at all times. The word translated “meditates” (vs. 2) literally means to mumble; it refers to the Jewish practice of reciting or chanting Scripture softly to oneself.

We can use our own methods to immerse ourselves in the Word. Unlike the ancient Israelites, believers today have access to the whole Bible as well as to many helpful Bible study tools. With these, we can

get to know the Bible so intimately that it guides all our thoughts and actions.

People who live for God are not promised an easy road. But they are promised benefits that will make the journey worthwhile. The righteous will have happiness, endurance, and prosperity.

The first of these benefits—happiness—is brought out at once. The psalm's opening phrase, translated in the NIV as "Blessed is the one" (vs. 1), might also be translated "How happy is the one." To be "blessed" or "happy" means to have a life marked by the peace and joy that come from living as God wishes.

The psalmist described two other advantages of righteousness—endurance and prosperity—with the aid of a comparison that would have been understood readily in dry Israel. He compared a righteous person to a tree that was transplanted to the edge of an irrigation canal. The tree now had a steady supply of water and did not suffer during a drought. Consequently, it produced fruit when it should. (See also Jer. 17:5-8.)

Like a tree "whose leaf does not wither" (Ps. 1:3) because its roots reach a constant supply of water, a person who has a personal relationship with the Lord can draw upon Him for endurance in



*A righteous person "is like a tree planted by streams of water" (Ps. 1:3).*

adversity. Troubles come as surely as droughts came to Israel, but Christians are not alone when they face grief, illness, and poverty. God is with us to help and to comfort.

Not only is the righteous person happy and able to stand up under hardship, but also "whatever they do prospers" (vs. 3). He regularly produces fruit, like a well-watered tree. Probably the psalmist had in mind such material benefits as a large family, influence in the community, and a good income.

The ancient Israelites, living before Christ, did not have a complete understanding of eternal life. Consequently, they tended to think that rewards and punishments are always given in this life. But from our perspective, we can see that sometimes justice has to wait until the next life. Nevertheless, it remains true that the righteous will prosper—if not now, then eventually.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do the roots of my faith go down far enough to make my life fruitful in all circumstances?*

## **b** The Way of the Wicked (1:4-6)

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

—Psalm 1:6

The righteous person is prosperous, but “not so the wicked!” (vs. 4). The wicked are not like well-watered trees that produce fruit in season. Instead, they are like “chaff

that the wind blows away.” This image is drawn from the ancient practice of winnowing grain. After a harvest, farm workers would use the wind to separate the chaff (the worthless husks of grain) from the kernels.

This comparison to chaff makes the wicked look lightweight and headed for destruction. And in fact, the following verses bear out that impression.

### **Grain Harvesting**

In ancient Israel the spring grain harvest began with reaping. This was accomplished with small, curved culling tools called sickles. The reaper would cut the barley or wheat with one hand and gather the severed stalks with the other hand.

Next, workers would carry the reaped stalks to the threshing floor—a large open area, often at the top of a hill. There the stalks were trampled by oxen drawing a wooden sledge. The oxen’s hooves, as well as sharp studs embedded in the underside of the sledge, separated the kernels from the straw and chaff.

After this, workers winnowed the grain, using pitchforks to toss it into the evening breeze. The light straw and chaff blew away, while the heavier kernels fell to the ground.

To prevent theft, farmers usually would sleep near their winnowed grain until they could store it in large clay jars or pits in the ground.



According to verse 5, the wicked would have no weight, or influence, in the proceedings of the community. They would not be able to gather at the city gate with the community leaders to decide issues of justice. Neither could they worship in the temple with the people of God. Their wicked behavior would become known, making them outsiders.

In a larger sense, this verse points to the final judgment. On that day God will repay the wicked for their deeds, expelling them forever from His presence and from His people's presence.

The psalmist's description of two ways, one righteous and one wicked, concludes with the ways leading to two very different destinations. The righteous continue to live with God's loving eye upon them. But the wicked will meet their doom.

When we put our faith in Christ, we begin to live a new life in Him. And after death this life in Christ continues, but on a higher plane. We who believe in Christ will remain forever in God's presence.

Those who reject God's offer of love may travel down their own road of earthly life as long as believers do on theirs. But after that, the wicked will receive a sentence of terrible finality.

**Ask Yourself . . .** Which destination am I headed for—God's presence or destruction? Before I continue in this study of the Psalms, do I need to give my life over to Jesus Christ?



## The Lord Installs a King (2:1-6)

**"I have installed my king  
on Zion, my holy mountain."**

—Psalm 2:6.

Psalm 2, attributed to David in Acts 4:25, seems to have been composed for the coronation ceremony of a king. But several aspects of the psalm apply better to the Messiah than they ever did to an Israelite king.

The psalm is made up of four sections, each containing three verses. The first section (vss. 1-3) sets the coronation scene against a backdrop of danger. It says that rulers of nations under Israel's control were on the verge of rebelling against God and the king whom God had placed over His people. In verse 2 Israel's king is called the "Lord's anointed" (literally, "Messiah") because an anointing with oil was part of the enthronement ceremony.

It is possible that such a situation of danger actually existed at the coronation of one of Israel's kings. However, it is also possible that the psalmist was describing a nonexistent threat as a means of heightening the impact his psalm would have. We should note as well that Peter and John applied this passage to opposition against Jesus (Acts 4:25-27).

The psalmist seemed amazed that people would dare oppose God and the king. But in the psalm's second section (vss. 4-6) we see that God,

# Royal Psalms

**R**oyal psalms are those in which the central figure is a king of Israel or Judah. These psalms include references to court ceremonies such as the coronation of a king, the anniversary of a coronation, a royal wedding, the start of a military campaign, or the celebration of a victory.

Many of the royal psalms prophesy about the Messiah. They present Him as a coming King who would bring salvation to His people.

the King of heaven, took a different attitude toward the rebellious rulers: He laughed and scoffed at them. And in response to their threats, God displayed His wrath by announcing that He had installed a king in Jerusalem. The implication is that if God establishes a king, that king will stay established. This is even more a certainty when the king in view is Jesus Christ.

It should encourage us to see how closely God identifies with His people in trouble. When enemies of the

Gospel oppose us, they oppose Him. We have a Sovereign in heaven who fights for us and ensures our victory.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I facing a threat regarding which I should ask God's help?*

## **d** Serve the Lord, Kiss the Son (2:7-12)

Therefore, you kings, be wise;  
be warned, you rulers of the  
earth.

Serve the LORD with fear  
and celebrate his rule with trem-  
bling.

—Psalm 2:10, 11

In the third section of the psalm (vss. 7-9), Israel's king repeated the Lord's words to him. The "decree" (vs. 7) may have been a document given to the king during the coronation ceremony (II Kings 11:12). This document renewed God's covenant with the king.

"Today" (Ps. 2:7)—that is, on the coronation day—the Lord declared the king to be His son. This reflected a practice common among rulers in the ancient Middle East. When an empire subjugated neighboring peoples, the emperor (called the suzerain) would allow the conquered kings (called vassals) to rule their own nations under him. In this arrangement, the suzerain would call himself "father" of the vassals, his "sons."

Psalm 2 indicates that the king of Israel had God for his suzerain. Furthermore, the psalm says the heavenly suzerain promised, if asked, to make the Israelite king a suzerain on earth. God would give His "son" control over other nations.

No Israelite king ever had control over nations to "the ends of the earth" (vs. 8). This is one indication that the psalm is prophetic. Its ultimate fulfillment is in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

New Testament writers applied verse 7 to Jesus at many points in His life: His birth (Heb. 1:5), His baptism (Matt. 3:17), His transfiguration (II Pet. 1:17), and His

resurrection (Acts 13:33). Verses 8 and 9 of Psalm 2 are mentioned in Revelation as a reference to Jesus' final victory (Rev. 2:26, 27; 19:15).

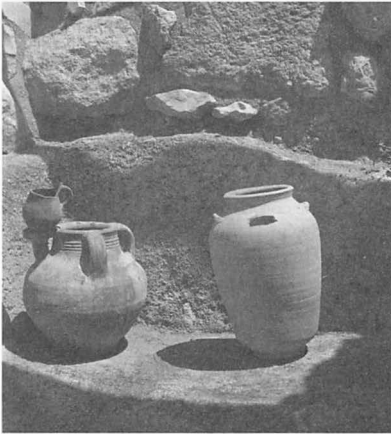
**Ask Yourself . . .** *When I am being persecuted for the Gospel, do I dare believe that my King will be victorious?*

In light of divine support for Israel's king, the psalm's fourth section (Ps. 2:10-12) offers advice to potential enemies. They should serve the Lord and submit to the king.

Instead of taking a stand against God, the rulers should serve Him with "fear" (vs. 11), that is, serve Him with reverence. If they did this sincerely, then they would experience the joy all believers have in the presence of the Lord, even though it would be mixed with the trembling of awe.

A kiss was a customary token of homage to a leader (I Sam. 10:1). In this case, it was a sign that the rulers would submit as vassals to Israel's king. If rebellious rulers would take the psalmist's advice, they would be "blessed" (Ps. 2:12). But if they would not take the advice, then they would feel the wrath of God and His king.

The decision is the same for all. Each of us must choose a side in the age-old conflict—whether to remain enslaved to sin or to submit in faith to God through Christ.



*Pottery of Israel.*



**Ask Yourself . . .** *How does my life give evidence of my allegiance?*

### **Psalms in Brief (3—7)**

Note: Since the Book of Psalms is long, this Bible study focuses on 35 representative psalms, summarizing the others in a sentence.

Psalm 3 is a psalm of confidence in the Lord despite numerous foes.

In Psalm 4, David prayed for deliverance and found comfort.

Psalm 5 records the psalmist's appeal for God's help at a time when enemies were spreading lies about him.

A cry for mercy, Psalm 6 was probably composed at a time of illness and military danger.

In Psalm 7, David cried out to God for justice when his enemies attacked.

## **e Evidence of God's Glory (8:1-9)**

**What is mankind that you are  
mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for  
them?**

—Psalm 8:4

"LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:1, 9). Psalm 8 begins and ends with this burst of worship. No wonder Bible scholars point to this psalm

as a model of what a hymn should be: a rehearsal of God's deeds and a celebration of His glory.

The psalmist recognized that wherever God reveals Himself, whether above the heavens or upon the earth, He is majestic. His praise is chanted on high and echoed from cradle and nursery. This praise is a sufficient answer to God's opponents.

Jesus quoted verse 2 when the Jewish religious authorities complained about the hosannas of children in the temple courts. The children spoke more wisely about our Lord than did the chief priests and teachers of the Law (Matt. 21:16).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When have I heard a child say something that made me think about God in a fresh way?*

At Psalm 8:3, the focus of attention shifts from the Creator to His creation. Gazing at the night sky, the psalmist was filled with a sense of insignificance. Possessing an even greater awareness of the immensity and complexity of the universe, we can exclaim with David, "What is mankind that you are mindful of them?" (vs. 4).

This question could not be answered by the sky or by any other part of nature. The writer received insight by the Holy Spirit. He knew that despite our apparent unimportance in the universe, we humans are in fact highly valued by God.

The phrase translated by the NIV as "a little lower than the angels" (vs. 5) raises a couple of

interpretation issues. First, that phrase can be translated "a little lower than God." This would ascribe even more dignity to us than being compared with angels (see Heb. 2:7). Second, the phrase translated "a little" (Ps. 8:5) could read "for a little while." This might mean that believers, when glorified in heaven, are somehow "higher" than the angels.

Whichever interpretations are taken, it is clear we are "crowned . . . with glory and honor."

Our dignity stems from our creation in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Despite our forefather Adam's sin, all people bear vestiges of God's image. Followers of Jesus Christ are in the process of having the image of God restored in them. Therefore, Psalm 8:5 not only applied to Adam and Eve when they were created, but also applies to us.

Because humans are the only creatures on earth made in God's image, God put us in charge of the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28-30). As Psalm 8 reminds us, we have dominion over the animal world. We have the right to use nature to meet our needs, while at the same time fulfilling our responsibility to take care of nature.

Some people claim that humans are no more valuable than any other form of life. But Psalm 8 plainly contradicts that opinion. God has bestowed on us more significance than on any other part of the visible creation.

Because of our sin, none of us

has perfectly achieved the dignity God wanted us to have. But Jesus Christ assumed human flesh and brought God's purpose for people to fulfillment (Heb. 2:6-9). He is the perfect Person. And through His work on the cross, our dignity can be brought to fullness.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Is it time that I again thank God for giving me His grace?*

The psalm ends as it began, with a burst of praise to God. Contemplation of God's universe moves the believer to worship.

# 2

## Where Are You, God?

**Psalms 9—21**

### **a** Sing Praise to His Name (9:1-12)

Sing the praises of the LORD,  
enthroned in Zion;  
proclaim among the nations  
what he has done.

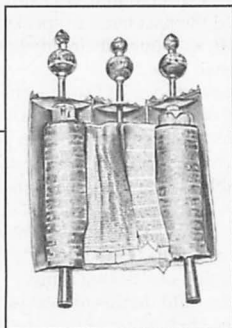
—Psalm 9:11

In Psalm 9, David asked God to deliver him from his enemies. David was threatened on many occasions, but we do not know which occasion prompted David to write this psalm.

Psalm 9 follows an acrostic pattern, although it is impossible to tell this from an English translation. Nearly every other verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (This pattern is not followed regularly.)

Psalm 10 seems to continue the acrostic pattern begun in Psalm 9, though even more irregularly. This continuity of form is one reason Bible scholars believe Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one.

Composing Psalm 9, David resolved to praise God not merely with his lips but with all his heart (vs. 1). David promised to tell of God's wonders and praise God's



### **Blotting Out Names**

**W**hen David spoke of his enemies' names being blotted out (Ps. 9:5), he was using a familiar Old Testament expression. This expression brought to mind the image of ink being washed from a register of names on a scroll. This symbolized the way offenders would lose their place among the living.

name. The “wonderful deeds” refer to God’s saving acts; God’s “name” (vs. 2) represents His being. Thus David would praise God for who He is and for what He does.

Next, David got more specific and personal about why He would praise God. David expected God to overthrow his enemies. In fact, David’s expectation was so sure that he used the past tense in speaking about it, as though it already had happened (vss. 3-6).

The overthrow of David’s enemies would occur in three stages. The enemies would “turn back” in panic-stricken retreat (vs. 3). They would “stumble,” meaning they would sprawl headlong on the ground. Lastly, they would “perish,” or die. These are stages in the pursuit and destruction of a fleeing army.

God would do this for David because He had judged it to be the just resolution of the conflict. In David’s dispute with his enemies, David was in the right (vs. 4).

Verses 5 and 6 reveal that David anticipated that the overthrow of his enemies would be complete. Their cities would be uprooted like weeds. Their ruin would be perpetual. Not even their memory would survive.

No matter what the outward circumstances seemed to say, the psalmist was confident that God rules the universe and that righteousness would prevail (vss. 7, 8). A similar assurance marks believers in every age. We know that our God reigns and that the success of evildoers is short-lived.

While God is a judge in relation

to the wicked, He is a secure refuge for His own. In Bible times a “refuge” or “stronghold” (vs. 9; same word in Hebrew) was a place of high fortifications, often at the top of a hill overlooking the plains. By this figure, David declared that the oppressed may seek God and find protection in Him.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I have faith in God’s justice even before it happens?*

This section closes as it began: with praise. The opening two verses tell of the psalmist’s personal intention to offer thanks; in verses 11 and 12, the call is for all God’s people to join in the praise.

Two phrases describe the Lord in verses 11 and 12. He is the Enthroned of Zion (see vs. 11), who chose Jerusalem to be His special dwelling place. And He is the Avenger of Blood (see vs. 12)—the judge of those who try to take life.

## **b** God Remembers the Oppressed (9:13-20)

**But God will never forget the  
needy,  
the hope of the afflicted will  
never perish.**

—Psalm 9:18

The first section of this psalm (vss. 1-12) opened and closed with praise; the second section (vss. 13-20) begins and ends with prayer. David praised God in advance for

delivering him, and then got down to the business of asking for that deliverance. Because of persecution from his enemies, David looked to God as his Lifter-up (the literal meaning of “lift me up” in verse 13).

Having been brought to “the gates of death” (vs. 13) by the actions of his foes, David prayed for an opportunity to testify of God’s deliverance “in the gates of Daughter Zion,” meaning Jerusalem (vs. 14). In ancient times people gathered in the open areas near city gates to carry on business and discuss issues. There a public testimony could be heard by the greatest

number of people.

The psalmist’s cry for mercy reminds us of the way many men and women wait for a crisis to arise before seeking God. Because of His love, God will meet us even when we turn to Him as our last resort.



Dating from about 695 B.C., this alabaster bas-relief from Nineveh shows men hunting bulls.

## Hunting

Ancient Israel abounded with large animals such as lions, bears, bulls, panthers, wolves, jackals, deer, and gazelles, as well as smaller game including such birds as partridges and quail. Men occasionally hunted for sport, but more often to provide food or to protect their herds from predators.

Hunters used a variety of weapons, including arrows, lances, swords, slings, and clubs. Sometimes they would lay traps or snares of different kinds.

Psalm 9:15 mentions pits and nets. A pit was a hole dug in the ground where large game passed. An animal would break through the covering of brush and become trapped in the pit. Hunters used nets in several ways. Sometimes they laid the nets on the ground and waited until animals walked across them.

But it is to our advantage to build a relationship with Him before disasters strike.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How may I offer public witness to my experiences of God's love and power?*

While the godly are rescued, the wicked are caught in their own traps (vss. 15, 16). The judgment of God has a passive aspect. Sometimes He allows sin to go on until it entangles the sinner.

(For the meaning of "Higgaion" and "Selah," see p. 114.)

Verses 17 and 18 declare that the needy will eventually have more than their hope to sustain them. Help is on the way. God will intervene, bringing assistance to the poor and sending the wicked back to Sheol, the place of the dead. Death is their native element, and to it they will return.

The final two verses of the psalm constitute a prayer in which David urged God to stand up from His throne and enter into battle. This action of God in human affairs would show the arrogant that they are mortal after all.

The pride of human leaders offends God and endangers those under their control. David's words are a reminder that one of the best defenses God's people have against pride is prayer.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Which oppressed peoples can I pray for this week, asking God's mercy on them?*

## **C** The Arrogance of the Wicked (10:1-11)

**In his pride the wicked man does not seek [the Lord]; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.**

—Psalm 10:4

The writer of Psalm 10 expressed a feeling that, sooner or later, just about all Christians echo: "Why, LORD?" (vs. 1). Sometimes God seems indifferent to the distress of His people. The wicked victimize the rest of us, yet God seems to stay away on purpose. Why?

In reality, of course, God never hides. He knows everything that happens. When He fails to repay wickedness immediately, it is only because He has wise reasons for delaying justice. As Christians, we should keep this in mind. But that won't necessarily change the painful feelings that cause us sometimes to cry, "Why, Lord?"

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Did I get an answer when I cried "Why, Lord?"*

Verses 2-7 begin to paint the portrait of an evil person. This person designs and puts into action schemes to take advantage of the weak. His values are the reverse of what they should be, so that he boasts of wicked desires and blasphemes the Lord. Indeed, he lives as though there is no God. Because of his past successes, he thinks he is beyond the reach of

## Are Psalms 9 and 10 Really One Psalm?

### Reasons for Unity

- Psalm 10 completes the acrostic pattern begun in Psalm 9.
- Some ancient copies of the Psalms run Psalms 9 and 10 together.
- Psalm 10 has no title, suggesting that the title of Psalm 9 once served for both.
- The two psalms share a number of distinctive expressions such as "times of trouble."

### Reasons against Unity

- Psalms 9 and 10 have different moods:  
Psalm 9 is a hymn;  
Psalm 10 is a lament.
- Most ancient copies of the Psalms separate Psalm 9 and Psalm 10.

justice, both human and divine, and he believes his success will go on uninterrupted. Evil speech is tasty in his mouth.

Verses 8-11 complete the portrait of this evil man. First, the psalmist used a swift change of figures to describe him. He is like a robber hiding in ambush, a lion waiting for its prey, and a hunter catching victims with a net. Then the psalmist admitted that the wicked person, in his role as a lurking predator, is indeed successful. This success leads the wicked one to declare that God is not paying attention.

The dominant characteristic of this evil person is arrogance.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *In what situations do I see wicked people enjoying success at the expense of the innocent?*

## **d** A Prayer for Intervention (10:12-18)

**You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted;  
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.**

—Psalm 10:17

Realizing that humans are powerless to correct the injustice he had described, the psalmist asked God to become active in the situation. The psalmist apparently did not get an answer to his questions about why the wicked are allowed to succeed. But in spite of this, he had enough faith to turn to God for help.

In his prayer, the psalmist said,

## PSALMS OF Lament

**T**he Israelites knew many bitter hours when rejoicing seemed impossible. Consequently, it is not surprising to find in the Psalms numerous outcries at the troubles of life. These psalms are called laments. They are of two kinds: national laments and individual laments.

National laments contrast the past mercies of God toward His people with His apparent neglect in the present. Sometimes these laments were connected with ritual fasts or temple ceremonies designed for repentance and prayer.

Individual laments express one person's torment. Yet nearly all the psalms in this category end on a note of hope and confidence.

"Lift up your hand" (vs. 12). This pictures God's raising His hand to deliver a blow of judgment against evildoers. Unlike the wicked person, the psalmist knew that God helps orphans and other victims who have nowhere else to turn. The downtrodden do not commit their circumstances to the Lord in vain, for He observes the righteous in their times of trouble.

When the psalmist asked God to "break the arm of the wicked man"

(vs. 15), "arm" meant "power." This was another way of asking God to call to account the one who said he would never be called to account (compare vss. 13 and 15). The psalmist wanted justice.

As the psalmist continued in prayer, his confidence in God increased. Using words that echo Moses' speech after God delivered the Hebrews from Pharaoh, the psalmist declared, "The LORD is King for ever and ever" (vs. 16; compare Exod. 15:18). Furthermore, "the nations will perish from his land" (Ps. 10:16). This looked forward to a day when Israelites would be in sole possession of the promised land. All others, such as the Philistines, would be destroyed or driven out.

The psalmist realized that not only his prayers but all the cries of the afflicted are heard by God. The doom of the wicked, who after all are mere mortals, is sealed by the Lord (vss. 17, 18).

Laments like Psalm 10 show us that it is OK for believers to pour out their woes before God. We can complain to Him, but we should not lose hope in His ability to save us.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *If I were to make a list of times when God has rescued me from problems, what episodes would top the list?*



## Psalms in Brief (11—12)

**Psalm 11** sounds a note of confidence in God's righteous rule, even when the wicked seem to have the upper hand.

It appeared to David that everyone was faithless and untrustworthy when he composed **Psalm 12**, a prayer for help.

## **e** How Long, Lord? (13:1-6)

How long, LORD? Will you forget  
me forever?

How long will you hide your  
face from me?

—Psalm 13:1

By all appearances, David wrote Psalm 13 in the midst of an ordeal.

However, we don't know what sort of ordeal. He may have been ill or hunted by enemies; possibly both. Whatever the case, David's endurance was nearly gone. He believed that unless God came to his aid soon, he would die.

