

The Psalms remind me of the ocean. Walking along the sandy beach observing the surf and taking in its beauty is one thing, but surfing the waves contending with rip currents and being tossed against the rocks is an altogether different experience. We can walk along the edge of the Psalms and remark on their beauty or we can plunge into their depth. There is a difference between navigating the Psalms and taming the Psalms. The ocean is too powerful to tame and so are the Psalms. The five books of the Psalms correspond to the five major ocean currents.¹ To pray the Psalms is to launch out into the open sea of doxology, depravity, despair and devotion.

A devotional reading of the Psalms is vital for our worship, but there is a difference between a sentimental reading and a substantive reading. Praying the Psalms subjectively allows my feelings to rule; praying the Psalms substantively allows the Psalms to rule my feelings. I want the meaning of the psalm to move my feelings, not my feelings to manipulate the psalm. Historically, the Psalms were read daily and the entire psalter, all 150 psalms, were prayed regularly. If this isn't the case today, and I suspect it isn't, the psalms are often read in a vacuum, without the psalm's meaning guiding our understanding. On Sunday morning when a psalm is used in worship it may invoke an emotion and impress us with a particular truth, but often times its purpose and passion miss us as we move on to the next item in the liturgy. Random impressions from the psalms are better than nothing, but the power of the psalms to transform body, mind, and soul are truer to their character and purpose.

We can treat the Psalms like a deck of playing cards: shuffle, split, bridge, and deal – lament, praise, thanksgiving, penance, imprecatory, and confession. Naturally we are inclined to the more positive psalms. Psalm 23 is our Ace. Psalm 1 is our King and Psalm 150 is our Queen. We have our favorites Psalm 8, 19, 119, 139, etc. But praying the Psalms is not like shuffling a deck of cards, where we hope we are dealt a lucky hand. The Psalms are more like unstoppable ocean currents that sweep through our lives with the power of God's truth. The Psalms are impossible to tame. They challenge our pre-conceived notions of God and his ways and lead the people of God in resilient faithfulness. They remind us that we need God's deliverance from every conceivable type of evil and they give us words to describe our moral pain. They give us history and doctrine, theology and ethics, worship and witness. They educate us in the ways of God and the rhythms of grace.

One hundred and fifty Psalms compose a finite text and infinite truth. Monks in the ancient church memorized all one hundred and fifty. Through prayer, memorizing, and music, they grasped the totality of the Psalter, but they never came close to grasping their full significance. How could they? How could we? Only the living Word, the embodied Word, has a lock on truth and all our study and all our prayer only serves to inspire awe in the truth. We can never go high enough to get to the top of it nor deep enough to get to the bottom of it. For our sake the finite canonical text has its limits, but Truth-in-Person, God the Father, Son, and Spirit, knows no boundaries – always and forever inexhaustible. The Triune Author of the Psalms brings together Scripture and Revelation as one, so that language and being are distinct yet inseparable. On one

¹ The five major ocean currents: North Atlantic, South Atlantic, North Pacific, South Pacific, and Indian Ocean.

side we have earthy, translatable, debatable, and inscrutable language issues and on the other we have the very revelation of God – the true and only Word of God. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, makes this finite text-and-infinite truth, a bound phrase that cannot be separated. “What God has joined together let no one separate.”

We can follow the lead of the Church and embrace the Psalms by study and prayer. There is a shape and a flow to the Psalms that calls for discernment and recognition. The deep meaning of the Psalms are worthy of our exploration. The arrangement of the Psalms is in itself a significant form of spiritual direction. There is a rhythm to the worship of the Psalms that alternates between the dark night of the soul and Yahweh’s new-every-morning-faithfulness. The juxtaposition of soul-churning lament and soul-inspiring love captures the extremes of life. The psalms move from the depths of persecution to the heights of God’s majesty. True worshipers live in the reality of one and in the hope and expectation of the other.