The psalm opens with a fourfold "How long?" uttered out of the depths of grief (vss. 1, 2). David felt as though he had been left alone to deal with his inward turmoil and outward problems. It seemed to David that God had forgotten him and had turned His face away—in other words, that God was ignoring his plight. David was troubled with sad thoughts and feelings because his enemy—whether a person or the great enemy Death—appeared poised to triumph.

In verses 3 and 4, David's lament about God's apparent absence turns into prayer. After asking his four questions, David requested an

## Anthropomorphisms in the Psalms

The Psalms contain many references to God's face such as in Psalm 13:1. This is an example of *anthropomorphism*, a literary technique that attributes a human quality or feature (in this case, a body part) to a nonhuman being (in this case, God).

In Psalm 13:1, David was not saying that God has a face. Instead, he used anthropomorphism to convey an idea. Just as people turn their faces away when they want to ignore someone, so God seemed to be ignoring David.

Other anthropomorphisms in the Psalms include references to God's eyes, ears, arms, and feet.

answer. It seemed to David that God was hiding His face (vs. 1), so David asked Him, "Look on me" (vs. 3).

"Give light to my eyes" (vs. 3) reflects a Hebrew expression about strength and weakness. When a person's energy waned, the Israelites would speak of his or her eyes being dimmed. When a person was revitalized, they would say his or her eyes were lightened. By using this common expression, David was saying that unless God intervened, he would die. And his death would bring glee to his foes.

First, lament (vss. 1, 2) turned to prayer (vss. 3, 4). Now prayer turns to praise (vss. 5, 6). Because of his faith, or "trust" (vs. 5), David anticipated both God's graciousness and his own thanks for that graciousness. God would send His salvation; He would be good to David. Therefore, David would sing the Lord's praises.

In our lives, as in David's, we may discover at times that God seems distant. At such moments we will be tempted to despair. However, if we follow David's example and turn our complaints into prayers, we will become more aware of God's goodness. Our problems may not

disappear overnight, but God will give us the courage to wait for His help. He will not fail.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Am I able to thank God in advance for something I expect Him to do for me?*

### Psalms in Brief (14—21)

**Psalm 14** portrays the folly of those who ignore God (compare Psalm 53).

Instruction for those who wish to meet God in worship is contained in **Psalm 15**.

**Psalm 16** is a prayer asking for preservation from premature death.

David composed **Psalm 17** both as an expression of innocence and as a call for God to protect him from his foes.

**Psalm 18** sings of vindication during a crisis (compare II Sam. 22).

Partly a nature psalm, the **19th** praises the power and wisdom of God seen in sky and Scripture.

It appears that **Psalm 20** was written for a service of petition to God before the king went out to battle.

**Psalm 21** was probably composed for a service of thanksgiving when the king returned from war.

# 3

## Trusting through the Night, Joy in the Morning

**Psalms 22—30**

### **a** Why Have You Forsaken Me? (22:1-21)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?  
—Psalm 22:1

Evidently at some point in his life, David faced a combination of evils: he was sick; and worse, enemies surrounded him; and worse still, he felt abandoned by God. He wrote Psalm 22 to describe his feelings at that time.

No known episode in David's life can account, in a literal sense, for many of the expressions in this psalm. Yet those expressions fit the suffering of David's descendant Jesus Christ in a remarkably literal way. It is no wonder that this "psalm of the Cross" is quoted in the New Testament more often than any other psalm.

The first part of Psalm 22 contains six sections that alternately focus on David's problems (vss. 1-2; 6-8; 12-18) and on God's salvation (vss.

3-5; 9-11; 19-21).

Psalm 22 is remarkably messianic—many of the statements go far beyond David's experience, echoing strikingly what Christ suffered. In fact, the chilling opening cry of abandonment in verse 1 was quoted by Christ as He hung on the cross (see Matt. 27:46 and Mark 15:34). David's circumstances must have given him a small taste of the darkness that Jesus Christ experienced—as if God were far away and not listening. Indeed, Jesus knows the depths of our suffering, because He has been there Himself, and beyond.

But even in his distress, David's assurance is found in God's sovereignty. As Jesus resolved in Gethsemane, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39), so David declared, "Yet you are enthroned" (Ps. 22:3). Despite great suffering, both David and Jesus understood that God is worthy of absolute trust (vss. 3-5). They desperately wanted their suffering to cease, but still they trusted God—regardless.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When in my life has God shown Himself to be sovereign, even through difficult suffering?*

## The Animals of Psalm 22

In Psalm 22 the victim's enemies assume the shape of dangerous beasts:

- "Bulls of Bashan" (vs. 12). Located northeast of the Sea of Galilee, the region of Bashan was famous for producing large cattle.
- "Roaring lions" (vs. 13). In David's day lions still roamed parts of Israel. David portrayed them with fangs bared, hungry for their supper.
- "Dogs" (vs. 16). The word David used for "dogs" referred not to household pets but to wild dogs, which ran in packs searching for food.
- "Wild oxen" (vs. 21). This term probably referred to aurochs, the wild ancestors of domestic cattle. However, some commentators identify it with oryx, which are large, straight-horned antelope.

David's enemies were poised to take advantage of his weak condition. David felt as though he were surrounded by wild beasts—bulls, lions, dogs. Meanwhile, David was losing his strength, courage, health, and possessions. Verses 12-18 present a vivid picture of David's unhappy condition (compare Matt. 27:35).

In the third section that focuses on God's salvation (Ps. 22:19-21), David made his most urgent plea yet for help. Reversing the order of his previous list, David asked for deliverance from the sword (see

"pierced" hands and feet, vs. 16), from dogs (see vs. 16), from lions (see vs. 13), and from wild oxen (see "bulls," vs. 12).

Although none of us will have to face all the sufferings described by David and experienced by Jesus, we may have to endure insults and violence from godless people. Since the world hates our Lord, it hates us, too. But we have the promise that God will never forsake us.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Have I used the power of prayer to help me through my hard times?*

## **b** Delivered by God (22:22-31)

For he has not despised or  
scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted  
one;  
he has not hidden his face from  
him  
but has listened to his cry for  
help.

—Psalm 22:24

There is a world of difference between the first part of this psalm and the second part. The first part (vss. 1-21) described David's distress. The second part (vss. 22-31) contains David's vision of thanksgiving.

David vowed that once he was delivered from his troubles, he would publicly praise God in the temple (vss. 22, 25). Verses 23 and 24 contain the words with which David planned to call his fellow Israelites to join him in praising God.

Furthermore, David intended to hold a feast so that others could celebrate with him (vs. 26). His blessing upon his guests on that occasion would be "May your hearts live forever!"

Beginning with verse 27, David's vision of celebration bursts the bounds of what could actually have happened in his near future. He began to prophesy about the Messiah's future reign.

David envisioned a combined worship service and feast, attended by people from all around the world

## Messianic Psalms

The Psalms contain many prophecies of the Messiah (see Luke 24:44). Some Bible scholars divide messianic psalms into five kinds:

1. *Purely prophetic psalms.* These refer to a future king of David's line (e.g.: Ps. 110).
2. *End-time psalms.* Psalms in this category refer to the coming of the Lord and His kingdom (Ps. 96).
3. *Typological psalms.* In these psalms, the writer described his own experience in a way that went beyond him and better described Jesus (Ps. 22).
4. *Indirectly messianic psalms.* These psalms concern an earthly king but are ultimately fulfilled in Christ (Ps. 72).
5. *Typically messianic psalms.* In psalms of this type, only a part applies to Jesus (Ps. 34:20).

(vss. 27, 28). Clearly, this glimpse into the future encompassed a time when Gentiles would be included in the family of faith. And among them will be the rich (vs. 29), who will join in the feast right along with the poor (see vs. 26). Indeed, the time will come when the grip of mortality itself must bow to the lordship of Christ (vs. 29), for His power supercedes even death.

In David's vision, one generation of believers passes on the news about God to the next, so that God's praise stretches on and on into the future (vss. 30, 31). And David foresaw the promise that someday all of God's people will make up one great company, united in worship.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How can I share the Good News with future generations?*

## **C** In God's Care (23:1-6)

**The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.**

**He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.**

—Psalm 23:1-3a

The most famous psalm is a serene statement of trust in God. It opens with a general statement of confidence in God's provision: "I lack nothing" (vs. 1). Then the rest of the psalm illustrates how the divine Shepherd provides for His sheep

(vss. 14) and how the divine Host provides for His guests (vss. 5, 6).

Due to the dry climate, few patches of grass and even fewer pools of water were available to Israelite shepherds and their sheep. So a caring shepherd would lead his sheep to "green pastures" and "quiet waters" (vs. 2), where they could feed and rest during the heat of the day.

An able shepherd would also lead his sheep along the paths where they needed to go. David knew firsthand about being restored in his soul and about turning to paths of righteousness (vs. 3). After the prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin of adultery (II Sam. 12:1-14), David repented and entered on a course of moral restoration. Such restoration brings honor to God.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I currently need any kind of restoration?*

Because of the way God had met his needs in the past, David was sure God would remain with him even when he faced his last trial, death. This experience David compared to a shepherd and sheep walking through a dark valley (Ps. 23:4). A narrow gorge could be a dangerous place when the evening shadows might be hiding bandits or fierce beasts.

A typical Israelite shepherd would carry a "rod," or club, to defend against enemies (vs. 4). He would also be equipped with a "staff," or crook, to control the sheep. For these reasons his presence would

## Shepherd's Crook

A part of a shepherd's usual equipment was a staff, or crook. The staff's hook was made for fitting around the neck of a wayward sheep. Thus it was used as a tool of guidance.

comfort his sheep,  
just as God's powerful  
and disciplining presence  
comforts believers. What  
could be more encouraging  
to us than the realization that we  
have the Lord as our Shepherd?  
When we face any trial, even death,  
He is there by our side to help us.

At verse 5, the figure of the Lord changes from a shepherd with his sheep to the host of a banquet. This host entertains David lavishly. David's head is anointed with perfumed oil in the traditional way of showing honor to a guest. The table is spread with food and David's cup is kept filled with wine. Meanwhile, David's enemies are present to look with envy upon his happiness, in the way captive enemies would be forced by ancient kings to observe their victory celebrations.

But the feast David described was more than a victory celebration. It was also the seal of his alliance with God. In ancient Israel, covenants were often concluded with a

meal that  
expressed  
the bonds  
of friendship

(Exod. 24:8-11). The word translated "love" in Psalm 23:6 is the word used throughout the Old Testament of the friendly relations between the two parties of a covenant.

"Goodness and love" would "follow" (literally, "pursue") David throughout his life (vs. 6). David would not have to beg God for evidences of His care; God would be eager to give them.

David had not come to the Lord's house for one meal only. He had come to live there "forever" (vs. 6). This does not mean David expected to take up residence in the tabernacle. Rather, it means he looked forward to eternal communion with God.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I feel assured that I will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" ?*

### Psalms in Brief (24—26)

**Psalm 24** was perhaps written for the return of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (II Sam. 6:12-15), and used on anniversaries of that event.

In **Psalm 25** the psalmist expressed concern about his burden of guilt, his need for guidance, and the pressure being brought upon him by enemies.

In **Psalm 26** David prayed to be spared the death that swiftly overtakes the ungodly.

## **d** Confidence in the Midst of Danger (27:1-6)

For in the day of trouble  
he will keep me safe in his  
dwelling,  
he will hide me in the shelter of his  
sacred tent  
and set me high upon a rock.

—Psalm 27:5

Anxiety is a universal emotion. Having to face perils, endure adversity, or walk alone into the unknown has triggered fear in men and women of all generations. David was no exception. Psalm 27 is a window into his struggle with foes who were determined to destroy him.

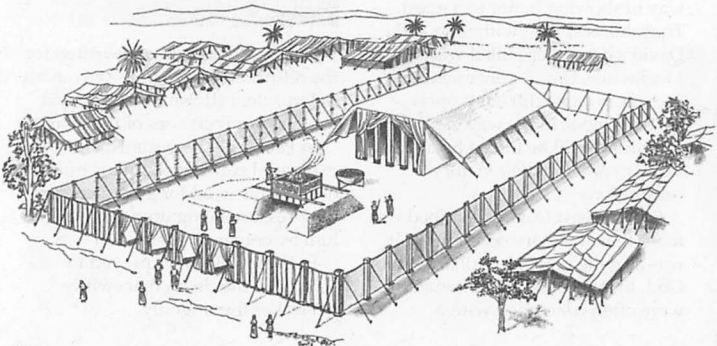
The psalm opens with a burst of

confidence containing three metaphors for God: light, salvation, and stronghold. When David called God “light” (vs. 1), he was using a common figure of speech that can stand for truth, understanding, vitality—just about anything that is good. By calling God his “salvation,” David suggested that God delivers the godly from every kind of evil. When he said God is “the stronghold of my life,” David depicted Him as a place of safety.

Because God was his light, salvation, and stronghold, David could be courageous. This was an important concern to him, since war was imminent. And this military threat was combined with slander. “Devour me” (vs. 2) is a Hebrew expression referring to verbal abuse. Yet despite the danger, David was

## **The Tabernacle**

Before David’s son Solomon built the temple, the nation’s worship was conducted at a tentlike structure called the tabernacle, which housed the ark of the covenant and other religious items.





confident that his courage would hold and that his foes would be defeated (vs. 3).

Sooner or later, foes will appear on the horizons of our lives. Whenever this happens, we should reach out in confidence to the One who guides our steps, delivers us from our enemies, and offers us refuge.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What occasions in my life have given rise to the faith that God gives victory and strength?*

One reason David did not fear his enemies was because he kept his mind focused on the Lord. He sought to be with God. For Israelites, God's presence was specially associated with the tabernacle, called in Psalm 27 "the house of the LORD" (vs. 4) and the "temple." In the tabernacle, David could view "the beauty of the LORD."

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I seek to know God above all things?*

David expected practical benefits from seeking the Lord. He would find security in God (vs. 5) and would defeat his enemies (vs. 6). Afterward, he would be able to thank God for his victory.

David described his security in God by comparing it to God's "dwelling," God's "tent," and a "rock" (vs. 5). In ancient times, a host assumed responsibility for the safety of a guest in his dwelling, or home. The tent or tabernacle was a recognized place of immunity from pursuers. A rocky elevation was a common refuge from enemies.

When David was victorious over

his enemies, he would offer a sacrifice in the tabernacle to show his gratitude. This would be an occasion of great joy and singing.

Into our lives, as into David's, God brings victory over trials. And when He does, we should not be in such a hurry to return to normal life that we forget to thank Him. The process of winning victories is not complete until we have carried through with praise and thanksgiving to the Lord.



## **Plea for Help (27:7-14)**

**Do not hide your face from me,  
do not turn your servant away  
in anger;  
you have been my helper.  
Do not reject me or forsake me,  
God my Savior.**

—Psalm 27:9

The first part of Psalm 27 ended with David on his feet testifying. The second part opens with him on his knees praying. It isn't far from faith to fear in the real world.

David's prayer is contained in verses 7-12. It begins with a general appeal that God would hear him and not reject him (vss. 7-9).

Verse 10 seems to suggest that David's parents had deserted him. However, David's real meaning probably was that God's love is more constant than the love of even those closest to us.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How have I discovered that when earthly props give way, God is adequate for my needs?*

On the basis of his confidence, David made two specific requests.

First, he wanted help to follow the “way,” or “straight path” (vs. 11), which was the line of conduct that would please God. An added reason for David to behave righteously was his enemies’ eagerness to exploit any slip he might make.

Second, David asked that the evil designs of his foes would fail (vs. 12). “False witnesses” were not people who lied in court, but slanderers. David wanted protection against people who spoke evil about him.

David ended the psalm with a burst of praise (vss. 13, 14). The phrase “be strong and take heart” (vs. 14) recalls the transfer of power from Moses to Joshua in an earlier day (Josh. 1:6). Joshua was to face his foes courageously because God would strengthen him in the promised land. Likewise, David was to remain strong because God would

help him to rule the nation and overcome Israel’s enemies.

The advice “wait for the LORD” appears twice in Psalm 27:14. It is a reminder to the faint of heart that God does not operate on human timetables. But He will hear and answer our prayers, and His answers are always worth waiting for.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *In what area do I need to have more patience with the way God is working out His plan?*

### **Psalms in Brief (28—30)**

Deliverance, perhaps from a premature death, is the prayer of **Psalm 28**.

**Psalm 29** is a hymn of praise to God the King, whose majesty and power are displayed in a violent storm.

A psalm of thanksgiving, **Psalm 30** was written after the psalmist’s deliverance from a life-threatening illness.

# 4

## God Is Enough

**Psalms 31—41**

### Psalm in Brief (31)

In **Psalm 31** David cried for deliverance from a situation so threatening that his friends had abandoned him.

### **a** The Blessedness of the Forgiven (32:1-11)

Blessed is the one  
whose transgressions are  
forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.  
Blessed is the one  
whose sin the LORD does not  
count against them  
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

—Psalm 32:1, 2

Psalm 32 is an analysis of sin and forgiveness, willfulness and repentance. The psalm's writer, David, knew about these subjects through his own experiences. The psalm may reflect upon his adultery with Bathsheba (II Sam. 11:1—12:13).

The psalm opens with joy at God's mercy (Ps. 32:1-2). It says the

forgiven are "blessed," or happy.

David used three Hebrew words to describe sin. The word translated "transgressions" (vs. 1) referred to rebellion against God. The word translated "sins" stood for offenses that constituted a swerving from the path of obedience. The word translated "sin" in verse 2 indicated distortion, illegality, or a lack of respect for God's will.

Matching the three words for human evil are three terms for divine forgiveness. The term translated "forgiven" (vs. 1) meant "lifted" or "removed." The second term, translated "covered," suggested that God conceals sin from His own eyes. The third term, translated in verse 2 as "not count against them," referred to the canceling of a debt.

Forgiveness comes by grace through faith apart from works (Rom. 4:6-8). But faith must be sincere and obedient. Forgiveness comes only to those "in whose spirit is no deceit" (Ps. 32:2).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I ever pretend that I want to change my sinful ways when I really don't want to change them?*

David knew how to value the happiness of the forgiven. Previously his stubborn refusal to confess his sin had brought him nothing but misery (vss. 3, 4).

Psychologists have long known that bottling up feelings of guilt triggers harmful reactions in both mind and body. The psalmist had suffered some of these reactions when he had tried to stifle his conscience. He had grown weaker and had groaned in discomfort all the time. In contrast to the righteous, who are like trees that flourish even during a drought (1:3), David had been like a withering plant (32:4).

At the heart of David's discomfort had been the conviction of sin that was sent by God. This conviction had felt like a hand pressing relentlessly upon him.

Not all physical illness and mental distress can be traced to specific sins. But some can be. If the Spirit convicts suffering believers about a wrong action or attitude, their proper response is to agree with God and ask for His cleansing.

David had taken that step and immediately had felt relief (vs. 5). David's confession had been complete, as shown by his repeating all three words for sin. Although verse 5 uses just one word for God's forgiveness, we can be sure it was complete as well.

David urged others not to repeat his mistake (vs. 6). Rather than trying to hide our wrongdoing, we should confess it to God while He "may be found" (vs. 6). There will come a time (after death) when

sinner's will no longer have the opportunity to seek forgiveness.

Those who repent receive God's help in escaping troubles. When floodwaters rise, we can flee to high

## Mighty Waters

**T**he creation myths of many middle eastern peoples told of gods who subdued a chaotic ocean and formed the world from it. These peoples viewed large bodies of water as evil.

While Israelite religion denied the reality of such myths, Israelites were familiar with them. Thus it was natural for David to compare encroaching evil with water that seems to engulf the land (Ps. 32:6).

ground; when trials come, we can flee to God.

David expressed that truth again in a prayer to God, his "hiding place" (vs. 7). And as David prayed, he was aware of loud singing around him. Others were celebrating God's deliverance too.

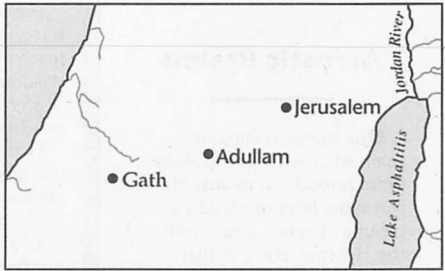
Those of us who hear the message of Psalm 32 have a responsibility. God is willing to guide us and keep His eye on us (vs. 8), but we need to have teachable spirits. We should not be ornery, like a horse or mule that needs a strong hand from its

rider before it will go where it should (vs. 9).

Those who don't want to cooperate with God have unhappy lives, but those who trust God are surrounded by His love. The word translated "surrounds" in verse 10 is the same term used in verse 7 regarding songs of deliverance. To be encompassed by God and by saints declaring God's praise is reason enough to "rejoice" and "be glad" (vs. 11).

### Psalm in Brief (33)

**Psalm 33** is a hymn of praise to God as Creator, Sovereign, Judge, and Savior.



## **b** The Lord Is Good (34:1-22)

**This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;  
he saved him out of all his troubles.**

—Psalm 34:6

According to the title, this psalm belongs to the period when David was struggling to stay out of the clutches of King Saul. At one point David's flight took him to Gath, where he acted insane to prevent the Philistines from killing him. Then he escaped to Adullam (1 Sam. 21:10—22:1).

Like Psalms 9 and 10, Psalm 34 is an acrostic. In this psalm the pattern is nearly complete. Each of the verses, except the last, begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One letter was skipped (between verses 5 and 6).

The psalm opens with David's vow to make God's praise the business of his life (vss. 1, 2). Since this praise would be public, it would raise the spirits of others. David invited all to join him in giving God glory (vs. 3).

Private worship is commended in Scripture, but believers also need to band together to praise God. Exalting His name in family and church groups refreshes all who participate.

David was filled with praise because God had rescued him from fears (vs. 4) and troubles (vs. 6). We don't know what these fears and troubles were, but David's release from them brought him great joy.

Based on his own experience, David encouraged others to look to God. Then their faces would no

## Acrostic Psalms

One poetic technique psalmists used was the alphabetic acrostic. In psalms of this type, lines or verses or groups of verses begin with the Hebrew letters in their alphabetical order.

It's not clear why psalmists used the acrostic. One reason may have been simply because it supplied the poets with a framework upon which to hang their thoughts. A second aim for the acrostic may have been to aid learners in memorizing the psalm. A third possible reason for the acrostic is that it gives the impression of having covered the subject completely—"from A to Z."

Having personally experienced the power of God, David could teach others who seek godly wisdom (Ps. 34:8). He invited his hearers to "taste and see" God's goodness (vs. 8).

Hebrews 6:5 and I Peter 2:3 use this phrase to describe the earliest stage of spiritual life. We who have found an abundant life in Christ have the privilege of inviting others to "taste and see" for themselves.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Is there someone close to me who needs to hear about God's love?*

Those who take refuge in the Lord (see vs. 8) and "fear him" (vs. 9) do not suffer want. Lions are strong, but because they depend on themselves to get their food, they may run short. On the other hand, the meek who depend on God will "lack no good thing" (vs. 10). In the style of Jewish wisdom literature, David taught his "children," or hearers, about the "fear of the LORD" (vs. 11). David did not describe the "fear of the LORD" itself but rather

longer wear the look of shame but would be "radiant" with joy (vs. 5).