Athanasius (298-373), an early church pastor-theologian, is best remembered for his classic work *On the Incarnation* (318). But his pastoral letter to Marcellinus on the interpretation of the Psalms has also come down to us. Athanasius commended his Christian brother’s devotion to the Psalms and encouraged him “to grasp the inner force and sense” of each psalm.² Athanasius showed Marcellinus that the entire story of Scripture is embedded in the Psalms. The Psalms are not only the “magnetic center” of the Wisdom Books, but of the entire Canon. The Psalms celebrate creation (Psalms 19, 24), the exodus (Psalms 87, 105, 106, 114), the tabernacle and the priesthood (Psalm 29). They recount the works of Joshua, the Judges, and kings (Psalms 20, 105). The prophetic message of the coming of the Messiah is contained in the Psalms (Psalms 45, 50, 110, 118), as is his suffering (Psalms 22, 69, 88), his Ascension (Psalm 24, 47), and his judgment of evil (Psalm 9, 72, 50, 110). For Athanasius, the Psalms echo every part of salvation history, but their inestimable value does not stop there.

“But in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill.”³

Athanasius looked to the Psalms to give Christ’s disciples words for repentance, thanksgiving and praise. “In fact, under all circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own soul’s need at every turn.”⁴ In other parts of the Bible, “holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21), but in the Psalms, “it is as though it were one’s own words that one reads; and any one who hears them is moved at heart, as though they voiced for him his deepest thoughts.”⁵ The Psalms serves as a “mirror” allowing us to see ourselves and our own souls.

² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 97.

³ Ibid., 103.

⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁵ Ibid., 104.

“If you want to sing Psalms that speak especially about our Savior,” Athanasius wrote, “you will find something in almost all of them.” His interpretation of the Psalms expands our understanding of the messianic Psalms to include, not only specific prophecies of Christ’s coming, death, and resurrection, but also the many psalms that reflect the virtues of his life: forbearance, love of others, goodness, courage, mercy, and righteousness. The Psalms reveal the pattern of his life by driving home the truth that the way to know Christ is to become like Jesus.

“The Psalter gives a picture of the spiritual life.”⁶ The many different types of psalms, including narrative (Psalms 73, 78, 114, 115), hortatory (Psalms 32, 97, 103), prophetic (Psalms 22, 45, 47, 110), prayers (Psalms 6, 16, 54, 102), confessions (Psalms 51), and thanksgiving, praise, and jubilation (Psalms 8, 98, 117, 125), cover the soul’s state and every possible condition we will encounter. Every weakness, every danger, every pressing concern is covered in the Psalms. Athanasius saw the true pastoral scope of the Psalms: “For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, whether you have been set free from plots and snares or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.”⁷

Jesus’ Prayer Book is not a random assortment of spiritual themes thrown together. The more we study the flow of the Psalms as a finite text with shape, scope, and structure, the greater our awareness and appreciation for their rhythms of grace and God’s infinite truth. The five books of the Psalms (Book I - Psalms 1-41; Book II - 42-72; Book III - 73-89; Book IV - 90-106; Book V - 107-150) reminds us of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and the opening five books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts).

Each Book of the Psalter with its variety of psalms constitutes a compact whole. We know from the beginning that the principle subject of the Psalms is the Anointed One. If the Son of David had not come we would naturally limit our study to the historical-grammatical method and the literary nature of the psalms. We would treat the psalms as a window into the liturgy and worship of ancient Israel. We would study their forms and attempt to reconstruct their ceremonial significance and their religious value. But Jesus has come and his prayer book has become our prayer book. The interpretative trajectory passes through David’s reign and Israel’s history, through the enthronement psalms and their prophetic application to Israel in exile, and then all the way to the New Testament and the Church.⁸ We pray all the psalms with the voice of Christ singing the psalms to us. He is the Son of Man, whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and he is the Son of God to whom the Father said, “You are my Son; today I have become your father” (Ps 1:2; 2:7).