Another way David encouraged others was by assuring them that "the angel of the Lord" encamps like an army around "those who fear him" (vs. 7). Unlike the "fears" in verse 4, "fear" in this case means reverence for God. The "angel of the LORD" probably is a manifestation of God (compare Gen. 16:7, 13). God is the one who delivers us.

how one who fears the Lord ought to behave. Those who want the benefits of godliness (vs. 12) have a negative and a positive task before them: they are to (1) "turn from evil" and (2) "do good" (vs. 14).

There are more kinds of wickedness than those performed by the tongue. But evil speech is among the most dangerous kinds of wickedness (Jas. 3:1-12). So David used spoken evil as an example of

the evil from which we ought to turn (Ps. 34:13).

As an example of doing good, David cited the pursuit of peaceful relationships with others (vs. 14). The words translated “seek” and “pursue” indicate that we are to cultivate this virtue energetically.

The decision to fear the Lord or not to fear the Lord has consequences. These are spelled out in verses 15-22.

God sees all that happens to the righteous and knows our problems before we pray about them. Yet He listens to our requests (vs. 15) and judges the wicked (vs. 16).

Verses 17-20 develop in greater detail the truth that God pays close attention to the righteous. We sometimes have our hearts broken and our spirits crushed. But at such times the Lord is “close” (vs. 18), His presence offering strength.

The assurance of deliverance from all troubles (vss. 17, 19) has ultimate fulfillment beyond death for the people of God. Yet often He delivers us from dangers in this life, as seen in the statement that the righteous man will escape the breaking of his bones (vs. 20; see also John 19:36).

The psalmist concluded with a summary of the principles taught in the preceding verses. Sin has a boomerang effect and will destroy the wicked (Ps. 34:21). However, the righteous walk in assurance of God’s continuing presence and ultimate deliverance (vs. 22). “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), the Redeemer.

## Psalms in Brief (35—39)

**Psalm 35** appeals to God, as Warrior and Judge, to aid His servant.

Human wickedness and divine goodness are contrasted in **Psalm 36**.

Emphasizing the security of the righteous, **Psalm 37** offers instruction in godly wisdom.

In **Psalm 38** David appealed for relief from illness and loneliness.

**Psalm 39** is a prayer in which the psalmist expressed dismay at the fragility of human life.

## **C** Firm Footing and a New Song (40:1-10)

He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
out of the mud and mire;  
he set my feet on a rock  
and gave me a firm place to  
stand.

—Psalm 40:2

**Psalm 40** appears to have been written by David at a time when he faced some terrible problems. Nevertheless, David didn’t get around to mentioning those problems until the second half of the psalm. In the first half, he recalled an earlier time when God had rescued him. This past victory gave David courage to face his current situation with God by his side.

David didn’t specify what his past hardship had been. But he did tell what facing that hardship had

felt like: it was like floundering in a mud-filled pit. Since "pit" was sometimes used figuratively of the grave, David may have been implying that he had been brought near death. David had not been able to climb out of the pit by himself, but God had lifted him to a place where his feet had found firm footing (vs. 2).

David had prayed and "waited patiently" (literally, "waiting, I did wait") for God's help (vs. 1). His patience had been rewarded: help had come.

Filled with joy because of his salvation, David had broken out in song. It may be that the references to a "new song" and a "hymn of praise" (vs. 3) should be taken literally. Perhaps on this occasion David had composed one of the other psalms contained in our Book of Psalms.

Seeing and hearing David as he praised God, many people would be moved to trust in the Lord as David had done. Similarly, Christians today should seek opportunities to tell about God at work in their lives.

The psalmist meditated upon what God had done (vs. 4), then summarized what he had experienced (vs. 5). David refused to place trust in those who are arrogant.

Instead, he rested his confidence fully upon God.

For David, the past was full of the Lord's acts and

the future was rich with His plans. God's gracious dealings with His people reinforce the believer's awareness that nothing compares with Him.

When the psalmist declared that God does not desire "sacrifice and offering" (vs. 6), he was not rejecting the religious rituals of his time, which were instituted by God. Instead, he was saying that

## The Sacrificial System

According to some theologians, the first sacrifice occurred when God killed an animal to clothe Adam and Eve with its skin. Cain and Abel, Noah, Job, and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all offered sacrifices. The law given at the time of Moses described in detail several kinds of sacrifices.

From the first, sacrificial offerings were meant to express repentance and faith. Misuse of the system occurred when Israelites relied on offerings to take the place of a change in their hearts. Nevertheless, the sacrificial system did its job by reminding people that sin has consequences and that a blood sacrifice is needed to atone for it. Jesus Christ made the final, all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross.



obedience to ritual laws is secondary to the obedience of the heart.

The second phrase in verse 6 may be translated either "my ears you have pierced" or "my ears you have opened." If the first translation is correct, then it probably refers to the ceremony by which slaves could show their voluntary, perpetual enslavement to their masters (Exod. 21:5, 6). If the second translation is correct, then it means that God had opened David's ears to hear His instruction.

It is easier to see how Psalm 40:6-8 applies prophetically to Jesus (Heb. 10:5-10) than to see how it applied originally to David. Perhaps the "scroll" mentioned in Psalm 40:7 was the coronation decree binding David to keep the law. If this is so, then David was saying that he was ready to fulfill his responsibilities to keep God's commandments and do His will (vs. 8).

One way David did his duty as king over God's people was by publicly speaking about God's "righteousness," "faithfulness," "saving help" and "love." (vss. 9, 10). David's psalms, recited or sung at worship in the tabernacle and later in the temple, played an important part in keeping the nation on track spiritually.

Like David and Christ, all believers should delight in obeying God's will. And they should not hide what they know of God, but should spread the news widely.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How can I help spread the Gospel to the unsaved?*

## **d A Prayer for Deliverance (40:11-17)**

I am poor and needy;  
may the Lord think of me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
You are my God, do not delay.  
—Psalm 40:17

Finally, we arrive at David's situation at the time of the psalm. "Troubles without number" surrounded him (vs. 12). There seemed to be more of them than hairs on his head. It's anyone's guess what these troubles were, but David took at least partial responsibility for them by admitting, "My sins have overtaken me."

When David said "I cannot see," he meant his body was growing weak. When he said "My heart fails within me," he meant his courage was growing weak. David knew he was incapable of getting himself out of his predicament, so he asked God to save him (vss. 11, 13).

It seems that some of David's troubles were due to enemies who were mocking him and plotting his destruction (vss. 14, 15). David asked God to reverse the fortunes of these evil men. He also asked for strength so that he and other righteous people could continually praise God (vs. 16).

The psalm ends with an urgent yet faithful plea for God's help (vs. 17). Once again, David was waiting.

We would do well to follow

David's example, telling the Lord that we are counting on Him in times of danger and personal testing. When we need deliverance, He is our chief source of strength.

**Ask Yourself . . .** Which of my prayer requests is the most urgent?

### Psalm in Brief (41)

**Psalm 41** was composed by David during a time of serious illness.

# 5

## Joy in Sorrow, Triumph in Tears

### Psalm 42—57

#### Psalm in Brief (42—45)

Psalm 42 and 43 were probably originally a single psalm, the lament of a temple singer in exile who longed for the house of God.

Psalm 44 is a national cry for help following Israel's defeat by an enemy.

The theme of Psalm 45 is praise for the king and queen on their wedding day.

#### **a** God Is Our Refuge (46:1-11)

"Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the  
nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth."  
—Psalm 46:10

Against a background of natural and national upheavals, Psalm 46 expresses confidence in the protection of God. It's not known who wrote this psalm, or when. It's also not known whether the psalmist was referring to specific events in Israel's history or was just

making a general statement. Yet the point of the psalm—God is our refuge—could not be clearer.

The psalm has three sections: verses 1-3, verses 4-7, and verses 8-11.

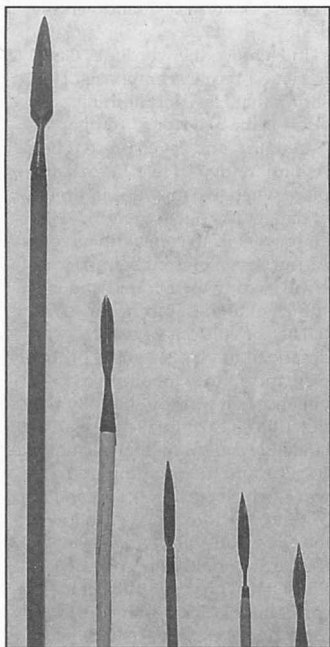
In Hebrew, the word for "God" in verse 1 receives emphasis. This shows that He—and nothing else—is the believer's "refuge," "strength," and "ever-present help." As our "refuge," He is like a safe place where we may flee in times of danger. As our "strength," He empowers us to cope with adversity. As our "ever-present help," He is always ready to be found and is sufficient to meet our needs.

The convulsions of nature described in verses 2 and 3 probably were meant to symbolize the violence of a war. But literally they describe an earthquake (vs. 2a); a landslide caused by that earthquake (vs. 2b); and the resulting tidal wave, which crashes upon land (vs. 3). Since the Jordan River follows the Great Rift Valley, a fault in the earth's crust, from earliest times Israel has been subject to earthquakes. The psalmist evidently drew on his experience with such events.

Earthquakes are terrifying enough in our day, when we understand their cause. They must have been far more unsettling at the time Psalm 46 was composed. Nevertheless, the psalmist said the people of God trust in Him and have no fear (vs. 2).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When have I felt God's stabilizing presence while everything else in my world seemed to be shaking?*

Replicas of weapons used in battle.



After a violent tidal wave at sea, the peaceful river of verse 4 comes as a welcome change. That verse's references to "the city of God" and to "the holy place where the Most High dwells" clearly point to Jerusalem. Yet Jerusalem occupies a dry hilltop; it has never had a permanent river. So what did the psalmist mean about a "river" there?

The answer to that question is found in verse 5. There is no river within Jerusalem, but "God is within her." His presence, flowing into lives like a river, makes glad the people of God.

Jerusalem needed the presence of God as a help against its enemies. "Break of day" was the time when armies normally attacked. But when Jerusalem was attacked, God protected it. Mountains and kingdoms might fall (vss. 2, 6), but Jerusalem "will not fall" (vs. 5).

Because Israel's enemies were in an "uproar" (vs. 6), they were unstable to start with. But God lifted "his voice" to finish them off.

Verse 7, the psalm's refrain (see vs. 11), reveals God to be full of power and grace. The name "LORD Almighty" (vs. 7) can also be translated "Lord of hosts." It indicates that God has heavenly armies at His disposal. The name translated "God of Jacob" evokes the memory of one of the nation's greatest ancestors. Jacob was graciously chosen by God for a blessing instead of his older brother, Esau.

The mighty God is with us. The gracious God protects us.

The third section of the psalm invites us to use the eyes of our imagination to examine the aftermath of a tremendous battle. The field is strewn with the broken and smoking instruments of warfare. This is a scene of terrible destruction.

But this is not just the result of one group of armed men overcoming another. God Himself entered the fray on the side of His people. Thus the desolation on the battlefield is His work. He brought peace, but He did it by carrying the battle to a decisive end.

This scene cannot represent only the conclusion of a battle in Israel's history. The psalm says God "makes wars cease *to the ends of the earth*" (vs. 9, emphasis added). Therefore, it would seem that the scene must be a preview of God's final victory over evil.

Above the din of earth's wicked people, God cries "Be still" (vs. 10), meaning "Enough! Stop!" He calls all people to recognize Him as God, and He confidently declares that He will be exalted among the nations, He will be exalted in the earth.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *In what ways do I try to contribute to God's exaltation in the world?*

After such a scene, the truth that God is our protection seems more precious than ever. And the lot of those on the side opposing God seems more awful than ever. That's why it's so important that we do a good job as recruitment officers for the army of the Lord.

## Psalms in Brief (47—50)

In **Psalm 47** the God of Israel is identified as the universal Ruler.

**Psalm 48** celebrates Jerusalem as the city of the Great King (God).

According to **Psalm 49**, those who trust in wealth for security are fools.

**Psalm 50** reminds those who engage thoughtlessly in religious practices that they deal with the living God.

## **b** A Plea for Forgiveness (51:1-9)

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

—Psalm 51:7

**Psalm 51** is the most vivid, detailed, and anguished confession of sin in the Bible. Its author, David, was a man after God's own heart. Yet one year, in mid-life, he started an affair with a married woman named Bathsheba. David arranged for Bathsheba's soldier-husband, Uriah, to be positioned in battle where he was certain to be killed. Uriah received a military funeral, and later his widow moved into the palace (II Sam. 11).

End of story? Not quite.

David managed to quiet his conscience for many months. But finally he was confronted by the prophet Nathan (II Sam. 12). Then

the king saw in a flash that he had offended God by his many sins. Psalm 51 allows us to glimpse the feelings that followed in David's heart.

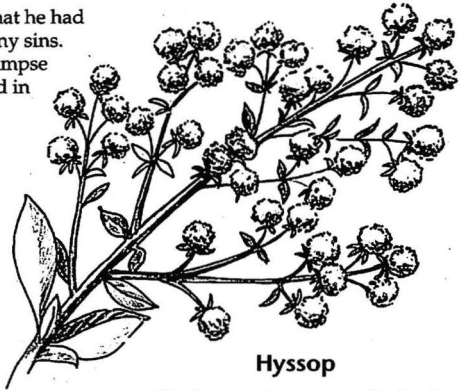
The psalm begins abruptly with David's cry for mercy and forgiveness. He addressed his words to "God" (vs. 1), rather than to "my God" as in other psalms. Perhaps this was to express his sense of distance from God.

David knew he had failed God, but he also knew God's love is "unfailing." David appealed to this love and to God's "great compassion"—a term that in Hebrew suggests the care of parent for child. In hopes of receiving some of this compassion, David admitted his "transgressions," "iniquity," and "sin" (vss. 1, 2).

In his prayer, David asked for his transgressions before God to be blotted out (see vs. 1), meaning wiped away like writing from a scroll. He also asked that his iniquity be washed away and his sin cleansed (see vs. 2). These two terms; in Hebrew, were used of laundering dirty clothes. David saw himself as soiled with guilt.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Is there unconfessed sin darkening my life?*

David knew his sins were serious. He couldn't get them out of his mind; he had to talk with God about them (vs. 3).



**Hyssop**

The hyssop plant was used in ritual cleansings (Exod. 12:22; Lev. 14:1-7; Num. 19:16-19).

Some people wonder why David told God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (vs. 4; see II Sam. 12:13). After all, others had been hurt by the king's actions. True, David had *wronged* others, but he had *sinned* against God by breaking His commands. In the same way, when we sin, we always hurt God.

Because David had sinned against God, God was just in punishing David. According to II Samuel 12:13 and 14, God's decision was to spare David's life but to let the son of his guilty relationship with Bathsheba die of an illness.

David traced his sinfulness to his fallen nature (Ps. 51:5). All Adam's descendants have evil in their nature from the start.

While David knew that evil lurked within him, he longed for

divine "faithfulness" and "wisdom" (vs. 6). Then he would not be so likely to sin against God.

Verses 7-9 begin with David's expectation that God would "cleanse" (literally, "un-sin") him. David compared his anticipated forgiveness with being washed "whiter than snow" (vs. 7). Snow is rare in Israel, but Israelites knew what it looks like—if only as the brightness on a distant mountain summit.

David looked forward to the time of his restoration, when he would be welcomed with sounds of "joy and gladness" (vs. 8). He felt as though his bones had been crushed, but he anticipated a time when he would dance with happiness.

Here, as in other psalms, joy is depicted as a by-product of a healthy relationship with God. When we try to find joy in the pursuit of pleasure, joy eludes us, as it did David. And as with David, we know joy only when God has wiped away our guilt and looks no more upon our sin (see vs. 9).



## A Response of Gratitude (51:10-19)

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken  
spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.

—Psalm 51:17

In the psalm's second half, the emphasis shifts from confession

of sin to recovery from sin. To accomplish a full recovery, David needed to have a "pure heart" and a "steadfast," "willing" spirit (vss. 10, 12). In other words, he needed to be changed inside. Modifying his behavior would not be enough.

David knew that for him to change inside, God would have to stay with him and he with God. So this was his prayer (vs. 11). David may have asked specifically not to be deprived of the Holy Spirit because he knew that the Spirit had withdrawn from the previous king, Saul (I Sam. 16:14).

Then David prayed again that his lost joy would be restored (Ps. 51:12). The repeated emphasis on getting back this elusive quality suggests that the psalmist was seriously depressed.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How long has it been since I felt the joy of salvation?*

As a reformed sinner himself, David promised to become a counselor to others who were deep in sin (vs. 13). But before David could do that, he needed to know that God had completely forgiven him. His mention of "guilt of bloodshed" (vs. 14) probably refers to his part in Uriah's death.

David promised that he would sing of God's righteousness and declare God's praise for forgiving him. But of course that would have to wait until God forgave him. It was up to God, then, to open David's lips in worship (vs. 15).

That day would come, David felt sure, because God values

repentance. David was repentant. His spirit was “broken” (vs. 17), as it had to be before it could be made steadfast and willing. His heart was “contrite” as a prelude to being made pure.

David identified this condition of repentance as his sacrifice for his sins. Verses 16 and 17 may sound as though David had rejected the sacrificial system. But that cannot be, since God had ordained that form of worship. Instead, David expressed his understanding that sacrifices are useless—and even offensive to God—if unaccompanied by repentance.

Some Bible scholars have suggested that verses 18 and 19 were written by a second psalmist after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (centuries after David’s death). However, it is possible that David wrote these verses. If so, he probably meant that if God’s grace would extend beyond the king to include the nation, more people than just David would offer sacrifices of the heart and sacrifices of animals.

### Psalms in Brief (52—56)

After denouncing those who build a career on slander and intrigue, **Psalm 52** affirms that God will stand by His own.

**Psalm 53** testifies about the folly of the wicked (compare Ps. 14).

In **Psalm 54** David prayed for deliverance from men seeking his life.

**Psalm 55**, another Davidic psalm, has in view deliverance from a

conspiracy led by a former friend.

**Psalm 56** is a hymn of trust composed when David’s life was threatened by his enemies.

## **d** In the Shadow of His Wings (57:1-11)

Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,  
for in you I take refuge.  
I will take refuge in the shadow of  
your wings  
until the disaster has passed.

—Psalm 57:1

According to its title, Psalm 57 springs from the period in David’s life during which he escaped from Saul and from the Philistines, and hid in a cave near the town of Adullam (I Sam. 21:10—22:1; see also Pss. 34, 56). One might think that at such a time David would have relied on the rock walls surrounding him to make him feel safe. But Psalm 57 is remarkable for showing that David looked first to God for his security. His soul took refuge in God.

“The shadow of your wings” (vs. 1) was a common figure of speech symbolizing God’s sheltering presence. When danger comes near God’s people, He shelters us like a mother bird covering her nestlings with her wings.

The psalmist’s confidence grew as he addressed the Lord as “God Most High” (vs. 2), the one who controls human destinies. Yet God



was not remote or unconcerned about David's needs. He would rescue David from his pursuers, who presumably were King Saul's troops. God would also send "his love and his faithfulness" (vs. 3) as companions to save David from his enemies.

Although David felt confident of God's help, he had not yet been delivered from danger. As he lay down at night, David pictured his enemies as "lions" and "ravenous beasts" (vs. 4). These people were using their tongues as weapons, probably by spreading harmful lies about David.

Verse 5 is a refrain closing the psalm's first half. It shows that despite David's personal danger,

he was concerned about God's exaltation.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Have I ever praised God in spite of being surrounded by enemies?*

Like the first half of the psalm, the second half is addressed to God. But its tone is different. The first half (vss. 1-5) is a quiet prayer asking for help. The second half (vss. 6-11) is a loud prayer of joy, anticipating deliverance and praise.

Earlier, David had pictured his enemies as beasts. Now he pictured them as hunters, laying traps for him as for an animal. But the hunters would be caught in their own traps (vs. 6).



Site of Adullam.

When David said his heart was “steadfast” (vs. 7), he meant it was prepared. He was ready to give full attention to singing God’s praises.

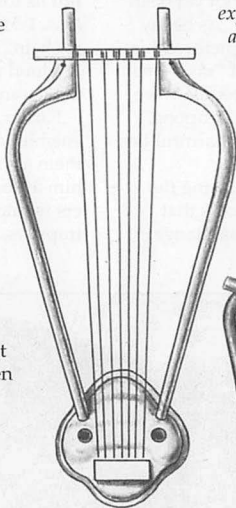
For David, the night seemed filled with danger. But he imagined himself rising early on a new day, the day of his deliverance (vs. 8). Then he would wake his soul to praise God. He would wake the instruments he was skilled at playing (I Sam. 16:23). He would even wake the dawn to spread the light of gladness over the scene.

Despite being holed up in a cave, David’s vision soared to the ends of the earth and to the heavens (Ps. 57:9, 10). His promise to praise God among the peoples of the world may have merely been exuberant poetry. Or he may have been

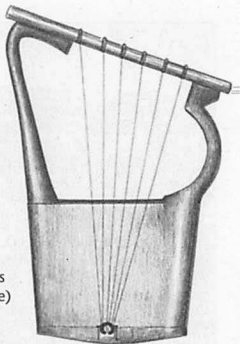
looking forward to a time when, as king, he would be in a position to declare the love and faithfulness of God to ambassadors from foreign nations. Everyone everywhere should hear about God’s love and faithfulness.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Have I ever experienced God’s help in a manner so marvelous that I longed to spread the news?*

Earlier, in verse 5, the refrain was a mark of defiant faith. But in verse 11 it expresses grateful love.



David was skilled at playing the musical instruments of his day, including the lyre (above) and the harp (right).





# Knowing That God Will Act

**Psalms 58—72**

## **a** Judgment against Unjust Rulers (58:1-11)

Do you rulers indeed speak justly?  
Do you judge people with equity?

No, in your heart you devise injustice,  
and your hands mete out violence on the earth.

—Psalm 58:1, 2

Corruption in high places is not unique to the twenty-first century. In David's era the elders who handled local legal affairs sometimes misused their power. David knew about the injustice going on around him, but he was unable to curb it entirely (see II Sam. 3:39).

In Psalm 58 David called on God to restore justice on the earth. Here is an overview of the psalm:

- charges against wicked rulers (vss. 1, 2);
- characterizations of the wicked (vss. 3-5);
- curses against the wicked (vss. 6-8); and
- assurances of justice to the righteous (vss. 9-11).

The psalm begins with David's bringing "rulers," or judges, into an imagined court of his own (vs. 1). The word translated "rulers" literally means "gods." This reflects the truth that human leaders are, in a sense, God's representatives to maintain order and justice in society. Evidently the judges David had in mind did not take their responsibility seriously.

David tried the judges of his day and found them guilty. He convicted them of planning injustice and of putting their plans into practice by rendering unfair judgments and doing violence (vss. 1, 2).

In the psalm's second section, David described "the wicked" (vs. 3). Possibly he was referring to all wicked people, but more likely he still had in view the unjust judges.

David knew the wrongful behavior of the judges sprang from their wicked nature. All their lives they had been evil (vs. 3).

Going further, David compared them to poisonous snakes. Their lies and unfair judgments were like venom. By turning a deaf ear to pleas for justice, they were like cobras that refused to dance to any snake charmer's music.