We embrace the Psalms because they are God’s answer to us and our answer to God. The Psalms hold up both sides of the conversation. We hear the voice of God in the Psalms and we

⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁸ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 870.

discover our own voice—God’s will and our will in dialogue. The Psalms are instruments of grace, tools of being and becoming, that guide us in true spirituality. By praying the Psalms, we learn what it is to be both human and holy in the presence of God. Their rhythmic arrangement, juxtaposing praise and pain, hate and love, saves us from shallow optimism and ornamental spirituality. Through the Psalms we gain a true understanding of ourselves and we enter into solidarity with the Body of Christ. In order to make the Psalms our own, we learn to pray the Psalms on behalf of others—the global church and the household of faith. We pray the Psalms in the light of Christ and in sync with our personal experience. Unselfish skill is required to line up the Psalms with life, to discover the deep correspondence between God’s will and the human condition. And perhaps some courage is needed as well.

As I said, the Psalms remind me of the ocean. We can survey the Psalms from a safe distance or we can dive in. Our son Andrew loves the ocean. He is an avid surfer and an ocean lifeguard. He routinely surfs with dolphins and rescues unsuspecting tourists from dangerous rip-currents. He contends with barracudas, stingrays, and sharks, but his greatest challenge is the tourist. They think of the ocean as a big swimming pool, and they are surprised to learn that the ocean is teeming with wild life and energy. Andrew has remarked, “If they actually knew what was in the ocean, they would never get in.” Thankfully, we are not spiritual tourists, dipping our toes in the Psalms, fearful of what lies below the surface. We are sojourners diving into the Psalms. We identify with their raw nature, exploring their depths and praying them as Jesus did.

“Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:7-8

Psalm 1 and 2 serve as the preface to the Book of Psalms. Psalm 1 is the narrow-gate. Psalm 2 is the epic drama of salvation and judgment. The blessing of God begins and ends this two part overture: “Blessed is *the One*. . .” (1:1) and “Blessed are *all* who take refuge in him” (2:12). The two psalms are a *binocular* introduction to a life of prayer that is both personal and social.⁹ Psalm 1 places human flourishing in tension with human depravity. Psalm 2 places human rebellion in tension with divine sovereignty. Both psalms are messianic, the first implicitly, the second explicitly. Neither psalm can be fully understood “until it is read in light of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ The Lord truly knows the way of the righteous (1:6), because he alone embodies the righteous way. For no one delights in the law more than the one who fulfills the law absolutely.

Think of Psalm 1 as the opening prayer for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, the Incarnate One is the archetype of the psalm’s sketch of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Human flourishing and everlasting life merge in the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Psalm 1 is local; Psalm 2 is global. Psalm 1 is personal; Psalm 2 is political. The humility of the Incarnate One ushers in the exaltation of the Sovereign King. The redemptive inscape of Psalm 1 yields to the eschatological landscape of Psalm 2.

Beatitude-Based Believers

*Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.*

Psalm 1:1-2

The opening phrase, “Blessed is the man,” is best translated, “Blessed is the one,” or “Blessed is the person.” Psalm 1 is not about humanity in general but about the person in particular. We begin on a personal note. But it is not only about us, it is also about the Son of Man. Jesus is the picture of the “blessed one,” the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way sinners nor sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.” “Jesus Christ uniquely corresponds to the portrait of the righteous man, and the congregation shares his spirit of delight in I AM and his word.¹¹ “The ‘man’ of reference here is a particular man. . . .He is the one Mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ. The Law of the Lord, which is to be our delight and meditation day and night, finds its meaning only in Him. Christ is the one who fulfills it, and He is the key to its understanding.”¹² The meaning and fulfillment of the human person is bound up with the meaning and person of the Son of Man,

⁹ Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 19.

¹⁰ Belcher, Jr. *The Messiah and the Psalms*, 33.

¹¹ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 143.

¹² Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 2.

who came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.¹³

Psalms 1 and The Sermon on the Mount describe what it means to be *Blessed*. Jesus's description of the beatitude-based believer harmonizes well with the psalmist's description. Wisdom requires a way of living that is counter-cultural by faith.¹⁴ Instead of walking, standing, and sitting in the counsel, habits and mind-set of the wicked, we experience Jesus' alternative route to happiness. Jesus repeats the word *blessed* nine times. God's blessing is received through an amazing reversal of conventional human values. The first step toward true freedom is not independence, but dependence on the mercy of God. We admit our overwhelming need for God and our overwhelming sorrow for our sin. True happiness is counter-intuitive. The beatitudes describe a state of grace, not a means of grace – a life fully alive by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalms 1 and the Beatitudes sketch a character description of the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Mercy, not merit, frames these compelling pictures of how grace renovates the heart and transforms life. Neither Psalm 1 nor the Beatitudes leave us with a moralistic picture of religious do-good-ism. There is never any doubt that God's grace makes this counter-cultural profile of happiness possible. The pursuit of happiness guided by Jesus and the pursuit of happiness inspired by the world are two radically different journeys. "We are not finished with finding ourselves personally in Psalm 1 until we pay meditative attention to Jesus' comprehensive definition of himself in his last conversation with his disciples: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6, KJV)." Eugene Peterson continues, "Jesus gives his life as an exposition, an incarnation, a *presence* of how this way works itself out in our lives."¹⁵

Two Ways

Humanity can be divided up in many ways, rich and poor, strong and weak, black and white, educated and uneducated, old and young, Republican and Democrat, Olympians and everyone else. Comedian John Oliver played a clip of an Olympic official in the opening ceremony saying, "In the Olympic world we are all equal." "That is simply not true," Oliver responded. "The whole reason we do this is to find out who is better than everyone else so they can stand higher than the people who are not as good as they are."

There are many ways we divide humanity up, but all of these divisions will fade in significance.

¹³ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 893. Waltke writes, "The difference between the people's understanding of the messiahship and Jesus' reality was so radical that the title Messiah is the one Jesus used least for himself, preferring instead Son of Man."

¹⁴ Peterson, *The Message Remix*, 527. Peterson writes, "The Psalms are part of a larger well orchestrated arrangement. It is for good reason that the five Wisdom Books form the center of the canon. They belong in the New Testament as much as the Old. They remain as vital to the 21st century disciple of Jesus as they did to God's people in Babylonian captivity. When seen as a unit with the Psalms at the center and two sets of polarities, Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, crisscrossing the center, we begin to understand their essential impact on life. Psalms is a magnetic center, pulling every scrap and dimension of human experience into the presence of God. . . The Job-Proverbs polarity sets the crisis experience of extreme suffering opposite the routine experience of getting along as best we can in the ordinary affairs of work and family, money and sex, the use of language and the expression of emotions. . . The Song-Ecclesiastes polarity sets the ecstatic experience of love in tension with the boredom of the same round. The life of faith has to do with the glories of discovering far more in life than we ever dreamed of; the life of faith has to do with doggedly putting one flat foot in front of the other, wondering what the point of it all is."

¹⁵ Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 111-112.

They will not last. But the psalmist has identified the one division that “will last as long as heaven and hell.”¹⁶ The psalmist illustrates two ways to approach life. One way is blessed, the other way is destructive. One way is fruitful, the other way is unproductive. He does not belabor the point. His brevity is impressive. We live in a very complicated world, but the psalmist sweeps the complexities aside and sketches a very simple picture. He doesn’t argue or debate his point. He simply states it. If you are blessed, here’s what you don’t do. You don’t become like the wicked; you don’t commit yourself to sinful practices; and you don’t join in on their cynicism and mockery.

The psalmist begins with a warning. We imbibe the attitudes and actions of the ungodly and our thoughts and actions are driven by concerns and passions that have nothing to do with the word of God and the gospel. We easily acclimate to family dysfunction. We fall in with the professor’s philosophy. We buy into the boss’s ethics. We get caught up in group dynamics. We accept the ethos of the team, the fraternity, the sorority, the club, the church, the office, and before you know it we have blended in. We assimilate easily to the ways of the world.

This fateful pattern of “frog-in-the-kettle” intensification is easy to identify but difficult to resist even for professing followers of Christ. Life is shaped more by professional etiquette and the spirit of the times than the wisdom and love of God. The psalmist proposes a simple counterpoint to this scenario of assimilation and conformity. Happiness belongs to the one “whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.”