# Curse

## PSALMS

In several psalms the psalmists urged God to strike down the wicked. Sometimes these curses appear as brief statements, while at other times they take up a large part or the whole of a psalm.

These curses can seem shocking to Christians. So we should remember three points. First, the curses were honest expressions of human emotion. Second, the curses were directed against severe cases of injustice. Third, the psalmists left it up to God to deliver judgment.

Present-day believers should hate injustice as much as—if not more than—ancient believers did. But we should not curse people. Christ taught us to pray for sinners, not against them. He set the example when on the cross He prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I need to ask God’s forgiveness right now for a time when I refused to follow the just course of action?*

Moved by a thirst for justice, David prayed that God would deal with the wicked as they deserved. Since he had given up hope that they would change, he asked God to make them incapable of doing further harm (vss. 6-8).

First, David asked God to “break the teeth” of the wicked judges (vs. 6). These teeth he pictured as lions’ fangs. Like lions, the wicked judges were predators on the weak. Verse 6 means that David wanted God to stop the judges from speaking evil and dangerous words.

Next, David hoped the wicked rulers would “vanish like water that flows away” (vs. 7a), soaking into the ground. This was a common sight in Israel after the rainy season. David wanted the wicked judges to go away.

The Hebrew of verse 7b is open to several interpretations. But if the translation of the NIV is correct, then David asked God to counteract (fall short) the wicked influence (arrows) of the judges.

Finally, David compared the wicked judges to slugs and stillborn children.

Slugs are snails that produce slime, which they slide on, leaving a trail behind them. They cannot survive long without water. The point of David’s comparison of the wicked judges to sunscorched slugs and stillborn children is simple: he wanted them dead.

The harshness of David’s speech may surprise us. But it’s a measure of the seriousness with which God views human injustice. And what

God hates, His people should hate too.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What can I do to advance justice in my community?*

David closed this psalm with an assurance that God will bring justice to the “righteous” (vss. 10, 11). This translates a term for those who have been wronged by judges.

Verse 9 contains more Hebrew with uncertain meaning. If the NIV translation is correct, then it describes a pot set to boil on a fire fueled with thorns. But before such a pot can feel the heat even from a fire of dry thorns (which burn quickly), a gust of wind sweeps away the fire. This pictures the swiftness with which God’s judgment will come upon wicked people.

According to verses 10 and 11, the righteous will witness God’s justice on the wicked and will thank Him for vindicating them. The image of bathing feet in the blood of the wicked refers to the victors of a battle exulting over their defeated enemies. This image and the declaration in verse 11 might make it appear that the righteous will gloat over the defeat of the wicked. In reality, however, these verses teach no more than that the righteous will celebrate the final triumph of justice in the universe.

Let those who feel helpless against the tide of wrong in the world take heart! God reigns, and one day multitudes will join the psalmist in declaring, “Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth” (vs. 11).

## Psalms in Brief (59—66)

An innocent sufferer in danger of attack wrote **Psalm 59**.

**Psalm 60** is a national prayer for help after defeat by a foreign power.

In **Psalm 61** David prayed for restoration to God’s presence.

**Psalm 62** expresses David’s commitment to God when he faced a conspiracy.

A confession of David’s thirst for God’s help, **Psalm 63** was composed when David was surrounded by desolate circumstances.

**Psalm 64** is a prayer for protection when David was facing slander.

Thanksgiving for God’s blessings upon His people is the theme of **Psalm 65**.

**Psalm 66** is a call for praise to the God who answers prayers.

## **b** Blessed to Be a Blessing (67:1-7)

May God be gracious to us and  
bless us  
and make his face shine on us, so  
that your ways may be known on  
earth,  
your salvation among all nations.  
—Psalm 67:1, 2

Because of its reference to a “harvest” in verse 6, Psalm 67 seems to have been designed for use in Israel’s harvest festival. Yet the psalm’s scope extends far beyond national interests. The unknown

psalmist repeatedly referred to "nations" and "peoples," expressing his hope that the blessing bestowed on Israel might spread around the world.

A blessing must be received before it can be passed on to others. That is why the psalmist began his song by asking God to bless "us," meaning the Israelites (vs. 1). The first verse echoes the

benediction with which the priests blessed the nation (Num. 6:24-26). Borrowing these words, the psalmist sought prosperity for his people, for if Israel fared poorly, other nations would fail to appreciate the greatness of Israel's God. On the other

hand, if God blessed the Israelites, saving knowledge of Him would spread near and far (Ps. 67:2).



## The Old Testament's Worldwide Vision

In ancient cultures, each nation had its own religion with its own gods. One unique aspect of the Hebrew religion was the belief that its God, the living God, reigns everywhere, and that one day everyone will know it.

This vision for the worldwide spread of God's worship appears early and often in the Old Testament. God told Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew race, that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Old Testament law provided a way for aliens to enter the covenant community. Prophets kept the vision before the people through such words as these: "I will beckon to the nations, I will lift up my banner to the peoples" (Isa. 49:22).

In the Old Testament, God's worldwide worship remained a vision of the future. But when Jesus came, it was time to begin making that vision a reality.

Verses 1 and 2 teach us that it is OK to ask God for material and spiritual blessings. But once the blessings are given, we should share them with others as freely as God has shared them with us.

Verses 3 and 5 are a prayer that all peoples will praise God. These verses frame verse 4, which tells why the peoples should praise Him. God's reign over the world brings joy to His subjects because He rules justly like a good judge, and He guides tenderly like a good shepherd.

The final two verses of the psalm express confidence that God's blessings will come and that everyone will recognize God for giving them. A good harvest was just the beginning of the blessings. The greatest blessing will be that "the ends of the earth [meaning people everywhere] will fear him" (vs. 7). The God of Israel—"our God" (vs. 6)—will be recognized as the God of the world.

The predictions of Psalm 67 are nearer fulfillment than ever before. Yet millions living today have not heard about Jesus. They need someone to tell them. It is our privilege and our responsibility to help spread the Good News to people all over the world who have grown accustomed to bad news.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What should be my role in the church's missionary enterprise?*

### Psalms in Brief (68—71)

**Psalm 68** is a hymn celebrating the triumphant rule of Israel's God.

David's purpose in writing **Psalm 69** was to ask God to save His people from a host of enemies.

**Psalm 70** asks God to come quickly and bring deliverance from those who were inflicting pain and misery (compare Ps. 40:13-17).

Composed by an old man, **Psalm 71** is a prayer for help against enemies.

## C A Righteous Reign (72:1-7)

Endow the king with your justice,  
O God,  
the royal son with your  
righteousness.

—Psalm 72:1

One of two psalms attributed to Solomon, Psalm 72 is a prayer asking for God's blessing on the king—and on the people through the king. This psalm may have been used during coronation ceremonies or on anniversaries of coronations.

While the psalm has historical links to Solomon, the description of the monarch is too grand to fit any earthly ruler. In addition to its original meaning, therefore, the psalm must point to the Messiah.

The first section of the psalm (vss. 1-4) describes the quality of the king's reign. It is just and righteous.

Early in his reign, Solomon asked God for the wisdom to rule the people righteously and justly (I Kings 3:7-9). He expressed the

same wish in Psalm 72:1-4, this time in poetic form.

When endowed with some of God's own justice and righteousness, the Israelite king would protect the poor and needy. He would do this by upholding justice (vs. 2) and by protecting them from their oppressors (vs. 4). These actions of the king's would be reflections of God's concern for the weak of this world. "Your afflicted ones" (vs. 2) could be translated "God's poor."

**Ask Yourself . . .** *In what ways can I help the poor?*

Not only would the poor and needy fare well during the king's reign, but also the nation as a whole would have *shalom*, translated "prosperity" in verse 3. *Shalom* was a broad concept referring to harmonious wholeness.

Solomon symbolized the future *shalom* of the nation by saying that even the hills and mountains, where the soil is poor, would yield a harvest. But this would be a harvest of "righteousness" (vs. 3).

Verses 5-7 continue describing the quality of the king's reign, but add to it the length of the reign. According to verse 5, the king would endure through all generations and as long as the sun and moon exist. These are poetic ways of saying the king's reign would be long. Of course, the Messiah's reign will last longer than the sun and moon. It will last for all eternity.

The beautiful figure of speech in verse 6 likens the ruler to gentle rain descending on a field from which

crops have recently been harvested. The moisture refreshes the soil and makes it productive (compare II Sam. 23:1-7).

The specific meaning of this figure of speech is given in Psalm 72:7. During the king's reign the righteous would flourish and *shalom* would abound in the land.

This description gives us some advice we can use when we occupy leadership positions at work, at church, or in the home. One of our goals as leaders should be to enable those we supervise to grow and flourish, becoming all they can be.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Whom do I lead? How well do I lead them?*

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## **d** A Successful King (72:8-20)

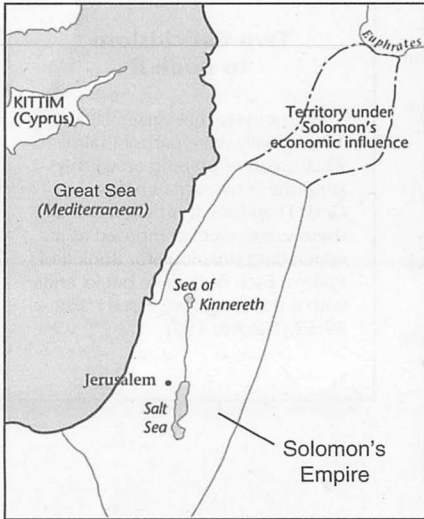
**May his name endure forever;  
may it continue as long as the  
sun.**

**Then all nations will be blessed  
through him,  
and they will call him blessed.**

—Psalm 72:17

In verses 8-11 the psalm focuses on the extent of the king's reign. "He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (vs. 8). By comparing this description with Exodus 23:31, we can conjecture that the psalmist meant (in today's terms) from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Mediterranean





Sea and from the Euphrates River to the Negev Desert.

If this interpretation is correct, it accurately describes Solomon's empire at its height. However, the psalm describes a far-reaching influence that goes beyond what Solomon is known to have achieved. Some neighboring kings submitted to him and the Queen of Sheba brought him gifts, but "all nations" did not "serve him" (Ps. 72:11). All people will, however, one day honor the messianic king.

Among those bringing tribute to the king would be rulers from the east, west, and south. The "desert tribes" (vs. 9) were Arabians. They would "lick the dust," showing their

surrender to the king's authority. The "kings of Tarshish" (vs. 10) probably lived on the west coast of Spain. The kings of "distant shores" probably ruled civilizations around the Mediterranean Sea. The "kings of Sheba and Seba" probably lived in southwest Arabia or along the upper Nile River in Africa.

In view of the king's broad influence, his concern for the weak and needy (vss. 12-14) takes on added importance. In Solomon's day the lowly and afflicted seldom received attention, but the king would be their savior. Their "blood," representing

their lives, would be precious in his sight (vs. 14).

Along with the king's eternal reign and worldwide influence, his concern for the weak shows that the description does not exactly fit Solomon. In the latter stages of Solomon's rule he became notorious for levying harsh taxes. His subjects complained that he "put a heavy yoke on us" (I Kings 12:4). Jesus, on the other hand, could say, "My yoke is easy" (Matt. 11:30).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Does someone who is "weak and needy" live near me? How does the Lord want me to help this person?*

Verses 15-17 bring together many of the themes we have seen in earlier portions of Psalm 72. They serve as a summary prayer for success to crown the king's rule. Verse 15 asks God to make the king powerful in foreign relations and popular in domestic relations. The next verse asks God to bless the land with good harvests at all locations. The first half of verse 17 asks God to give the king lasting fame.

The psalm closes by applying Abraham's benediction to the king (compare Gen. 12:3 and Ps. 72:17b).

## **Two Conclusions to Book II**

It is unlikely that verses 18 and 19 originally were part of Psalm 72. Instead of praising an earthly king, these two verses praise God. Therefore, it is believed that these verses were composed as a concluding doxology for Book II of Psalms. Each of the five books ends with a doxology (see Pss. 41:13; 89:52; 106:48; 150).

# 7

## Finding God in the Gloom

**Psalms 73—89**

### **Psalms in Brief (73—84)**

**Psalm 73** raises the question of why the wicked seem to prosper while the godly suffer.

The **74th Psalm** appeals to God to aid His people and defend His cause against mocking enemies.

A song of reassurance, **Psalm 75** was voiced by the congregation of Israel for God's protection in the face of national danger.

**Psalm 76** celebrates God's power in defending Jerusalem against a concerted attack.

Beginning with perplexity, **Psalm 77** moves to a comforting recollection of how God acted in the past.

In **Psalm 78** the dark picture of the nation's sin is relieved by the light of God's grace and power.

**Psalm 79** shows God's people seeking His punishment of their oppressors.

**Psalm 80** is a prayer for restoration to God's favor.

A festival song, **Psalm 81** makes a plea for the nation to remain faithful to the Lord.

**Psalm 82** reflects the psalmist's concern that the powerless be dealt with in fairness.

In **Psalm 83**, Asaph prayed for God to move against Israel's enemies when the whole world seemed allied against the nation.

**Psalm 84** reveals the psalmist's longing to worship in the temple.

### **a A Cry for Restoration (85:1-7)**

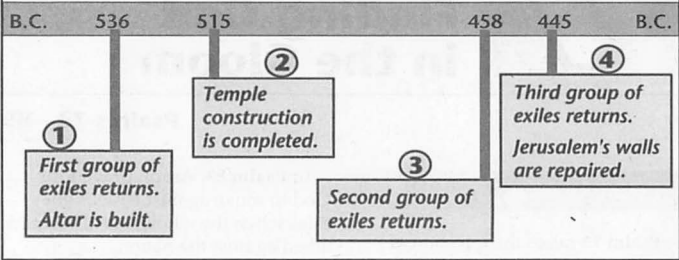
Show us your unfailing love,  
LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.

—Psalm 85:7

Here is a psalm that looks backward to one national restoration and forward to another. Possibly this psalm was written by someone who had returned with others to Judah from exile in Babylon and Persia. If this is the case, then the psalmist expressed the former exiles' gratitude for their return as well as their need for God's help in meeting the challenges they had come home to.

Whatever their specific setting, verses 1-3 recall past mercies of God toward His people. (In verse 1, "Jacob," the alternate name for Israel, stands for the Jewish people.)

## Stages in the Restoration of Judah



God had been punishing the people for their sins. But then evidently the people had repented, so God had forgiven them and had stopped punishing them. Since they were again acceptable in His sight, He showed favor to them by giving back what He had taken away.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When blessings come into my life, do I recognize God as the ultimate cause behind them?*

What God had done once, He might do a second time. "Restore us again," cried the psalmist (vs. 4). The psalmist's prayer for another act of divine deliverance is contained in verses 4-7.

As in the earlier case, the people's problems this time were the results of their sins. They were feeling the force of God's just anger. But the psalmist believed the punishment had gone on long enough. Probably the people had begun to recognize their guilt and to confess their sins to God.

If God would restore the people, thought the psalmist, then they would have a fresh reason to rejoice in Him. So the psalmist appealed to God's faithfulness toward His covenant people: "Show us your unfailing love, LORD, and grant us your salvation" (vs. 7).

Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the psalmist could accurately identify his people's troubles as punishment inflicted by God. Without that inspiration, we should be cautious about identifying our personal problems with God's judgment. But God has many reasons for allowing suffering, and one of them could be to make us more sensitive to Him. So if during a time of suffering we become aware of personal sins, then we should confess those sins and trust in His love.

And that trust will not be misplaced. God does *not* remain angry with His people forever. He is quick to forgive.



## God's Reassuring Promises (85:8-13)

I will listen to what God the LORD says;  
he promises peace to his people,  
his faithful servants—  
but let them not return to folly.  
Surely his salvation is near those  
who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our  
land.

—Psalm 85:8-9

In his prayer, the psalmist spoke on behalf of the people, whom he called “us” (see vss. 4-7). But at verse 8 the psalmist became more personal, declaring, “I will listen to what God the LORD says.” The psalmist himself was going to wait for the voice of God.

When the Lord’s words would come, they would be reassuring. The Lord would give “peace” (*shalom*) to His people (vs. 8). In other words, the psalmist’s prayer for national restoration would be answered. However, this promise would be accompanied by a warning to avoid returning to “folly,” meaning moral or spiritual compromise. Folly was what had gotten them into their predicament in the first place.

Those who were not foolish but who instead feared the Lord would find that His help is close at hand. Such reverent obedience would be rewarded by God’s “glory” dwelling in the land of promise (vs. 9; see also Hag. 2:7, 9). God’s presence would be with His people.

Psalm 85 concludes with a description of spiritual harmony (vss. 10-13). The psalmist was imagining what it would be like when God would again restore His people. In his description, the psalmist personified love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace.

In verse 10, we see friends coming together: “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and

## Personification in the Psalms

**P**ersonification is a technique in which a writer attributes human characteristics to abstract ideas or nonhuman objects. Personification is common in the Psalms. Here are some examples outside Psalm 85:

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (42:2).

“The waters saw you and writhed, the very depths were convulsed (77:16).

“The trees of the forest will sing for joy” (96:12).

“He made the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down” (104:19).

peace kiss each other." This embrace represents the way God's grace comes to those who love Him through His Son.

The next verse is similar, but more specific. It pictures divine righteousness and human faithfulness reaching toward each other. This represents God's outreach to believers, and our response to Him through grace.

Verse 12 describes the same situation, but in terms of agriculture. In the countryside the sky sends rain and sun, and the soil responds by growing crops. Thus God's grace blesses our lives.

Finally, in verse 13, righteousness is personified as a pioneer clearing the path for God to work in the lives of His people. While God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, He reserves His lasting blessings for the people of faith.

The psalmist could not have known the final basis for the harmony he described. But we know. On the cross, Christ offered Himself as our sacrifice, thereby making peace between sinners and the holy God.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I feel at peace with God?*

### **Psalms in Brief (86—88)**

In **Psalm 86** David described the fierce attacks against him as a show of disdain for God.

**Psalm 87** is a song of praise for Zion, the city of God.

A gloomy cry from one near death fills **Psalm 88**.

## **C Sing of the Lord's Great Love (89:1-18)**

**I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;**

**with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.**

—Psalm 89:1

Psalm 89 asks God to restore the line of kings descended from David. Probably the psalm was composed after the southern kingdom of Judah came to a violent end in 586 B.C. The psalmist could not understand why God appeared to have cut off David's line. Had not God promised that a descendant of David would reign forever?

The psalmist waited until the psalm's last third (vss. 38-51) to get to the heart of his concern. In the first two-thirds he celebrated God's love and faithfulness (vss. 1-18) and offered praise for God's covenant with David (vss. 19-37).

God's apparent breaking of the Davidic covenant, while it disturbed the psalmist, did not destroy his faith in God. He introduced his psalm with a declaration of trust in God's love and faithfulness (vss. 1, 2). These attributes of God are eternal. Therefore, God's covenant with David (summarized in verses 3 and 4) must be eternal too. Despite appearances, the psalmist believed God would keep His promises faithfully.

After the introductory verses, the psalm goes on to praise God

for His supremacy in the spiritual world (vss. 5-8), for His power in the physical world (vss. 9-13), and for His perfect qualities (vss. 14-18).

Angels—called “heavenly beings” (vs. 6) and “holy ones” (vs. 7)—are glorious creatures. Yet when God is in the midst of the angels, like a king in the midst of his court, His superiority is obvious to all who observe. He is superior because of His attributes, such as “faithfulness” (vs. 5), and His great deeds, or “wonders.”

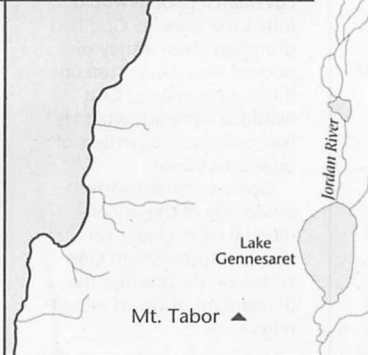
From the earthly perspective, God’s greatness is seen through His power in sea, sky, and land. Verses nine and ten probably refer to the

time God parted the Red Sea, letting His people pass safely through but drowning the Egyptian army (Exod. 14:21-28). “Rahab” (Ps. 89:10) was a nickname for Egypt. The mountains Tabor and Hermon may have been mentioned in verse 12 to balance “the north and the south,” since one mountain lies east of the Jordan Valley and the other lies west of it. Perhaps this was the psalmist’s way of saying “He’s got the whole world in His hand.”

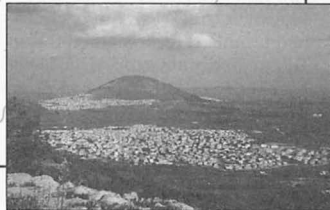
With God’s power established beyond question, the psalmist called attention to His “righteousness and justice,” “love and faithfulness” (vs.



Mount Hermon



Mount Tabor



14). These qualities keep His might from becoming tyranny. They also make human life joyful.

Too often the believer's faith is imagined by unbelievers to be a drab exercise. But in fact the opposite is true. Worship releases springs of joy in the human soul.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Am I walking in the light of the Lord's presence?*

The "shield" mentioned in verse 18 is the king. This verse's mention of the close connection between God and the Israelite king is a hint of what is to come in the next section of the psalm.

## **d** The Covenant of David (89:19-37)

Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—  
and I will not lie to David—  
that his line will continue forever  
and his throne endure before me  
like the sun.

—Psalm 89:35, 36

In the second part of the psalm, the psalmist reminded God of His covenant with David (II Sam. 7:8-16). God had chosen David to be king over Israel (Ps. 89:19b-21). He had promised to strengthen David and to give him victory over his enemies (vss. 22, 23). He had promised to extend the territory under David's control (vss. 24, 25).

He had promised to give David priority over other kings (vss. 26,

27). And He had promised that a descendant of David would rule forever (vss. 28, 29).

The Davidic covenant's promises are simple enough to understand. But the verses contain a number of details that may need clarification.

The "sacred oil" (vs. 20) was the oil used in anointing men as king

## **Biblical Covenants**

**A** covenant was a treaty or legal agreement. The Old Testament describes several covenants between God and people.

Covenants were either conditional or unconditional. Under conditional covenants, people would forfeit the benefits God had promised them if they disobeyed Him. Under unconditional covenants, God would accomplish what He had promised regardless of others' behavior.

God's covenant with David was of the unconditional type. Under no circumstances would God withdraw His promise that a descendant of David would reign forever.



(I Sam. 16:13). The “horn” in verse 24 stands for strength. The “sea” (vs. 25) probably refers to the Mediterranean Sea, and the “rivers” probably refers to the Euphrates River (Exod. 23:31). The “firstborn” (Ps. 89:27) son was the most privileged child in ancient families, just as David was the most privileged king in the Middle East.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Are there any of God's promises to me that I should remind myself of now?*

God's covenant with David applied to David's descendants as well. God would bless the Davidic kings if they obeyed Him. But Davidic kings who did not obey Him could expect serious punishment (vss. 30-32).

This punishment would not, however, extend to a breaking of the covenant. People might be unfaithful, but God would never be unfaithful. David's throne would be established forever, enduring like the sun and the moon (vss. 33-37).