Augustine (354-430) left us a personal description of how his teenage peer group influenced him. “I was ashamed not to be equally guilty of shameful behavior when I heard them boasting of their sexual exploits. . . . Yet I went deeper into vice to avoid being despised.” Unable to rival their depravity Augustine pretended to do bad things so his friends wouldn’t scorn him. “With them I rolled in the dung as if rolling in spices and perfumes.”¹⁷ He stole not because he needed or wanted what he stole but for the sheer excitement of stealing and doing what was wrong. He realized how sin-sick and miserable he was when he determined that his pleasure was not in the theft but in the crime itself and that he never would have done it alone. “My love in that act was to be associated with the gang in whose company I did it.”¹⁸ Augustine knew the controlling power of walking in step with the wicked, standing in the way of sinners, and sitting the company of mockers. And if we’re honest we do as well.

John Calvin wrote in his commentary on Psalm 1 (1557) that it is “impossible for anyone to apply one’s mind to meditation upon God’s law, who has not first withdrawn and separated themselves from the society of the ungodly.” Calvin insisted “that the first step to living well is to renounce the company of the ungodly, otherwise it is sure to infect us with its own pollution. . . . The servants of God must endeavor utterly to avoid the life of ungodly people.”¹⁹

Calvin’s emphasis on keeping our distance from the ungodly is important so long as we

¹⁶ Henry, *Psalms*, print-on-demand, 2015. 17.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 27, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol IV: 2-3.

remember that Jesus takes us out of the world only to send us back into the world. We seek the positive tension of being in the world but not of the world.²⁰ Christ's followers were never meant to be sequestered from the world. Escape from the culture is not an option, although retreats may be necessary. Jesus intended for us to live in the neighborhood, befriending and serving. Christians were meant to inhabit culture and contribute to the good of a pluralistic society. The New Testament church is like Joseph in Pharaoh's Egypt and Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. "Instead of being in the world but not of it, we easily become of the world but not in it."²¹

The psalmist focuses our attention on two conflicting sources, the word of God and the world. The psalmist is not telling us to leave the world or sever relations with the world. If that were the case we would not be salt and light to the world? Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19). The apostle Peter challenged Christ's followers to set apart Christ as Lord in their hearts. He said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:15-16).

Delighting in the Law of the Lord

How do we delight in the law of God when the apostle Paul said that "no one who relies on the law is justified before God" (Gal 3:11)? Paul declared, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Rom 3:20). If that's true how did Paul pray Psalm 1? Did he delight in the law? Did he agree with David's prayer that "the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. . . [that] the precepts of the Lord are right giving joy to the heart" (Ps 19:7-8)?

Two important truths stand in positive tension. Paul exposes the abuse of the law that uses the law as tool for self-justifying works righteousness. The psalmist extols the virtue of the grace-filled law that empowers the work of righteousness. As long as we think we can earn our righteousness before God by meeting a set of expectations and stipulations we misinterpret, misunderstand, and misapply the word of God. When we are under the law, instead of grace, the law is reduced to a religious standard that is bound to obligate, frustrate, and estrange us from God.

Until we revel in the mercy of God and put no stock in our own merit we will never delight in the law of the Lord. We will be like the older brother in Jesus' parable of the waiting Father, who became resentful because he did not understand the Father's love. Apart from God's grace in Christ we are either like the rebellious younger son or the dutiful older son, but neither son

²⁰ See John 17:13-19

²¹ Horton, "How the Kingdom Comes," 46.

understood their Father’s love. The elder brother is a picture of self-justifying religious effort that takes pride in duty, but never knows the delight and devotion invoked by God’s great mercy.

We confess that it is the law of the *Lord*. The source of this incomparable and absolutely dependable teaching is none other than the *I Am* who is “the Holy One without mixture: pure being without dependency; pure power without limitation; pure love without self-regard . . .” The Name behind this Law is captured in the English phrase, *I am who I am for you*.²² Such an Author inspires a deep “psychic feeling of pleasure” and a visceral yearning to know and understand.