We all know how common it is for people to break their word. But God is all-true and all-powerful; He always does what He promises. Therefore, we can believe Him when He says such things as “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18), “I am with you always” (28:20), and “I will raise [believers] up at the last day” (John 6:40).

## **e An Appeal for God to Remember the Covenant (89:38-51)**

**LORD, where is your former great love,  
which in your faithfulness you  
swore to David?**

—Psalm 89:49

From bright promise, the psalmist moved to grim reality. Verses 38-45 describe national disaster—probably Judah's defeat by the Babylonians, which occurred between 605 and 586 B.C. During this period Jerusalem was repeatedly attacked, and finally its walls and temple were destroyed.

Verses 38-45 also describe the temporary end of the Davidic kingship. These verses probably refer to Judah's King Jehoiachin, who began thirty-seven years of Babylonian captivity in 597 B.C., when he was 18. Technically, however, the Davidic line of kings did not come to an end until 586 B.C., when the Babylonians removed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah from power in Judah (II Kings 24:8—25:21).

Following such events, the sound of God's assurances to David had a hollow ring. It seemed to the psalmist that God had “renounced the covenant” (Ps. 89:39). The “you” in verse 38 and following verses, referring to God, is emphatic. This suggests that the Babylonians were only the immediate cause for the ending of David's line. The ultimate cause was God. God had punished

the people of Judah for their sins by allowing the Babylonians to overrun them.

The psalmist did not question God's right to punish His people. He only questioned whether God had violated His promises to David by allowing the punishment to include a break in the line of Davidic kings.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What kinds of trouble might cause me to doubt God's love for me?*

The unhappy prospects for king and nation might have driven the psalmist to hopelessness. Instead, they brought him to his knees in prayer (vss. 46-51).

He pleaded the shortness of life, asking why life should be burdened with griefs. Specifically, why would God not remember His covenant with David and rescue the Davidic king from a position that exposed him to mocking? Presumably the psalmist wanted Jehoiachin released from his imprisonment in Babylon and allowed once again to occupy Judah's throne. This would,

of course, mean a restoration of the entire nation.

The psalmist's prayer was not answered as he expected. The Jewish nation did not get Jehoiachin or any other Davidic king for its earthly throne. But it did get Jesus. God fulfilled His covenant with David, not by putting an infinite series of Davidic kings on Israel's throne, but by establishing one Davidic descendant as the eternal King of kings.

## **A Conclusion to Book III**

**T**he brief statement of praise that makes up Psalm 89:52 jars with the unhappy prayer that precedes it. That's because verse 52 was composed separately as a concluding doxology for the third division of the Psalter.

# 8

## God Is with Us

### Psalms 90—100

#### **a** The Shortness of Life (90:1-12)

Our days may come to seventy  
years  
or eighty, if our strength endures;  
yet the best of them are but  
trouble and sorrow,  
for they quickly pass, and we fly  
away.

—Psalm 90:10

Psalm 90 sets human mortality against divine eternity. But rather than becoming discouraged at the thought of human mortality, the psalmist was moved to hope in God.

If the title is correct and Moses wrote Psalm 90, this is the oldest of all the psalms. It may have been composed during the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews, perhaps after nearly the whole of a generation had perished for their rebellion against God (Num. 14).

Though God gave Canaan to the Hebrews as their homeland, He Himself remained their "dwelling place" (Ps. 90:1; see Deut. 33:27). "Dwelling place," in this instance, refers to a protecting shelter.

True security is not found in a place, but in a Person. Though our circumstances may fluctuate like the stock market, God remains life's most dependable constant. Through every change He is faithful, the One to whom we may ever turn for strength and encouragement.

As His people's dwelling place, God is eternal. He has existed since before He created the mountains and "the whole world" (Ps. 90:2). The Hebrew word for "world," a poetic synonym for "earth," means the productive part of the earth. The Creator of all the world exists unchanged "from everlasting to everlasting."

After establishing God's perpetual existence, the psalmist contrasted it with the transient nature of human life (vss. 3-6). He made his point in several ways. First, he alluded to Genesis 3:19 by saying that all "people" (literally, "weak men" or "mortals") must return to dust (Ps. 90:3). In other words, we will die and our bodies will decompose after death. Second, he said that to God a millennium is like a day or—even less—like the four-hour "watch in the night" (vs. 4). This means God is not subject to time, as are humans;

He exists in eternity and sees all of time—past, present, and future—at once. Third, the psalmist said that the human journey through life to death is like being swept away in a flood and that it is over as swiftly as grass withers in the middle eastern sun. One generation is always being born, but another is always dying.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Is my own mortality something I think about or something I ignore?*

As if the shortness of human life were not bad enough, Psalm 90 points out that the years we do get in this life are filled with trouble and sorrow (vss. 7-10).

Why should human beings, who are made in the image of God, be reduced to such a state? The psalm points to sin as the cause and to God's wrath as the agent. By

disobeying God in the Garden of Eden, Adam brought a sentence of hardship and death on the whole human race. God carries out that sentence.

But we cannot blame Adam only. The short, troubled nature of our lives is also due to "our iniquities" and "our secret sins" (vs. 8, emphasis added). Adam blamed Eve for his sin, and Eve blamed the serpent, but we should admit that we have ourselves to blame for our sins.

The first part of the psalm concludes with verses 11 and 12. These verses say we cannot measure God's anger, but we should try to measure our lifetime.

Despite advances in medicine and technology, death still approaches all of us swiftly and inevitably. That's why we should make it our business to come to terms with our own mortality.

## Life Spans

**A**ccording to Old Testament history, people lived much longer in ancient times than they do today.

Before the Flood, life spans often approached 1,000 years. Adam lived 930 years. One of his descendants, Methuselah, lived 969 years.

After the Flood, the average life span steadily decreased. Noah's son Shem lived 500 years. But Abraham's father, Terah, lived just 205 years, while Abraham himself lived 175 years and Joseph lived 110 years.

Moses lived 120 years, but apparently by his time (about 1520-1400 B.C.), such an advanced age was unusual. The average life span had dropped to about seventy or eighty years (Ps. 90:10), and there it has remained.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *If I were to keep my own mortality before me, not morbidly but honestly, how might I use my time differently?*

## **b** The Source of Joy and Gladness (90:13-17)

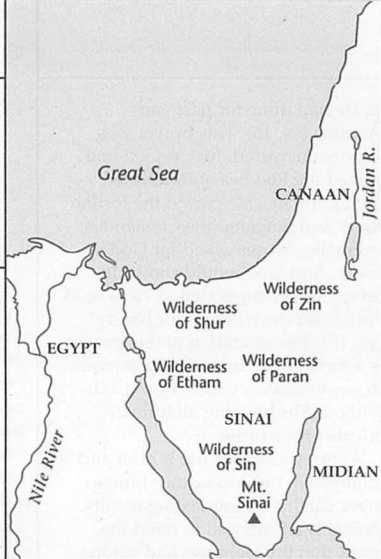
Satisfy us in the morning  
with your unfailing  
love,  
that we may sing for joy  
and be glad all our days.  
Make us glad for as many  
days as you have afflicted  
us,  
for as many years as we have  
seen trouble.

—Psalm 90:14, 15

The final part of Psalm 90 is a plea for mercy. Because the people had a pitiable existence in the wilderness, Moses, on their behalf, begged God for compassion.

The Hebrew word translated “relent” in verse 13 literally means “turn.” Moses was asking God to reverse His attitude toward the Hebrews. Moses could make such a plea because he knew God is not only wrathful; He is also compassionate (see Deut. 32:36). This shows us that we, too, can appeal to God when we are burdened with trouble or affliction.

To Moses, the period of judgment had seemed like night, so he asked



for a dawn of compassion. God’s “unfailing love” (Ps. 90:14) was His love for His covenant people. The psalmist believed that if the Hebrews could get a firm grasp on this love, they would experience joy and gladness.

Specifically, Moses requested for the people an amount of blessing equal to their previous suffering (vs. 15). This would make up for the troubles they had been through.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How would I like God to make up for the suffering I’ve had?*

Furthermore, Moses asked God to perform marvelous deeds for the present and future generations

as He had done for past generations (vs. 16). This prayer was shortly answered. Just as God had parted the Red Sea and defeated the Egyptians, He parted the Jordan River and defeated the Canaanites.

Finally, Moses asked for God's favor. And God would show His favor, Moses suggested, if He would "establish the work of our hands" (vs. 17). The repetition of this prayer is a signal of its importance. Success in any endeavor comes from God; without His blessing all human efforts prove futile.

Although human life is brief and anguished, by God's grace human labor can have long-lasting results. Probably Moses had in mind the work that the Hebrews had before them in establishing themselves in the promised land. But we can make the same prayer about the work we are trying to do in advancing the Church. Such work as evangelism can have eternal results (I Cor. 15:58).

**Ask Yourself . . .** Which "works of my hands" should I ask God to establish today?

## 70<sup>80</sup> Numbers in Hebrew Poetry

**H**ebrew poets had a way of using parallel numbers to represent an estimated or indeterminate amount. Two examples of this technique are contained in this lesson's psalms (see Psalm 90:10 and Psalm 91:7). Among the many other Old Testament examples of this technique are those in I Samuel 18:7; Proverbs 30:18; and Amos 1:3.

## **C** Guarded by God (91:1-8)

Whoever dwells in the shelter of  
the Most High  
will rest in the shadow of the  
Almighty.

I will say of the LORD, "He is my  
refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust."

—Psalm 91:1-2

Here is a psalm for our seasons of danger, when physical or spiritual well-being seems at risk. In simple

and direct terms, the anonymous psalmist described God's protection of His people. This psalm may have been used in temple worship to assure worshipers of their security in God.

Verses 1 and 2 state the psalm's major lesson: those who seek God's protection find it. These verses use four names for God, which are translated "the Most High," "the Almighty," "the LORD," and "God." These verses also use four comparisons for God's protection. God is like a "shelter," or secure hiding place from storms or wild beasts. God is like the "shadow," or shade, from a tree that protects a person from the midday sun. God is like a "refuge" and a "fortress"—places where people could escape their enemies.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *From what danger do I most need God's protection now?*

In verses 3-8 the psalmist used two dangers, war and disease, to represent dangers in which God protects His people. Both representative dangers are introduced in verse 3. The "fowler's snare," a bird trap, stands for an ambush or an unexpected strike from enemies. The "deadly pestilence" refers to the epidemics that periodically eradicated ancient societies.

God does not always protect His people from such dangers as war and disease. But He can protect us, and frequently does protect us. Therefore, when dangers threaten, we can know that we are not alone.

In general terms, the psalmist said God shelters His own as tenderly as a mother bird shelters her young. At the same time His faithfulness is strong, like a "shield" or a "rampart" (vs. 4). The word translated "rampart" may refer to armor or to a kind of shield.

Verse 5 repeats the idea that God can protect His people from war, whether it come by night or by day. Then verse 6 repeats the idea that God can protect His people from diseases, whether they infect a victim after dark or during the daylight hours. God can protect His people from such dangers at all times.

This part of the psalm winds up with the image of a godly person surviving an episode of danger, probably a battle, though thousands die all around (vs. 7). This person not only survives, but also observes a total victory over enemies (vs. 8). God is able to protect His people from even the worst dangers, and His protection is not partial but complete.

While Psalm 91 is enthusiastic about God's protection, we should not take it to mean that harm will never reach the people of God. Our experience shows us that, in fact, this is not the case. But we can learn from Psalm 91 to enlarge our appreciation for God's ability and for His frequent willingness to rescue His people from the direst circumstances. The psalm can also remind us that while evil may wound or harm believers, and even destroy our lives in this world, still we possess eternal hope in Christ Jesus.

## **d** The Promises of His Presence (91:9-16)

**"Because he loves me," says the  
LORD, "I will rescue him;  
I will protect him, for he  
acknowledges my name.**

**He will call on me, and I will  
answer him;**

**I will be with him in trouble,  
I will deliver him and honor  
him.**

**With long life I will satisfy him  
and show him my salvation."**

**—Psalm 91:14-16**

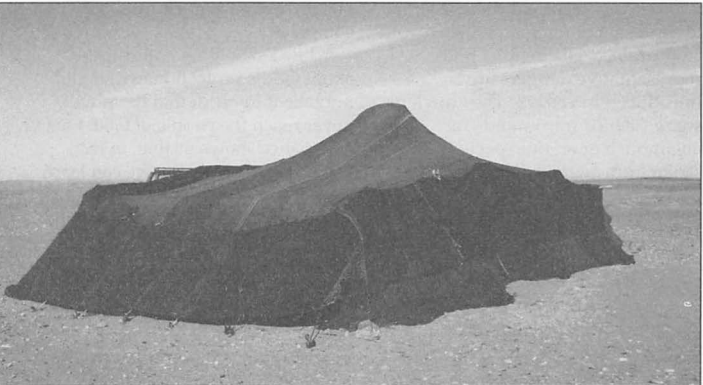
The second half of Psalm 91 has a two-verse introduction as does the first half. And like verses 1 and 2,

verses 9 and 10 teach that those who truly seek God's protection find it.

The psalmist then pointed out one means by which God has protected His people—He has sent angels to intervene (vss. 11, 12). Here, the angelic intervention is beautifully illustrated as an act of raising a pedestrian over a stone in the path.

It's worth noting that when Satan tempted Jesus, he misapplied this passage (Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:10, 11). God does give His protection to servants who sincerely make Him their dwelling: the center and sustenance of their lives. But people who foolishly feign faith in God are guilty of what Jesus condemned in His reply to Satan—testing God (Deut. 6:16). Such cannot claim God's protection from the likes of lions or poisonous serpents, which were two creatures

Ancient tents (see Ps. 91:10) probably looked a good bit like this Bedouin tent.





that posed real dangers in ancient Israel.

With verse 14, a change in voice occurs. Now we hear God promising to bless a person who trusts in Him.

According to the psalm, the trusting person has three characteristics. First, he "loves" the Lord (vs. 14). That is, he clings to the Lord as a child clings to a parent. Second, he "acknowledges" the Lord's "name." Since to Israelites a person's name stood for his or her character, this means the trusting person recognizes God's unique nature. Third, he "call[s] on" the Lord in times of trouble (vs. 15). When problems arise, he knows who to ask for help. If we want to receive God's blessings, these three characteristics ought to be ours.

**Ask Yourself.** . . . *Are these three characteristics true of me?*

The Lord's blessing upon the trusting person has eight characteristics. The Lord will "rescue" him, or get him out of his troubles (vs. 14). The Lord will "protect" him from danger. The Lord will "answer" his prayers positively (vs. 15). The Lord will "be with him in trouble" to help him through it. The Lord will "deliver" him from his problems, thereby bringing "honor" to him from others. The Lord will satisfy

## Angels

Drawing on the many biblical references to angels, we can piece together a partial description of them. Angels are supernatural beings whom God created before He created humans. They possess some divine characteristics, such as spiritual forms, and some human characteristics, such as limited knowledge.

Angels live in heaven, but sometimes God would use them on earth to communicate His messages to humans. Often when angels appeared on earth, they would look human. God also sent them to humans to announce, to warn, to guide and instruct, to guard and defend, to minister, and to carry out God's judgment.

him with "long life" a sign of divine favor (vs. 16). Lastly, the Lord will show him "salvation," which can mean deliverance from either physical or spiritual evil.

The picture of God's protection could hardly be more comprehensive than Psalm 91 presents it.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Of the several "I will" promises in verses 14-16, which bring me the greatest encouragement?*

**Psalms in Brief (92—100)**

**Psalm 92** celebrates God's righteous rule in the earth.

According to **Psalm 93**, the natural order remains secure because the Lord reigns.

**Psalm 94** is a call for God to avenge the wrongs done by wicked rulers against the weak.

A call to worship God, **Psalm 95** was probably spoken to Israelites assembled in the temple.

The intent of **Psalm 96** is to summon people of all nations to declare

God's glory throughout the world.

**Psalm 97** is another psalm focusing on the Lord's reign in all the world.

The composer of **Psalm 98** pictured joy extending in circles from the worshiping congregation, to all the inhabitants of earth, to the whole creation.

**Psalm 99** presents God as the sovereign Lord of history, deserving reverence from His people.

With **Psalm 100**, Israelites were urged to enter the temple to praise God.

# 2

## Making Known What We Know of God

### Psalms 101—106

#### Psalm in Brief (101)

Psalm 101 is David's concept of what a godly king ought to be.

#### **a** Distressed in Body, Broken in Spirit (102:1-11)

Hear my prayer, LORD;  
let my cry for help come to you.  
Do not hide your face from me  
when I am in distress.  
Turn your ear to me;  
when I call, answer me quickly.  
—Psalm 102:1-2

The title of Psalm 102 is unusual because it names no author and contains no historical notes or instructions to musicians. Regarding the psalmist, we learn only that he was "an afflicted man." But the title tells us enough to know that the psalm is perfect for adopting as our own when we are afflicted.

Here is a breakdown of the psalm's major sections:

- an appeal for God to hear the psalmist's prayer (vss. 1, 2);

- a description of the psalmist's distress (vss. 3-11);
- assurance that God will hear and answer the prayer (vss. 12-17);
- a call for God's deliverance to be recorded for His praise (vss. 18-22);
- a repetition of the psalm's main themes (vss. 23-28).

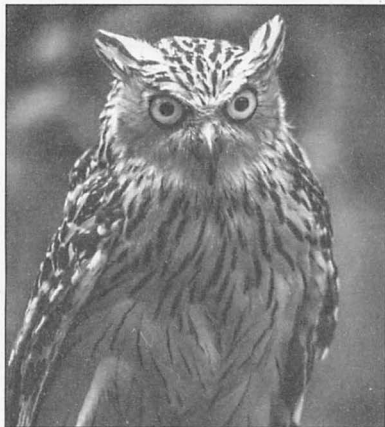
In five different ways the psalmist pleaded with God to pay attention to his prayer. The first two ways are contained in verse 1, the other three in verse 2. The five petitions all mean essentially the same.

Having made his plea to God for a hearing, the psalmist supplied a vivid description of his suffering (vss. 3-5), his isolation (vss. 6-8), and his repentance (vss. 9-11).

The psalmist was seriously ill. His symptoms included fever, lack of appetite, pain, and weight loss. And as a result of his physical suffering, the psalmist suffered emotionally: his "heart" was "blighted and withered like grass" in the hot sun (vs. 4).

In addition to his physical and emotional suffering, the psalmist suffered from loneliness. His friends had abandoned him when he got sick, probably because they viewed illness as punishment for sin. So the psalmist compared himself to a lone

bird on a roof and to two different kinds of owls, since owls were associated with solitary places. At night he lay awake thinking of his troubles and his isolation. And in the daytime he had to listen to rivals who took advantage of his condition to taunt him and misuse his name.



One of the many kinds of owls inhabiting Israel today.

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Their curse would run something like this: "May you become like So-and-so [the psalmist]."

The psalmist agreed with the others that his suffering was due to divine wrath for his sin. That's why he adopted traditional ways of showing repentance and humility, and he did so to an uncommon extent. He covered himself with so much ash that ashes got into

his food. He wept until the tears dripped into his cup.

Many people in our midst know exactly what the psalmist meant in verses 3-11. They, too, have felt sick, lonely, and guilty.

Whether the ill bear any responsibility for their condition or not, we should respond to them with compassion. It may not be comfortable for us to be around those who are suffering from illness, yet we should sacrifice our own comfort so that we can comfort them. It's the Christlike thing to do.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Have I learned anything from my sufferings that I can use to comfort another sufferer?*

Sometimes the psalmist held out little hope that his repentance would move God to heal and restore him. At those times, he felt that his days were dispersing like smoke that rises into the air (vs. 3), that his life was being overcome like the evening shadow that is lost in the dusk (vs. 11), and that his vitality was withering away like grass that dries up in the daytime heat. In other words, the psalmist thought he was fast approaching death. But as we will see in the following verses, the psalmist's hope had not completely disappeared.



Jerusalem today.

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## **b** God Reigns Forever (102:12-22)

But you, LORD, sit enthroned  
forever;  
your renown endures through  
all generations.

—Psalm 102:12

The words “but you, LORD” (vs. 12) mark a change of the psalmist’s focus from the near to the far, from the mortal to the immortal. Before those words the psalmist had been describing the swift passing of his life. But now he called attention to God’s eternity. God is “enthroned forever” and renowned “through all generations.”

Whenever we find ourselves  
mired in despair over life’s

demands, we do well to pause and consider God. By shifting our attention from our problems to His power, we can take the first step toward coping successfully with our situation.

The psalmist evidently saw his personal troubles as being bound up with the troubles facing his nation. At the time of his illness, “Zion” (Jerusalem) was in ruins (vs. 13). This may be a clue that the psalm was written after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Verses 13-17 describe the psalmist’s confidence that God would soon rebuild Jerusalem. The psalmist imagined God arising from His throne to intervene in history on the side of His holy city. Furthermore, the psalmist knew that if the stones and dust of the

damaged city were dear to the Jews, the city must have meant far more to God. He also knew that if God were to make Jerusalem and Judah rise from the ashes, God would gain new respect outside Judah's borders, even in the eyes of foreign rulers. The psalmist was certain God would restore Jerusalem because God had heard the humble prayers of many for Judah.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When have I seen God act in such an extraordinary manner that unbelievers took notice?*

In anticipation of God's plans for the Messiah's new kingdom, the psalmist called for a written record of His promises. The psalmist then proceeded to describe what the record should show, as delineated in verses 19 and 20. What is clearly envisioned is the restoration of Zion, represented figuratively by God taking notice of innocent death-row prisoners and restoring them to freedom. Some suggest this reference to "prisoners" (vs. 20) strengthens the case for this psalm having been written during the Babylonian captivity.

With the aid of a written record, generations to come would see God had sovereignly planned this glorious event long before—indeed, it's for "a people not yet created" (vs. 18), which may refer either to a reborn Jewish nation or to Gentiles whom God would bring into His family of righteousness. Other important events will fade from memory, but none will forget the restored Jerusalem.

For His amazing mercies, God would be praised in Zion, and not by Israel alone (vss. 21, 22). All manner of peoples would utter their praises and worship God.



## **The Lord Remains the Same (102:23-28)**

**In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.  
They will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment.**

**Like clothing you will change them  
and they will be discarded.  
But you remain the same,  
and your years will never end.**

—Psalm 102:25-27

In the midst of his concern about his people, the psalmist nearly lost sight of his own problems. But perhaps thinking about the future glory of Zion reminded him how far short of victory he was personally.

The psalmist had described his condition at length in verses 3-11, but now he merely summed it up by saying that he was weak and near death through God's actions (vs. 23). Yet he still hoped to live a normal span of life (vs. 24a).

As soon as the psalmist made his request for life, he was gripped by thoughts of God's nature. God is eternal, unlike the heavens and earth He created. As a garment becomes

worn and must be discarded, so one day the heavens and earth will reach the end of their usefulness and will be changed. Yet God remains unchanging. The universe is long-lasting, but its Creator is everlasting (Heb. 1:10-12).

While the universe will come to an end, the people of God will survive throughout eternity (Ps. 102:28). That's an amazing thought. The world around us, which seems so much more durable than we are, will not last as long as we will. Of all the parts of the material universe, only humans will endure forever. God is eternally committed to those who belong to Him.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How much of what I am doing with my life has eternal value?*



## **Praise for Many Blessings (103:1-5)**

**Praise the LORD, my soul;  
all my inmost being, praise his  
holy name.**

—Psalm 103:1

The person who feels that God's blessings are few and far between should meditate on Psalm 103. This hymn praises the love and compassion of God toward His people. David's words can clear our vision and release bottled-up worship.

The psalm begins and ends with calls to praise. First, David called

himself to praise God (vss. 1-5); later he called everyone to join him in praising God (vss. 2-22). In between these calls to praise are statements of God's love and compassion toward Israel (vss. 6-19).

In Hebrew speech, "my soul" (vs. 1) was a conventional way of addressing oneself. David summoned himself and even his "inmost being" to praise God.

This is a good reminder to us of the importance of praising God sincerely. God can hardly be pleased with our words or songs of praise when they do not come from our hearts.

To prepare for praising God sincerely, David encouraged himself to remember the "benefits" (vs. 2), or advantages, he had received from God. Then he listed six examples of these benefits (vss. 3-5).

First among the examples is *forgiveness of sins* (vs. 3a). David knew from experience how turning from God's commandments can darken and dirty one's life. But he knew as well the fresh breeze of grace that sweeps into the heart when one has repented.

The second example of God's benefits is *healing of disease* (vs. 3b). Several of David's psalms reveal that he had bouts with illness . . . some perhaps serious. And yet God healed him. It seems appropriate that we don't know the details of David's experience. Regardless of how healing occurs, we should give God the credit for it. He is the Giver and Sustainer of life.

The third benefit from God that

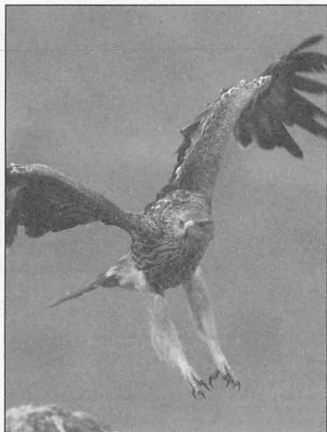
David cited was his being *redeemed from the pit* (vs. 4a). This means God had rescued David from premature death. But it may also refer to the gift of life after death. In this sense, all believers are saved from “the pit.”

David’s fourth example is the *crown of love and compassion* (vs. 4b). After three negative benefits, this is the first of three positive benefits. More than just being forgiven, healed, and redeemed, David had an abundant life—a life filled with God’s love and compassion. No doubt David valued this crown more than his actual crown. And the crown of love and compassion is one all believers can wear.

*Good things* (vs. 5a) is David’s fifth example of divine benefits. In many ways David was an ambitious man, hungry for success. But God’s spiritual and material blessings on him had satisfied his hunger. If we have the right desires, we too will find ourselves satisfied by God.

The fifth example, good things, leads to the sixth: *a renewal of youth “like the eagle’s”* (vs. 5b). David did not think he had found the antidote to aging. He meant, instead, that his relationship with God gave him an inner vitality that was like an eagle’s unflagging vigor. As believers, we do not need to go through our middle and later years with bitterness, for God is able to keep us youthful in spirit. Our souls need never stop soaring.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When have I seen examples of the six benefits David mentioned?*



An eagle of Israel

## **e** God’s Compassion for His People (103:6-22)

**As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;  
for he knows how we are formed,  
he remembers that we are dust.**  
—Psalm 103:13

Having recalled personal blessings from God, the psalmist, King David, moved on to list national blessings.

Scripture reveals God’s concern for oppressed people of all kinds, but in Psalm 103:6 the word



"oppressed" refers specifically to Israel. Verse 7 recalls God's deliverance of the chosen people from bondage in Egypt. It also recalls God's deliverance of the people from spiritual ignorance by giving them the law through Moses.

During the wilderness wanderings and at many other points in their national history, the Israelites let God down. Yet He remained "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" toward them (vs. 8; see Exod. 34:6). He did not ignore sin; He accused sinners and grew angry with them (Ps. 103:9). But He treated the sinners far better than they deserved by forgiving them of their sins when they repented (vs. 10).

God is merciful to those who "fear," or revere, Him (vss. 11, 13) because He loves us. And that love is as immeasurable as the distance between the earth and the heavens (vs. 11).

Also immeasurable is the distance that sin is separated from forgiven sinners. It is like the distance from east to west (vs. 12). Our sins may continue to have a harmful effect on us after they have been forgiven. But in terms of our account with God, they are utterly gone.

God's love is not only infinite, like the height of the heavens, but it is also intimate, like a father's love for his children (vs. 13). Parents know that their young children are weak and need constant care; therefore, they take care of the children. Likewise, the heavenly Father has "compassion" on His children.

God has compassion on humans because He knows how we are made. In fact, He made us. In Hebrew the "he" in verse 14 is emphatic, suggesting that God knows our needs better than we know them.

And our needs are great. We are earthly, made from the dust (vs. 14; see Gen. 2:7). This means that by our nature, we are subject to innumerable hazards. Grass or wildflowers seared by the desert wind: that's what we are like (Ps. 103:15, 16). Our lives are over in hardly any time at all.

Christians should never forget the way Jesus put a twist on the old analogy between humans and plants. He said God's care for such fragile things as flowers is evidence of His greater care for us (Matt. 6:25-34).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How has God taken care of me in the past week?*

Although human life is fragile and transient, God's love and righteousness endure forever. He will never abandon those who worship and obey Him. Psalm 103:17 and 18 mean that one faithful generation after another will know God's benefits. But they can also mean that each faithful person individually will enjoy God's benefits throughout eternity.

Just as verse 6 introduces the section on God's mercies to Israel, so verse 19 closes it. David didn't want it forgotten that while God had a special concern for Israel, He is King of all nations.

## CHILDREN'S Children

In ancient times, as many as three or four generations of a family might live together. Such close living fostered a sense of solidarity within an extended family that went far beyond the closeness of most families today. That helps explain why David thought of God's love and righteousness encompassing both believers and their "children's children," that is, their grandchildren (Ps. 103:17).

In light of the vast number of divine blessings, the psalmist seems to have become overwhelmed when he thought of how to respond. How can one person praise God adequately for all He has done? David's solution: Summon the

entire created universe to join in the thanksgiving.

First, David called on the spiritual creation to praise God. The "angels" (vs. 20), "mighty ones," and "heavenly hosts" (vs. 21) are all angels, perhaps different classes of angels. All of them are perfectly obedient to God's will. That's why the Lord's Prayer asks for God's will to be done on earth "as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Next, David called on all of God's creation, including us, to join its voice in the praise. David added his voice too.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What is a fresh way I could praise the Lord today?*

### Psalms in Brief (104—106)

**Psalm 104** is a hymn of praise that sees nature as an expression of God's wisdom and power.

**Psalm 105** is a call for Israel to praise the Lord because He fulfilled His covenant with Abraham.

**Psalm 106** confesses Israel's repeated rebellions against God, and seeks His salvation.

# 10

## The God Who Stands with His Own

### Psalms 107—118

#### Psalms in Brief (107—109)

**Psalm 107** was used to praise God for hearing and answering His people's prayers.

**Psalm 108** offers praise for God's love and seeks His help against enemies (see Pss. 57:7-11; 60:5-12).

Composed by David, **Psalm 109** is a prayer for God to judge false accusers.

#### **a** A Victorious King (110:1-3)

The LORD says to my lord:

"Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet."

—Psalm 110:1

Though one of the shortest psalms, Psalm 110 must rank among the most important. The New Testament writers applied it numerous times to Jesus Christ.

Old Testament scholars have offered a number of suggestions about the original meaning and setting of this psalm. The most

reasonable seems to be that—while perhaps vaguely looking toward son Solomon's reign—David primarily was foretelling a promise made by the Lord (*Yahweh*, God the Father) to David's Lord: *adonay*, the Messiah. Indeed, Jesus confirmed the messianic sense of this psalm while engaging the Pharisees (Matt. 22:41-46).

In this *oracle* (divinely inspired communication of God's will) David himself made it clear to whom God was saying, "Sit at my right hand" (vs. 1). In ancient societies the place of greatest honor was to the right of an important person. Since this "lord" was promised a seat at God's right hand—thereby sharing in God's kingly authority—this person had to be the Messiah.

Indeed, elsewhere Scriptures reaffirm God's promise of glory for the Messiah, with His reign to which "there will be no end" (see Isa. 9:7; I Cor. 15:24-28). The King's enemies are described as becoming like "a footstool," meaning all nations would be subjugated to Him.

Verses 2 and 3 of Psalm 110 expand on the oracle in the first verse, describing the political and military success of the king. Again,

while immediately reflected in a limited fashion during Solomon's reign, such only prefigures what was to be the prophecy's full and final realization in Christ. Especially compelling is how Jerusalem is envisioned as the hub of a vast empire, with troops "willing" to fight (vs. 3a; literally, be "freewill offerings") and sovereignty over all nations, including those opposed to the king.

The second half of verse 3 can be interpreted in a couple of different ways. It could mean that the king would retain the freshness of the dawn of life. Or it could mean that young men would appear before the king like morning dew, ready to fight alongside him.

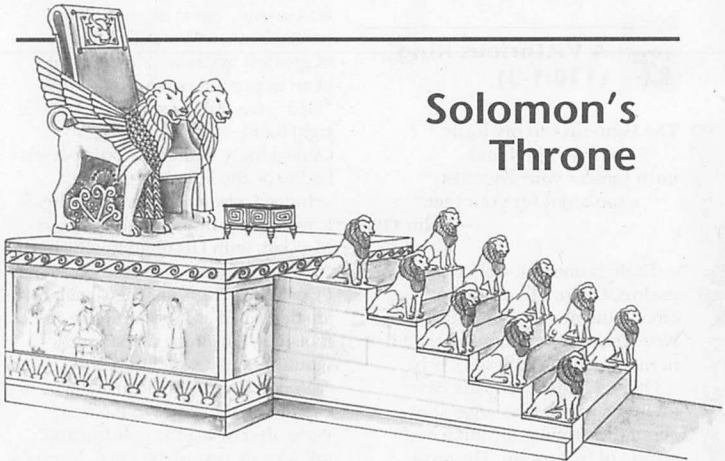
**Ask Yourself . . .** *Am I a willing soldier or a reluctant soldier in the army of the Lord?*

## **b** A Victorious Priest (110:4-6)

The LORD has sworn  
and will not change his mind:  
"You are a priest forever,  
in the order of Melchizedek."  
—Psalm 110:4

The first oracle concerned kingship. The second oracle concerns priesthood. Both roles were combined in one person.

The Lord swore an oath to the king: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (vs. 4). In Abraham's day Melchizedek was the king of Salem (Jerusalem). But he was also a priest (Gen. 14:18-20). Like Melchizedek, the king of Psalm 110 would be a priest and a king.



## Solomon's Throne

## Priests

**P**eople in all times and places have had a sense of their own sin. Consequently, nearly all religions have priests or similar religious figures who try to intercede with their gods on behalf of the people.

The Hebrew religion had priests too. Hebrew patriarchs, such as Abraham, offered sacrifices before God. Then in the time of Moses, the priesthood was formally organized with three ranks: the high priest, priests, and Levites. All Hebrew priests were members of the tribe of Levi.

We know little about the king-priest Melchizedek. Probably Melchizedek was a Canaanite, yet Abraham believed the two of them served the same God.



Although David and his royal descendants were not literally priests, they performed many functions related to the nation's worship. They looked after the ark of the covenant, they built and maintained the temple, and they oversaw the work of priests and Levites. In this sense, they could be called priests, though of an order other than the Levitical priesthood. They were king-priests, like Melchizedek.

It would be reasonable to expect that the verses following the priesthood oracle would have to do with priestly success, just as the verses after the kingship oracle had to do with kingly success. But for some reason that is not the case. Verses 5-7 refer once more to the king-priest's military victories.

The king-priest would have the Lord at his "right hand" (vs. 5). In this case, the phrase probably means nothing more than that God would be near to assist the king-priest in battle. The "he" mentioned in verses 5 and 6 is the Lord. Although the king-priest would be conducting the wars for the expansion of his empire, the credit for each victory would really belong to God.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How often do I have a sense that the Lord is "at my right hand" during my struggles?*

In verse 7 the "he" probably refers to the king-priest, not to God. This verse seems to picture the king-priest stopping by a brook in the midst of a battle to drink some water; then getting up, refreshed

and strong as ever. This suggests that the king-priest would carry on with the battle until he was victorious. On that note of expectancy, the psalm ends.

While Psalm 110 applied in some sense to Solomon and to other Davidic kings, it applies much better to Jesus Christ. David's reference to "my Lord" in verse 1 indicates that he considered the "Lord" to be his superior (Matt. 22:41-45). When Jesus ascended, He took up a position at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Acts 2:32-35). Jesus is the King of kings (Rev. 19:16), yet He is also the eternal High Priest (Heb. 5:5-10; 6:19—7:28). Jesus is in the process of defeating the dominion of Satan—a process that will be completed at the end of time (Rev. 19:11-21).

### **Psalms in Brief (111—117)**

**Psalm 111** praises God for His greatness and His righteousness.

**Psalm 112** portrays the blessedness of the godly.

The theme of **Psalm 113** is God's mercies to the downtrodden.

**Psalm 114** encourages the downhearted by recalling God's mighty deeds for Israel following the deliverance from Egypt.

**Psalm 115** declares God's glory and His blessings to the faithful.

The unknown composer of **Psalm 116** thanked God for saving him from death.

The shortest chapter in the Bible, **Psalm 117** is an expanded Hallelujah.



## **Thanks to the Lord (118:1-21)**

**Give thanks to the LORD for he is good;**

**his love endures forever.**

—Psalm 118:1

This resounding hymn offers thanks to God for a victory over enemies. Bible scholars agree that it was used in temple worship, but they disagree over when and how it was used. Perhaps the best explanation is that Davidic kings used it in public worship after successful military campaigns.

We can appreciate this psalm better through picturing in our minds its use by a crowd of worshipers marching to the temple. The worship service began somewhere outside the temple. First, one person (probably the king or high priest) called on the people to praise God, and the people responded (vss. 1-4). Next, someone (probably the king) sang or recited verses 5-21, describing the military victory. By verse 19 the group had reached the gates of the outer temple court, and the gates were opened for them to enter. Then the crowd sang or recited verses 22-27, praising God and blessing the victors. At the altar a lone voice offered a final doxology.

The first speaker asked the worshipers to praise God (vs. 1). Then he entered into a brief litany with the crowd. He addressed himself to three different groups.

"Israel" (vs. 2) was all the Israelites in the crowd, probably excluding the priests. "The house of Aaron" (vs. 3) was the priests. "Those who fear the LORD" (vs. 4) may have been either the whole crowd or just foreign converts to Judaism. All in the crowd praised God's enduring love.

The speakers in verses 5-21 witnessed to God's deliverance in a time of crisis. Behind the Hebrew word translated "hard pressed" (vs. 5) is the thought of being confined within a narrow space. The writer saw himself as having been caught between forces that threatened to destroy him. For him, freedom meant the removal of those forces and the ability to move without

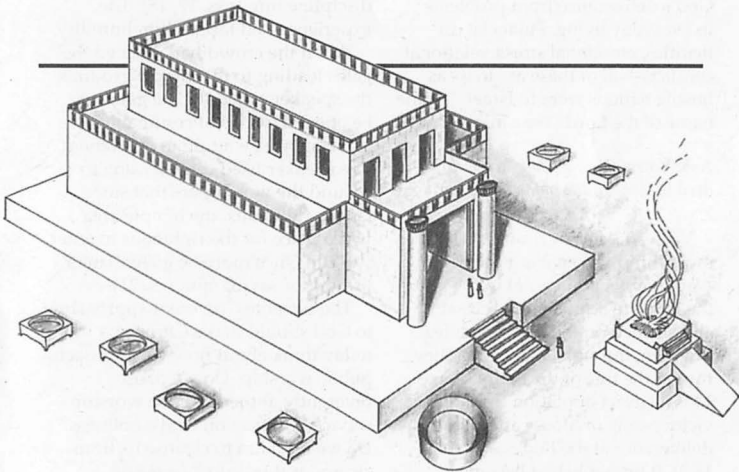
restriction.

This act of deliverance gave the speaker a tremendous confidence, not in himself but in God (vss. 6, 7). He had learned a lesson about God's trustworthiness, and he wanted to share it with others. Verses 8 and 9 urge people to put their primary trust in God rather than in other people, even powerful people.

That remains good advice. Others will let us down, but God never will.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How could I rephrase verses 8 and 9 to express my feelings about trusting God and people?*

After affirming that he had trusted the Lord, the psalmist told what he trusted the Lord about: conflict with



Artist's representation of Solomon's temple, which was enclosed within its own court.

an enemy military alliance. In verses 10-12, we can again pick up on the psalmist's sense of having been hemmed in: he was "surrounded," "surrounded . . . on every side"; his enemies "swarmed around" him like bees.

Furthermore, the psalmist said the attack was like a fire of thorns. Dried thorns burn hotly and with much crackling, but their fire dies down quickly. This suggests that the battle was fierce but short-lived.

After each description of the battle come the words "in the name of the LORD I cut them down" (vss. 10-12). The crowd may have joined with the main speaker in saying these words.

Christians still use the words "in the name of the Lord" to celebrate God's deliverance from problems in everyday living. Financial difficulties, emotional stress, relational conflicts—all of these are to us as hostile nations were to Israel. "In the name of the Lord" we can overcome.

**Ask Yourself . . .** What "foes" do I need to face "in the name of the Lord"?

Verses 13 and 14 provide a little more information about the battle. Apparently at one point in the battle the Israelite army had to retreat and seemed on the verge of defeat. But then, through God's help, they turned the tide of the battle. Verse 14 is an exact quotation from the victory song of Moses after Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea (Exod. 15:2). It probably had become a common testimony of praise (compare Isa. 12:2).

The victory on the battlefield filled homes throughout Israel with joy. The people praised God for saving their nation from defeat (Ps. 118:15, 16). The "tents" mentioned in verse 15 represented the Israelites' permanent dwellings. God's "right hand" referred to His power.

These verses can teach us that conversations about spiritual blessings should not be limited to church. The Lord is pleased when we talk about Him and His daily mercies as we meet with family and friends in our homes.

The speaker had as much reason to praise God for the deliverance as anyone. And now he could do so from a humble heart, because God had used the near-defeat to discipline him (vss. 17, 18). The experience had taught him humility.

When the crowd had reached the gates leading to the temple grounds, the speaker called for the gates to be opened (vs. 19). Presumably someone was waiting to open them. The speaker used this occasion to remind the worshipers that since God is righteous, the temple area was a place for the righteous to enter (vs. 20). Once more he gave thanks to God for saving him (vs. 21).

The Israelites' reverent approach to God should make Christians today think about how we approach public worship. Do we pause reverently at the start of a worship service to reflect on God's holiness? Do we ask Him to cleanse us from sin and put us into a frame of mind to praise Him and hear His instructions?



## **d** A Day to Rejoice (118:22-29)

The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.

—Psalm 118:24

At the temple precincts the people joined in the worship (vss. 22-27). Then a lone speaker concluded the worship with verses 28 and 29.

The worshipers referred to a stone rejected by builders. Again, while this reference would have had an immediate context—foreign nations discounting Israel as insignificant—Jesus made it clear that this psalm was a direct prophecy concerning Himself. Christ was (and still is) rejected by the masses; yet the day will come when He will be the capstone (Matt. 21:42, 45). He will finally rule earth as King of kings.

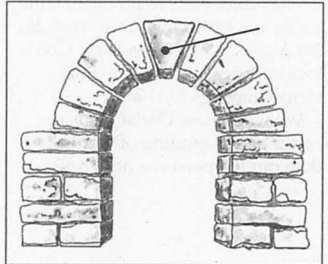
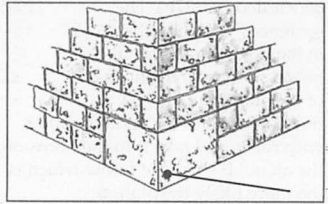
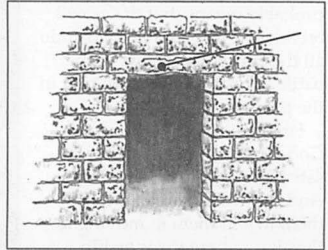
Likewise, God had intervened in Israel's immediate battle and had given His people a brilliant victory. Instead of being like a rejected stone, they were like a "cornerstone," the most important stone in the structure.

In recognition of being made the "cornerstone," the Israelites knew that it was proper to pick a day to offer thanks. They declared, "The LORD has done it this very day; let

us rejoice today and be glad." (vs. 24).

This beloved praise sums up perfectly how we should glorify God simply for the wonder of each created day.

**Ask Yourself . . .** Have I praised God for the gift of this day in my life?



The "cornerstone" of Psalm 118:22 may refer to the lintel stone over a door (top), to the cornerstone of a wall (middle), or to the keystone topping an arch (bottom).

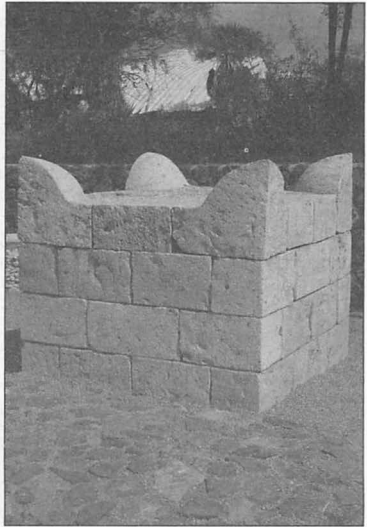
As the psalm draws to a close, we see that the crowd asked God for continued salvation (vs. 25). "Save us" translates the Hebrew word *Hosanna*.

The crowd also declared a blessing on the king, who had won the battle "in the name of the LORD" (vs. 26; compare vss. 10-12). Since the word translated "you" in verse 26 is plural, it probably means that the crowd broadened its blessing to include all the surviving victors of the battle, who no doubt took part in the procession.

Finally, the crowd praised God for shining the light of His salvation upon them (vs. 27a). And they called on all around them to join them in moving to the altar, where the worship concluded (vs. 27b). The sentence "With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar" can also be translated "Bind the festal sacrifice with ropes and take it to the horns of the altar." It's hard to know which is the more likely translation.

The psalm ends as it began, with a solo voice offering praise (vss. 28, 29). Verse 29 repeats verse 1. God's love endures forever. The final victory belongs to Him.

We who know Christ have a better understanding of God's love than did the person who wrote



This replica of an altar suggests what the "horns" on the altar of Jerusalem's temple looked like.

Psalm 118. But the psalmist did have a prophetic insight into God's Messiah. Jesus Christ called Himself a rejected stone that had become a cornerstone (Matt. 21:42-44). Furthermore, the procession to the temple prefigured Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On that occasion, the crowd carried palm branches and quoted Psalm 118:25, 26 (John 12:12, 13). In Jesus we see the clearest representation of God's everlasting love.

# 11

## A Treasure House of Truth

### Psalm 119

#### **a** God's Word: the Way to Blessedness (119:1-8)

Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,  
who walk according to the law of the LORD.

Blessed are those who keep his statutes  
and seek him with all their heart.

—Psalm 119:1-2

Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, is a meditation on God's Word. The anonymous writer made it clear that a true understanding of who God is and how people are to live can only be based upon divine revelation. God has spoken, and Scripture is a trustworthy record of His speech.

This psalm was methodically constructed. Its 176 verses are divided into twenty-two sections of equal length. The number of lines per section (eight) may have been chosen by the writer to agree with the number of synonyms for Scripture that he used. Furthermore,

the psalm is an acrostic: the lines of the first section all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the lines of the second section all begin with the second letter, and so on.

The first three verses of Psalm 119 are an introduction to the entire psalm. These verses pronounce a blessing upon those who are obedient to God's will. Such people not only avoid wrongdoing but also follow the Lord "with all their heart" (vs. 2).

Throughout this psalm, emphasis is placed on doing God's will, rather than merely on knowing God's will. It is good to be familiar with the details of the Bible, but we should not stop there. We have misused Scripture if we have learned it without allowing it to transform our hearts and lives.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How has the Bible made a difference in my life?*

Beginning with verse 4, every verse in the psalm (except vs. 115) addresses God. In the first section, the psalmist told God that he accepted Scripture as God's commands, which are to be "fully obeyed" (literally, "kept

## Hebrew Alphabet

**א** *Aleph* (vss. 1-8)  
**ב** *Beth* (vss. 9-16)  
**ג** *Gimel* (vss. 17-24)  
**ד** *Daleth* (vss. 25-32)  
**ה** *He* (vss. 33-40)  
**ו** *Waw* (vss. 41-48)  
**ז** *Zayin* (vss. 49-56)  
**ח** *Heth* (vss. 57-64)  
**ט** *Teth* (vss. 65-72)  
**י** *Yodh* (vss. 73-80)  
**כ** *Kaph* (vss. 81-88)

**ל** *Lamedh* (vss. 89-96)  
**מ** *Mem* (vss. 97-104)  
**נ** *Nun* (vss. 105-112)  
**ס** *Samekh* (vss. 113-120)  
**ע** *Ayin* (vss. 121-128)  
**פ** *Pe* (vss. 129-136)  
**צ** *Tsadhe* (vss. 137-144)  
**ק** *Qoph* (vss. 145-152)  
**ר** *Resh* (vss. 153-160)  
**ש** *Sin and Shin* (vss. 161-168)  
**ת** *Taw* (vss. 169-176)

In Psalm 119, all the lines of a section begin with the same Hebrew letter. The first section uses the Hebrew alphabet's first letter, the second section uses the second letter, and so on.



### God's Word: the Way to Purity (119:9-16)

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart;  
do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart  
that I might not sin against you.

—Psalm 119:9-11

The second section begins with the question "How can a young person stay on the path of purity?" (vs.

very much," vs. 4). The psalmist longed to obey these commands perfectly, but he knew he had not yet achieved such a level of obedience. As he looked forward to learning God's law better, the psalmist expected security from humiliating circumstances and expected opportunities to praise God. Consequently, he promised obedience if God would help him (see vs. 8).

9). The “young person” may have been the psalmist himself. Nowhere else in the psalm do we get a hint of the psalmist’s age. But it is possible that he was young when he wrote the psalm.

It is also possible, however, that the psalmist was addressing young people in the conventional way of Hebrew wisdom teachers. Frequently, teachers would speak or write as if to young people (see Prov. 7:1).

Whether the “young person” was the psalmist or not, the answer to his question remains true: youth can keep their way pure “by living according to [God’s] word.” If faithfully applied to life, God’s Word can enable the young (and the not so young!) to avoid the contamination of sin. Scripture does this by warning against destructive influences and by pointing to paths of blessedness.

The psalmist stated that he was seeking God with all his heart—a fact that put him in the company of the blessed, as we can see by comparing verses 2 and 10. But at the same time the psalmist had no illusion about doing the Lord’s will in his own strength. He acknowledged his dependence upon God to keep him from straying from God’s commands.

Verses 9 and 10 serve as an introduction to this section. The remaining verses of the section present two themes in alternation. The themes are (1) the internalization of Scripture, and (2) the joy of obedience to Scripture.

The psalmist made three claims. He said he hid God’s Word in his heart (vs. 11), recited Scripture from memory in private worship (vs. 13), and meditated on God’s laws (vs. 15). All three activities are ways of internalizing Scripture.

One way we believers today can hide God’s Word in our hearts is by memorizing portions of it. As the psalmist pointed out, one benefit of Scripture memorization is that it serves as a defense against sin. Memorized Scripture can help us know God’s standards for right and wrong when temptation arises.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What Scripture memorization plan would work for me?*

Like ancient believers, Christians today can meditate on Scripture. Meditation is something like a cow chewing cud. In other words, it is a process of bringing up from memory a certain Bible passage, and then reflecting on it at length. The purpose of meditation is to see many aspects of God’s Word so that we can better put it into practice in our lives.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What part of my typical week could I set aside for meditating in solitude?*

Although learning, meditating on, and obeying Scripture can be hard work, the psalmist found them a joy. He praised God (vs. 12), he rejoiced in God’s statutes (vs. 14), and he delighted in God’s decrees (vs. 16).

We may not have great wealth, but we have something that is worth more than any amount of money:

the Bible (see vs. 14). We can find joy in God's Word because it teaches us about God and about how God wants us to live.

**Psalm 119 in Brief (vss. 17-40)**

**Verses 17-24** teach that while the faithfulness of God's people infuriates the arrogant, God blesses His servants.

Despite being burdened with afflictions, the psalmist stated in **verses 25-32** that he was determined to hold fast to God's Word.

**Verses 33-40** show the psalmist at prayer for the Lord's guidance through His Word.

**C A Prayer for Grace and Courage (119:41-48)**

**May your unfailing love come to me, LORD,  
your salvation, according to your promise.**

**—Psalm 119:41**

God had promised to bless those who would be faithful to His covenant with them. The psalmist knew about this promise and knew as well that he had been faithful. On the basis of this, then, he asked God to bestow blessings on him personally.

The psalmist felt a need for God's help because people were taunting him about his faithfulness to God. Many Christians today know what it

feels like to have others make fun of them—or even threaten them—for their beliefs. It is not enjoyable.

From Psalm 119, it appears that even in God's chosen nation there was at times opposition to people who lived God's way. Some of this opposition evidently came from people in high places. But despite the pressures he was under, the psalmist vowed he would not relax his grip on the Word. He would always obey God's law (vs. 44).

The psalmist would go even beyond radical obedience to God's Word. He would testify of God's Word before rulers. By doing so, the psalmist would join a long line of godly people who confronted the nation's leaders about their sin.

The psalmist prayed that God would not "take your word of truth from [his] mouth" (vs. 43). This probably means that he wanted God to grant him the opportunity to speak about God's Word to others. The psalmist had no doubt that God would answer this prayer. His enemies were trying to hem him in, yet he felt that God would reward his faithfulness to the Word by enabling him to "walk about in freedom" (vs. 45). In other words, he expected to have the opportunity to witness "before kings" (vs. 46) and not be humiliated by them.

Although few of us will have the privilege of sharing Jesus with prominent figures, we all have opportunities to speak for our Lord in our own social settings. We, too, need courage and wisdom to make us adequate for such occasions.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *About whom should I pray for an opening to share Jesus?*

This section of the psalm ends with an expression of the psalmist's devotion to God and Scripture. The phrase "reach out for your commands" (vs. 48) in an expression of personal initiative to pursue God and His Word.

### Psalm 119 in Brief (vss. 49-104)

From **verses 49-56** we learn that true hope is based on God's Word.

According to **verses 57-64**, God is His people's precious possession and His Word is their rule for life.

**Verses 65-72** show that during affliction, the psalmist had been instructed in the Word.

## Synonyms for Scripture

The writer of Psalm 119 described Scripture using eight Hebrew terms. The section made up of verses 41-48 is one of six sections in the psalm that contain all eight synonyms. They are:

- **torah** (translated "law" in the NIV). This word was derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to teach" or "to instruct." It refers to the sum of divine teaching.

- **'edot** ("statutes"). Based on a word for "witness," *'edot* depicts Scripture as a dependable testimony of the Lord's will.

- **piqqudim** ("precepts"). This word was used of the action taken by an officer or overseer after looking into a situation. It indicates that God has given particular instructions to be obeyed.

- **huqqim** ("decrees"). *Huqqim* comes from a Hebrew term meaning "to engrave" or "to inscribe." Consequently, it reveals that the law is a permanent record of the Lord's will.

- **mitsvoth** ("commands," "commandments"). This word refers to an order issued with the full authority of the one issuing it. God's law is nonnegotiable.

- **mishpatim** ("laws," "ordinances"). A judicial term, *mishpatim* declares Scripture to give the standard for fair dealings.

- **dabar** ("word"). Meaning "to set forth in speech," *dabar* may refer to God's truth in any form.

- **'imrah** ("promise," "word"). From a verb meaning "to bring forth to light," *'imrah* points to a particular utterance.



The emphasis of **verses 73-80** is that God's deliverance comforts believers.

**Verses 81-88** portray the psalmist maintaining hope amid trials.

**Verses 89-96** celebrate the unchanging Word that upheld the psalmist and creation at all times.

In **verses 97-104** the psalmist declared that meditating on God's Word had led him to wisdom.

## **d** **Enlightened by God's Word (119:105-112)**

**Your word is a lamp for my feet,  
a light on my path.**

—Psalm 119:105

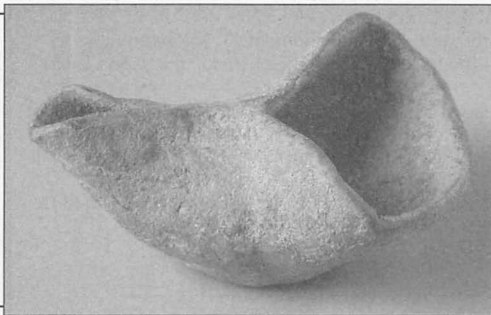
In this section, the psalmist vowed to be faithful to the Word of God regardless of the cost. Others were waiting to trip him up, but he would never abandon the Word.

The psalmist's unyielding faithfulness to Scripture was due to his understanding of its worth. The well-known first verse of this section makes that clear: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (vs. 105), he said.

Scripture often portrays the world as being enveloped in moral and spiritual darkness. Men and women grope about in the dark, wondering whether there are any ethical guidelines worth following.

The Bible is God's gift to humankind, a light that enables people to distinguish truth from falsehood. It throws light on life's questions, informs us how sin came into the world, and enlightens us about salvation.

The psalmist had made a covenant with God to obey His commands, but the psalmist's commitment was being severely tested. For publicly honoring God's law, he had suffered much (vs. 107), he was constantly taking his life in his hands (vs. 109),



During the Old Testament period, lamps were simple pottery dishes filled with olive oil or animal fat and lit by a wick of flax or cloth. Lamps were small enough for a traveler to carry by hand while walking after dark.



and the wicked had set a snare for him (vs. 110).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What kind of persecution would make it difficult for me to follow scriptural principles?*

In response to all this, the psalmist asked for God's protection (vs. 107). But he also praised God (vs. 108) and affirmed in various ways his vow to continue following God's laws (vss. 108-112).

The psalmist described the Word of God as a "heritage" (vs. 111) that will last forever. And consequently the psalmist understood that His commitment likewise had to endure until "the very end" (vs. 112).

The Word of God will never pass away. Therefore, we Christians should dismiss from our minds any idea that our commitment to God's Word is temporary. We are in it for the long haul.

### Psalm 119 in Brief (vss. 113-168)

In verses 113-120 the writer prayed for strength to remain loyal to God's Word in the face of strong opposition.

In verses 121-128 God's faithful servant prayed again for deliverance from his enemies.

The psalmist's devotion to Scripture as well as his disappointment that it was not being followed more regularly appear in verses 129-136.

In verses 137-144 the psalmist's deepest love and reverence are directed toward the righteousness,

purity, and truth of God's law.

As before, in verses 145-152 the psalmist turned to God in prayer and guided his steps by the unfailing Word.

Verses 153-160 suggest that personal need may be met by divine fullness.

Verses 161-168 affirm that the writer both loved and kept God's Word, and he recounted his happy experiences for the Lord's ear alone.



### A Plea for Insight and Deliverance (119:169-176)

May my cry come before you,  
LORD;

give me understanding  
according to your word.

May my supplication come before  
you;

deliver me according to your  
promise.

—Psalm 119:169, 170

Psalm 119 closes with a cluster of pleas to God. Almost every verse in the section is a petition, indicating the writer's dependence upon God.

The first two verses of the section repeat the psalmist's primary and secondary concerns: understanding God's Word and receiving deliverance from his enemies.

Verse 169 is a final cry for deeper insight into Scripture. The longer one studies the Bible, the more aware one becomes of how much there is to

## Bibliolatry in Psalm 119?

**S**ome people who have made a superficial reading of Psalm 119 have charged that the writer was guilty of bibliolatry (Bible worship). But those people have misinterpreted his fervor for God's Word.

One of the implied teachings of Psalm 119 is that believers should maintain a high view of Scripture but not to overrule their focus upon God. We are to honor Scripture, not for its own sake, but because it reveals God to us. It is God, and not Scripture, whom we must worship.

it. In this life, we will never understand all that Scripture means nor all the ways it applies to life. But that shouldn't keep us from trying!

Verse 170 asks for deliverance. Presumably the psalmist had in mind, as before, deliverance from enemies who mocked and threatened him. This issue comes up again in verses 173-175, where the psalmist asked for help, salvation, and life.

If God would answer his prayers for understanding and deliverance, the psalmist would have ample reason to praise God. The words translated "overflow" (vs. 171) and "sing" (vs. 172) suggest two forms of worship. The first term was used for the bubbling up of a spring. In the present context it may represent spontaneous, personal adoration of God. "Sing" is used elsewhere in the Bible of antiphonal choirs and of seraphim calling to one another. Thus it may refer to organized

public worship.

As the psalm ends, the author acknowledged that despite his love of God's Word, he sometimes wandered from its precepts. Now, like a lost sheep, he longed to be restored to his heavenly Shepherd.

After the psalmist's many protestations of his faithfulness to God's Word, we might have gotten the impression that he was prideful. But here we see that he had genuine humility. By God's grace he had achieved an admirable level of faithfulness. But he recognized his need for continued grace and mercy.

Our highest resolve to live for the Lord sometimes exceeds our performance. At such moments, we do well to follow the example of the psalmist and appeal to our Shepherd for restoration.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How does my passion for Scripture stack up against the psalmist's?*

# 12

## Songs for the Pilgrim Journey

**Psalms 120—134**

### **Pilgrimages**

**A**ncient Judaism had a single focus for its religious activity. That focus was the sanctuary, which for much of the nation's history was the temple in Jerusalem. Able-bodied Israelites who lived all over were expected to make the trip to the sanctuary for at least three annual religious festivals: Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles.

In addition to worship, pilgrimages afforded the chance to meet new people and to enjoy new experiences. But pilgrims also faced dangers, including sandstorms, robbers, and wild beasts. It is easy to guess that these features of the journey—the pleasurable and the perilous—account for many of the vivid images in the songs of ascent.

### **Psalms in Brief (120)**

**Psalm 120** is a prayer requesting protection from slanderers.

### **a Look beyond the Hills (121:1-8)**

**I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
—Psalm 121:1, 2**

Each of Psalms 120—134 is entitled “A song of ascents.” The most likely explanation for this title is that these psalms were sung by pilgrims as they made their way from the countryside to the capital for major religious festivals. Jerusalem occupies a hilltop, so one must ascend to it.

The songs of ascent have various themes. Psalm 121 is about protection. Travelers to Jerusalem must have found it heartening to think of God as their Guardian, which is how the psalm portrays Him.

The psalm is a dialogue made up of four two-verse sections. Apparently, the first section is one person's statement of trust in God, while the remaining three sections are someone else's confirmation of God's protection.

Central Judah, the location of Jerusalem, is hilly country. But why (as in vs. 1) would a pilgrim, when approaching the city, look to the hills? Perhaps verse 1 describes a traveler's impulse to take refuge in the hills when danger comes. Or perhaps the verse describes a pilgrim keeping a lookout for robbers who might descend from the hills.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I allow dangers, real and imagined, to keep me in a fretful state?*

Regardless of what verse 1 may have intended, the psalm's first speaker had a better idea of protection. His help came neither from hiding nor from vigilance, but from the Lord. As "Maker of heaven and earth" (vs. 2), God has the power to take care of His people.

The psalm's second speaker (whose speeches are recorded in vss. 3-8) described how thoroughly God protects His people.

Verses 3 and 4 teach that God watches over His people intimately and wakefully. God was so concerned about the pilgrims that He would even keep them from slipping and falling during their journey (vs. 3a). Furthermore, God's alertness never falters. Verses 3b and 4 probably were, in part, meant as a snub to the false Canaanite gods,

whose followers excused them for allowing crops to fail by saying they were asleep.

Like verses 3 and 4, verses 5 and 6 teach that God is near and ever vigilant. But these verses use different terms. "Shade" (vs. 5) was a symbol for protection in the sun-baked Middle East. God's protection is "at your right hand"; in other words, it is always nearby, ready for use. In verse 6, "the sun" represents dangers found in the daytime and "the moon" represents nighttime dangers. The point here is that God protects His people at all times.

The psalmist stated his point plainly: "The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life" (vs. 7). All activities are covered by the words "your coming and going" (vs. 8). From journey's start to journey's end, the pilgrims would be protected by God. Likewise, from life's start to life's end, believers in all ages are protected by God.

Although we do not make religious pilgrimages like those the Jews made, we too need and receive God's protection. Psalm 121 does not promise that believers will avoid all accidents and illness. But it does teach that no trouble can destroy our relationship with God or render His power inoperative. Each step we take, each breath we breathe, we can know that God is with us and that we are under His care.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Which ideas in Psalm 121 mean the most to me today?*

### **Psalms in Brief (122—125)**

**Psalm 122** expresses joy and concern over Jerusalem.

**Psalm 123** reflects the anguish of the righteous over their humiliation at the hands of the ungodly.

God's mercy in helping Israel to escape enemies is the theme of **Psalm 124**.

**Psalm 125** describes the security of God's people.

### ***b* Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy (126:1-6)**

Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.

—Psalm 126:6

Psalm 126 begins with fond remembrance: God had restored His people, bringing them much joy.

This past act of restoration gave the psalmist reason to hope for further restoration. Thus Psalm 126 is evenly divided between recollection (vss. 1-3) and expectation (vss. 4-6).

Whatever the event, it was like a dream come true to the Jews. They couldn't help laughing and singing over what God had done. And their joy was increased when others beyond their borders recognized what God had done for them.

Great excitement marked the period following the restoration. But later the mood changed. Perhaps the people faced a new problem. Or maybe they realized that the former restoration had been incomplete.

If the former restoration was the return of exiles to Judah, then we have only to look into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to learn that the returned Jews faced neighbors' threats, economic upheavals, building projects, and moral failures. Since the phrase translated "restore our fortunes" (vs. 4a—the same as in vs. 1a) could also mean "bring back our captives," the psalmist might

Psalm 126 asks for blessings like "streams in the Negev." A part of the dry Negev is pictured at the right.



even have wanted more Jews to return from exile.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Which of God's past actions would I like to see repeated?*

The psalmist compared the expected restoration to "streams in the Negev" (vs. 4). The Negev (meaning "dry country") was the southernmost part of Judah, extending toward the Sinai Peninsula. Water is scarce in the Negev. But after a rain, a dry gully (called a wadi) there can turn into a torrent, and the surrounding desert can become a place of grass and flowers.

To balance the idea that restoration is God's work (vs. 4), the psalmist stressed that God's people must also put forth an effort. In verses 5 and 6 we see a farmer who is faithfully sowing seed, despite his being unhappy (perhaps because his task seems hopeless). Months later he returns from the fields, but now he is joyful and carrying sheaves that have grown from the seed.

If we faithfully perform our God-given tasks, God will bless us.

## **C The House That the Lord Builds (127:1-5)**

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the  
city,  
the guards stand watch in  
vain.

—Psalm 127:1

Who among us does not know the frantic feeling that comes from believing something awful will happen to us unless we work very hard to meet our own needs? Psalm 127 urges us to let go of that harmful belief. And in the place of dependence on self, Psalm 127 encourages dependence on God.

Psalm 127 has two parts: verses 1 and 2, and verses 3-5. The first part deals with the sphere of business, while the second part deals with the sphere of family. Both parts make the point that blessings come from God, not from private achievement.

Solomon began by teaching that work of any sort, such as building or guarding, is useless if God is not in it (vs. 1). And if God is not in our work, it does not matter how many hours we devote to it; ultimately, it will be unproductive (vs. 2a).

Instead of working on our own to help ourselves, we should entrust our well-being to God. He will provide for our needs without requiring us to make exaggerated efforts. We can take time for sleep (vs. 2b).

Some people have thought that Psalm 127 encourages laziness. That is not true. The Bible teaches that hard work is a virtue, but one that should be accompanied by reliance on God.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How often am I tempted to think that my welfare depends mainly on me?*

Solomon began the psalm's second section by attacking the view that children are merely the result of human virility and fertility coming together. While it is true that children are conceived through human sexual behavior, in the final analysis they are a "heritage from the LORD" (vs. 3). We have God to thank for blessings in our family lives, just as in our work lives.

In Solomon's day, a man who fathered many sons when he was young would have their strength to count on when he was old (vs. 4). For example, if an enemy falsely charged a man with wrongdoing, he would have his sons to back him up when he went to the city gate, where judgments traditionally were made (vs. 5).

In the nearly 3,000 years since Solomon wrote Psalm 127, the population explosion has made large families undesirable in some people's eyes. Furthermore, judicial systems have been developed to protect victims from injustice. But nothing has altered the fact that parenthood is a privilege. Each child is a gift from the Lord. And each child can be a reminder that we are dependent on God for our blessings.



Solomon compared sons to a warrior's arrows.

### **Psalms in Brief (128-129)**

**Psalm 128** describes the blessings of one who fears God.

The composer of **Psalm 129** called on God to weaken Israel's enemies.

## **d** A Cry from the Depths (130:1-8)

Out of the depths I cry to you,  
LORD;  
LORD, hear my voice.  
Let your ears be attentive  
to my cry for mercy.  
—Psalm 130:1, 2

Being burdened with a sense of guilt can feel like drowning. The person who composed Psalm 130 knew that feeling, and knew as well that the only hope for rescue from guilt is in God. The psalmist shared that valuable information with his fellow believers.

Psalm 130 is composed of four pairs of verses. The first pair contains the beginning of the psalmist's cry to God "out of the depths" (vs. 1). "The depths" are deep, dangerous waters.

Because of the seriousness of his situation, the psalmist was concerned that God hear his prayer (vs. 2). Of course, such anxiety was unnecessary. God hears our prayers, though we may not always hear His replies.

In the second pair of verses, we find the psalmist's recognition that he had gotten himself into "the depths." His problem was sin. We don't know what he had done, but it had burdened him with guilt.

This situation was serious but not hopeless. The psalmist recognized that if God's justice were not tempered with mercy, no one could hope. But God's justice is tempered

with mercy. He forgives all who sincerely repent.

Verses 5 and 6 express the psalmist's patient hope for deliverance from guilt (and perhaps from other problems as well). The psalmist maintained this attitude because God had given His "word" (vs. 5), or promise, that He would help all who humbly approach Him. In hope, the psalmist would wait for God to act. The repetition of a phrase in verse 6 represents that waiting.

The psalmist compared himself to watchmen who peered toward the eastern horizon for the first hint of daybreak, when their work shift would end. With a similar

### **Watchmen**

**N**ighttime watching was an important profession in Israel. In the cities, men posted on walls and towers were given the responsibility to sound the alert if danger appeared either inside or outside the city. In rural Israel, watchmen would spend the night in towers to prevent theft from field or flock.



expectancy, the psalmist waited.

Christians should share the psalmist's willingness to wait for God's answers. Rather than demanding instant action from God, let us wait with expectancy until it pleases Him to act.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How good am I at waiting for God's help? How could I become better at it?*

A person who has experienced divine forgiveness should not keep this treasure for personal use only, but should make it known far and near. This was the psalmist's intent in the final section of the psalm. He told his fellow Israelites to hope in the Lord, who loves them and who redeems them from their sins.

The psalmist's confidence was vindicated in Christ, who by His death on the cross provided "full redemption" (vs. 7) for all who come to Him.

### **Psalms in Brief (131—132)**

In **Psalm 131** David told of his humble trust in the Lord.

**Psalm 132** is a prayer for God's favor to rest upon the Davidic king.



### **The Delight of Unity (133:1-3)**

**How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together  
in unity!**

—Psalm 133:1

Psalm 133 praises unity among God's people. The people of Israel were not always united—in fact, they eventually split into two nations. But David valued the times when they were in harmony.

This psalm may have been used in worship at the annual religious festivals. On such occasions pilgrims from all parts of the nation would come together at Jerusalem to celebrate their common faith.

David declared that it is "good and pleasant" when God's people live in "unity" like family (vs. 1). Then David compared such unity to dripping oil (vs. 2) and falling dew (vs. 3). Both these comparisons suggest that unity is a gift that descends from above—from heaven.

When Moses' brother Aaron was invested with the office of priest, fragrant oil was poured on his head as a symbol of sanctification (Exod. 29:7). The psalmist imagined this long-ago anointing as being so generous that the oil ran down Aaron's beard and onto his clothing. The psalmist's point in making this comparison seems to be that unity richly sanctifies the people of God.

In the psalm's second comparison, unity is like "the dew of Hermon . . . falling on Mount Zion" (Ps. 133:3a).

Presumably, high Mount Hermon was known for the quantity of its dew. Such a heavy dew would make it possible to grow abundant crops on Mount Zion, despite its having nearly a desert climate. This symbolizes the way unity would make Israel spiritually and materially fruitful.

The psalmist mentioned Mount Zion, rather than some other dry mountain, because Mount Zion was the location for the sanctuary. "There the LORD bestows his blessing" (vs. 3b). His greatest blessing, then and now, is eternal life. We can get a sense of what life in heaven will be like when we live in unity with others in the family of faith.

Christians disagree over how best to achieve unity. But no one can reasonably deny that the Bible teaches the importance of unity among God's people. We all should do what we can to promote harmony between individual Christians, within churches, and among churches. When we are successful, we will prove the truth of Psalm 133: unity is a blessing.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Am I currently in disharmony with any other Christians? If so, how can I change that?*



A high priest in priestly garments.

### Psalm in Brief (134)

**Psalm 134** reports a brief exchange between worshipers leaving the temple and the Levites who stayed within its courts at night.

# 13

## Stand Up in Praise to God

**Psalms 135—150**

### **Psalms in Brief (135—136)**

In Psalm 135, a call to praise, the Lord is portrayed as God of creation and Lord of the nations.

Psalm 136 is a litany of thanksgiving to the Creator and Redeemer.

### **a**

### **Songless In Babylon (137:1-9)**

**How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?**

—Psalm 137:4

In all likelihood, this psalm was composed by a Jewish musician who had recently returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. Although the future was hopeful, the sorrows of exile were fresh in the psalmist's mind and the ruins of Jerusalem were all around him. So he declared his love for Jerusalem and his hope for judgment upon Judah's enemies.

When the Jews were taken into exile by the Babylonians (in 605, 597, and 586 B.C.), they were settled in

a land of plains watered by rivers and irrigation canals. It didn't look anything like the hills and valleys of their native Judah. Quickly, homesickness took hold.

But to the Jews, Jerusalem was more than a home. It was also the center of their religion, their holy city. So they sat and wept.

Insult was added to injury when the Babylonians demanded to hear some of the joyful music of Judah. Evidently they had a taste for exotic foreign sounds.

To us, the demand may not seem unreasonable, but the Jews found it offensive. For one reason, their mood was the opposite of joy. For another, their music was meant to praise God. It would be wrong, they thought, to use it for entertaining Judah's conquerors.

So the Jewish musicians hung their "harps" (vs. 2) on tree branches as a sign that they refused to perform religious music for their captors. These harps were handheld stringed instruments.

The courageous Jewish musicians make good models for us when we are faced with the choice between an easy wrong and a difficult right. Sometimes it is necessary to take

a stand on moral issues despite danger.

We don't know what retaliation, if any, the Babylonians took against the defiant Jews. But we know the Jews' devotion to their capital outlasted the empire that took them captive. Babylon was taken over by the Persians in 539 B.C. But the Jews

commitment to living as God wished. Otherwise, vigilance may slip.

The psalmist went so far as to describe the punishments he would deserve if he broke his vow and did not consider Jerusalem his highest joy. The curses of verses 5b and 6a can be interpreted in different ways. But probably they mean that if the

psalmist broke his vow, he should no longer be able to play the harp or to sing—appropriate punishment for him.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *What is my "highest joy"?*

Although the Jews had returned to their homeland, their enemies had not yet been punished for their part in Jerusalem's destruction. So the psalmist asked God to judge Edom and Babylon.

The Edomites were neighbors and distant relatives of the people of Judah. When the Babylonians marched on Jerusalem, Edom's

underlying hatred of Judah had risen to the surface. Edom had offered its allegiance to Babylon and had encouraged them to destroy Jerusalem.

The phrase translated "tear it down" (vs. 7), referring to Jerusalem, literally means "strip her." Cities were often personified as women. Therefore, the Edomites had urged the Babylonians to



This Assyrian relief sculpture is tagged "City under Siege."

survived and repopulated Judah, returning in 536, 458, and 445 B.C.

Having come home with other returnees, the psalmist vowed his continued faithfulness to Jerusalem (and therefore to Jerusalem's God). Perhaps he understood that it can sometimes be harder to do right when the pressure is off than when it is on. In situations of sudden ease it is wise to renew one's

humiliate Jerusalem, like a woman stripped of her clothes in public.

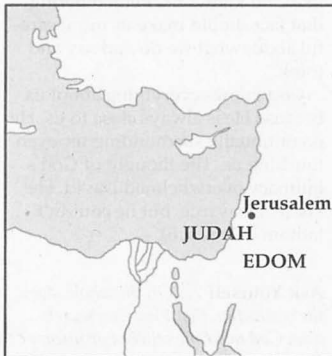
The psalmist asked God to “remember” the Edomites’ foul behavior, meaning to judge them. Other biblical writers foretold judgment against Edom (Isa. 63:1-4; Jer. 49:7-22; Lam. 4:21, 22; Ezek. 25:12-14; Obad.). And in fact, the Edomites dissolved as a nation after subjugation by Arabs and Romans.

But if the psalmist’s anger burned against Edom, it burned doubly hot against Babylon. The psalmist called Babylon the “Daughter Babylon” (Ps. 137:8)—another female personification for a city. He knew Babylon was “doomed,” probably because he had heard the prophecies about its destruction (Isa. 13; 21:1-10; 47; Jer. 50—51; Hab. 2:4-20).

The Persians had taken over the Babylonian Empire, but they had done it without inflicting much damage to Babylon itself. However, in the coming centuries the city saw scenes of violence and destruction, until finally it went into a steep decline. Today the ruins of Babylon stand as a mute testimony to the sureness of divine justice.

According to Old Testament justice, a criminal deserved punishment equal to his crime. In keeping with this principle, the psalmist wanted Babylon destroyed as Jerusalem had been destroyed.

Babylon at the time of the Jewish captivity.



• Babylon

Furthermore, he wanted violence to come to Babylon's people—men, women, and children—such as Babylonians had inflicted on the Jews.

We may be disturbed by the psalmist's strong language, but we can understand the reason for his strong feelings. And we can appreciate his hope for justice (see "Curse Psalms," p. 48). When the enemies of God take out their anger against His people, we can be sure that God will mete out appropriate judgment in His own time.

### Psalm in Brief (138)

Psalm 138 is a song of praise for God's help in dealing with threatening foes.

## **b** We Are Searched and Known by God (139:1-12)

You have searched me, LORD  
and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I  
rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from  
afar.

—Psalm 139:1, 2

Believers of all ages have understood that God knows the least detail about them. But deep inside they have also understood that for their own spiritual well-being it was important to open themselves up

consciously to God's searching gaze. That's just what David did.

The background of Psalm 139 seems to be a situation of some danger. Perhaps the psalmist exposed his life to God as a way of proving he did not deserve divine punishment through his enemies.

But before we get any hint of earthly danger, the psalmist eloquently described God's knowledge of him (vss. 1-4). This knowledge was complete. By mentioning "when I sit and when I rise" (vs. 2) and "my going out and my lying down" (vs. 3), the poet was merely meaning "all my ways." God knew what he would say before he said it. God did not miss a single one of the psalmist's thoughts. In short, God knew everything the psalmist did, said, and thought.

He knows everything about each of us, too. We might think that the people closest to us—spouse, family, friends—know us well. But nobody, not even we ourselves, knows us like God knows us. Remembering that fact should make us more careful about what we do and say and think.

God knows everything about us because He is always close to us. He is continually surrounding us, even touching us. The thought of God's intimacy overwhelmed David. He knew it was true, but he couldn't fathom it (vss. 5, 6).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *On the whole, does the realization that I have no secrets from God make me relieved or uneasy?*

God wants each of us to accept His knowing us, even though we cannot understand it. But we often want to escape that which we do not understand. That was David's first reaction too.

Hypothetically, the psalmist considered his possibilities for escape. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" (vs. 7). The word translated "presence" literally means "face." David thought about how he could escape God's gaze.

The first possibility David considered was travel (vss. 8-10). Perhaps he could travel vertically, up or down. He could go to one vertical extreme, "the heavens" (vs. 8), or to the other, "the depths." Literally, "the depths" is Sheol, which in Hebrew thought was the place where the dead reside. Or perhaps he could travel horizontally, to the east or to the west. "The dawn" (vs. 9) appears in the east. "The sea," the Mediterranean Sea, lies west of Israel. In the end, David rejected both vertical and horizontal travel because God is everywhere.

David considered another possibility: hiding (vss. 11-12). Adam and Eve tried to hide from God among the trees of Eden; here David thought about using the night as a screen to hide himself from God. However, he rejected this possibility as well, since God can see in darkness as well as in light.

David had to give up the idea of escaping God. So must we all. And once we have recognized the futility of escape attempts, we can begin to

accept happily God's being everywhere, just as we can accept happily God's knowing everything about us.



## **The Work of God's Hands (139:13-24)**

**Search me, God, and know my heart;**

**test me and know my anxious thoughts.**

**See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.**

**—Psalm 139:23, 24**

David had reached the point of spiritual maturity at which he had come to accept God's knowledge of him. He knew that every day of his life, from the first to the last, was known to God.

In David's day, people knew little about how a human fetus forms in its mother's womb. But David knew that God knows about this because He is the one who does it. And since the result is obviously a remarkable creation, David considered the making of a child a sign of God's wisdom (vss. 13-16a).

The process that takes place in the "mother's womb" (vs. 13; also called "the secret place," vs. 15, and "the depths of the earth") is like the creation of a work of art. David compared the formation of a human child to the skilled weaving of cloth on a loom. Children are "knit ...

together" (vs. 13) and "woven" (vs. 15) by God inside the womb. We who have seen photographs of fetuses at different stages of growth should be even more amazed than David was.

Next, the psalmist's thoughts turned from the beginning of life to life's entire course. He said that before we were born, God knew everything that would happen on every one of our days as though all of the events were written in a book (vs. 16).

As we look ahead, our future may look cloudy to us, but it is plain to God. Therefore, we can march ahead confidently, knowing that whatever awaits us, God will be with us.

God's thoughts were far beyond David's ability to number—that is, comprehend—them. Nevertheless, God's thoughts were "precious" to David (vs. 17) because they mean that God has the ability and the willingness to care for His children. And even though we may lose consciousness of God when asleep, He never loses consciousness of us (vs. 18). At our awaking from sleep (even the sleep of death), we will be with God and He with us. He will never leave us.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How precious are God's thoughts to me?*

Verse 19 marks an abrupt transition. Suddenly the psalmist began talking about wicked people who were God's enemies and his enemies. These men, said David, were "bloodthirsty." Furthermore, they misused God's name, probably

by calling down curses on God's faithful servants. They hated God and opposed Him.

Though abrupt, the transition makes sense. The earlier part of the psalm revealed that God's knowledge demonstrates His ability to care for His people and that it makes them love Him. Verses 19-22 reveal the psalmist's confidence that God could deal with his enemies. Those verses also reveal his zeal for God and for God's standards of righteousness.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I get upset when I hear God's name misused? How upset?*

Though zealous for God, David knew better than to think that he was perfect in God's sight. His "anxious thoughts" (vs. 23) may have been caused by the idea of God's searching him. But he invited God to search him anyway. He believed there was no grossly "offensive way" (vs. 24) in him, as there was in his enemies.

This process of God's searching David's life would bring up some impurities for cleansing. And this cleansing would open the way to greater progress in "the way everlasting" (vs. 24). So he asked God to test him, cleanse him, and thereby vindicate him.

David's exercise of freely opening his life to God is one each Christian could profitably adopt. Sometimes we try to keep parts of our lives hidden from God. We don't acknowledge before Him some of our most cherished sins. Therefore,



we need the courage and the faith to show Him everything about us, realizing that afterward will come the healing and sanctifying work of the Spirit.

### Psalms in Brief (140—149)

**Psalm 140** is a prayer for deliverance from slanderous enemies.

David, in **Psalm 141**, prayed that God would guide him in life-threatening situations.

**Psalm 142** is another psalm written at a time when David was in deep trouble yet dared to trust God.

In **Psalm 143**, episodes of past deliverance offered David hope while passing through affliction.

**Psalm 144** rejoices in deliverance and anticipates future prosperity and blessing.

Praise for God, the Great King, is the theme of **Psalm 145**.

**Psalm 146** encourages people to trust in God alone.

In **Psalm 147** the psalmist praised God for His benefits to Israel.

**Psalm 148** is a call for all creation to join in praising the Lord.

**Psalm 149** expresses Israel's praise for salvation given by God.

Suitably, the Psalter ends with a psalm that is pure praise to God. Reading Psalm 150, we can almost hear the loud and joyful way it was performed at the Jerusalem temple. We can also almost hear its echo resounding in heaven.

Psalm 150 begins and ends with the same Hebrew phrase: Hallelu Yah (meaning "Praise the Lord").

Then after its first hallelujah, the psalm describes the

where (vs. 1b),  
why (vs. 2),  
how (vss.  
3-5), and  
who (vs. 6a)

of praise.

God's praise is to

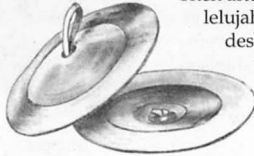
be offered on earth and in heaven.

The "sanctuary" (vs. 1) was the temple, representing God's presence on earth.

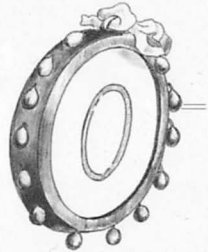
The "mighty heavens," or sky, symbolized heaven.

Since the praise is to take place on earth and in heaven, we get a glimpse ahead to the who of praise. God should be praised by people and by angels.

The themes of human and of angelic praise are God's "acts of power" (vs. 2) and "surpassing greatness." We are to praise Him



Cymbals



Tambourine

## **d** Praise the Lord (150:1-6)

Let everything that has breath  
praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD.

—Psalm 150:6

for what He has done and for who He is.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *For what specific acts of God in my life should I praise Him today?*

According to the psalmist, God is to be praised with music and dancing. The eight instruments mentioned in verses 3-5 include wind, stringed, and percussion instruments. Some were used only in worship services; others were used in

everyday merrymaking. The implication seems to be that God's people should use whatever means seem to them appropriate for worshiping and praising God.

What was taken for granted until the end of the psalm is now expressly stated: every being with breath is to praise the Lord. God breathed life into the first human, Adam, and now we descendants of Adam are to return our breath to God in praise. Hallelujah!



Trumpet

# Daily Reading Checklist



## Three months in Psalms

### For Lesson 1:

- ☐ Psalm 1
- ☐ Psalm 2
- ☐ Psalms 3—4
- ☐ Psalm 5
- ☐ Psalm 6
- ☐ Psalm 7
- ☐ Psalm 8

### For Lesson 2:

- ☐ Psalm 9
- ☐ Psalm 10
- ☐ Psalms 11—13
- ☐ Psalms 14—16
- ☐ Psalm 17
- ☐ Psalm 18
- ☐ Psalms 19—21

### For Lesson 3:

- ☐ Psalm 22
- ☐ Psalms 23—24
- ☐ Psalm 25
- ☐ Psalm 26
- ☐ Psalm 27
- ☐ Psalms 28—29
- ☐ Psalm 30

### For Lesson 4:

- ☐ Psalm 31
- ☐ Psalms 32—33
- ☐ Psalm 34
- ☐ Psalms 35—36
- ☐ Psalm 37
- ☐ Psalms 38—39
- ☐ Psalms 40—41

### For Lesson 5:

- ☐ Psalms 42—43
- ☐ Psalm 44
- ☐ Psalms 45—46
- ☐ Psalms 47—49
- ☐ Psalms 50—51
- ☐ Psalms 52—55
- ☐ Psalms 56—57

### For Lesson 6:

- ☐ Psalms 58—59
- ☐ Psalms 60—62
- ☐ Psalms 63—65
- ☐ Psalms 66—67
- ☐ Psalm 68
- ☐ Psalms 69—70
- ☐ Psalms 71—72

### For Lesson 7:

- ☐ Psalms 73—74
- ☐ Psalms 75—77
- ☐ Psalm 78
- ☐ Psalms 79—81
- ☐ Psalms 82—85
- ☐ Psalms 86—88
- ☐ Psalm 89

### For Lesson 8:

- ☐ Psalm 90
- ☐ Psalm 91
- ☐ Psalms 92—93
- ☐ Psalm 94
- ☐ Psalms 95—96
- ☐ Psalms 97—98
- ☐ Psalms 99—100

### For Lesson 9:

- ☐ Psalm 101
- ☐ Psalm 102
- ☐ Psalm 103
- ☐ Psalm 104
- ☐ Psalm 105
- ☐ Psalm 106:1-27
- ☐ Psalm 106:28-48

### For Lesson 10:

- ☐ Psalm 107
- ☐ Psalms 108—109
- ☐ Psalms 110—112
- ☐ Psalms 113—114
- ☐ Psalm 115
- ☐ Psalms 116—117
- ☐ Psalm 118

### For Lesson 11:

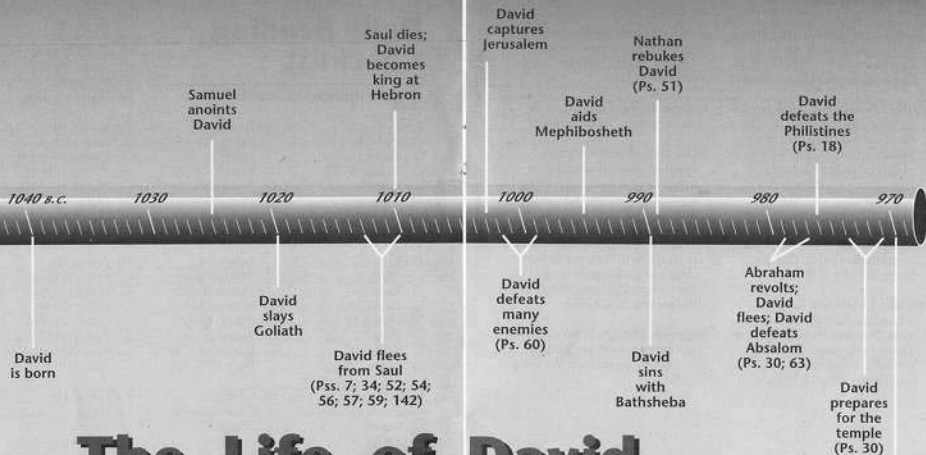
- ☐ Psalm 119:1-24
- ☐ Psalm 119:25-48
- ☐ Psalm 119:49-72
- ☐ Psalm 119:73-96
- ☐ Psalm 119:97-120
- ☐ Psalm 119:121-144
- ☐ Psalm 119:145-176

### For Lesson 12:

- ☐ Psalms 120—121
- ☐ Psalms 122—123
- ☐ Psalms 124—125
- ☐ Psalms 126—128
- ☐ Psalms 129-131
- ☐ Psalm 132
- ☐ Psalms 133—134

### For Lesson 13:

- ☐ Psalm 135
- ☐ Psalm 136
- ☐ Psalms 137—139
- ☐ Psalms 140—143
- ☐ Psalms 144—145
- ☐ Psalms 146—147
- ☐ Psalms 148—150



# The Life of David

## Where to Find David's Story in the Bible

- David's life before he became king (1 Sam. 16—31)
- David's life after he became king (2 Sam.; 1 Chron. 10—29)

The dating of some events and psalms is problematical.



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## **Psalms Glossary**

**Alamoth.** Thought to have referred to (1) music in the treble range or (2) music sung or played by girls. One occurrence, in Psalm 46 title.

**Gittith.** Thought to have referred to (1) a song for the grape harvest, (2) music that originated in the Philistine city of Gath, or (3) music played on an instrument from Gath. Three occurrences (Pss. 8, 81, 84 titles).

**Higgaion.** Thought to have been a musical notation calling for quiet or meditative music. One occurrence, in Psalm 9:16.

**Mahalath, mahalath leannoth.**

Thought to have referred to (1) a tune, (2) a musical instrument, or (3) the psalm's appropriateness for use in a time of suffering. Two occurrences (Pss. 53, 88 titles).

**Maskil.** Thought to have referred to (1) a teaching psalm or (2) a skillful psalm. Thirteen occurrences.

**Miktam.** Thought to have meant "a silent prayer." Six occurrences.

**Selah.** Thought to have been a musical notation calling for an interlude or a change of accompaniment. Seventy-one occurrences in Psalms.

**Sheminith.** Thought to have referred to (1) music in the tenor or bass ranges or (2) an eight-stringed instrument. Two occurrences in Psalms (Pss. 6, 12 titles).

**Shiggaion.** Thought to have referred to a stirring or ecstatic form of music. One occurrence, in Psalm 7 title.

## **Art Credits**

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