“The regenerate delight in the *Torah* because it is the God-given structure and order that speaks of Christ and frees from sin and death; for the unregenerate it is an oppressive burden of ‘Thou shalt not.’ Whoever delights in the Word of Scripture will delight in the *Logos* (‘Word’) of God, Jesus Christ, who fulfills Scripture and to whom it points.”²³

The Hebrew word for *law* is *Torah* which means teaching or instruction. Eugene Peterson draws out its linguistic roots: “The noun *torah* comes from a verb, *arah*, that means to throw something, a javelin, say, so it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is *torah*. In living speech, words are javelins hurled from one mind to another. The javelin word goes out of one person and pierces another. Not all words are javelins; some are only tin cans, carrying information from one place to another. But God’s word has this aimed, intentional personal nature. When we are spoken to this way, piercingly and penetratingly, we are not the same. These words get inside of us and work their meaning in us. . . .They are *torah* and we are the target.”²⁴ *Torah* is an elastic word that included the whole Old Testament, the five books of Moses along with the history and prophetic books and the wisdom literature. The whole *Torah* included the Psalms. If we expect to escape the deceptive influence of the ungodly we will need a deep-seated desire for God’s word.

To delight in God’s word is to meditate on it day and night. The original Hebrew idea behind the word *meditate* refers to the almost unconscious murmurs and sighs that come from a person impressed with the truth. My mental picture for the act of meditating is our family pet Maggie who could consume a bowl of dog food in a matter of seconds but would chomp on a bone for days. The phrase “day and night” employs a topic’s opposite extremes to denote its totality.²⁵ Meditation calls for memorization “so that along the way by day, or on the bed at night,” we can recall it and think about it.²⁶ But on a deeper level delighting in and meditation on the word of the Lord transplants us from an “ego-centered world into a God-centered world that serves others.”²⁷

²² Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 138.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁴ Peterson, *Answering God*, 25.

²⁵ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 139.

²⁶ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 1:189.

²⁷ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 139. Etymologically, the word “meditate” means “to utter inarticulate sounds.”

The English word *meditate* comes from the Latin root *meditatum*, which means to ponder. In the Old Testament *hāgā* means to sigh or murmur, but also to meditate. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, *hāgā* became the Greek *melete*. The Latin Bible then translated *hāgā* /*melete* into *meditatio*. The original Hebrew idea behind *meditate* may express the almost unconscious murmurs and sighs of one impressed with the truth. Eugene Peterson likens meditating to a dog chewing a bone.

Meditation provides the opportunity to obey the admonition, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16). It is a means by which we “humbly accept” the implanted Word (James 1:21). Meditation is not a luxury we do for ourselves to clear our heads for the coming rush of daily activities. Our focus is not on our feelings or moods, but on the concrete, defining, sure Word of God. Meditation is an act of obedience. It is not a technique for assuring tranquility or inspiring success. At times the Word will lead us “beside quiet waters.” It will restore our souls and guide us in paths of righteousness (Ps 23:2-3), but at other times it will be a fire in our bones (Jer 20:9) demanding immediate action. It will be like a hammer shattering the rock of sinful pride and complacency (Jer 23:29).

Through meditation we internalize the word of God. We engage it personally and seek to understand it in the light of God’s redemptive story. We aim to comprehend the meaning of the biblical text as it has been understood by the Church through the centuries. We realize that our natural, sinful tendency is to override the voice of God, but meditation on the Word disrupts that incessant selfish monologue and the influence of the world. Above all else we desire to hear the voice of God.

Like a Tree Planted By Streams of Water

*That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither –
whatever they do prospers.*

Psalm 1:3

The fruitful tree planted by a stream is a picture of human flourishing rooted in God’s word. In the desert landscape of the Near East, a leafy green fruit-bearing tree is a striking contrast. The image of the lush, verdant tree runs from Genesis to Revelation, symbolizing a range of meanings from Adam and Eve’s pre-fall fellowship with God to the historical continuity of Israel and the Church. The prophet Jeremiah builds on the same theme:

“Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” Jeremiah 17:7-8

The apostle Paul picked up on the organic image of the tree or vine to describe the one true Israel with certain branches (the Israelite remnant – Romans 11:2-5) “native to the stock, while others have been engrafted, so that both are fed from the same root (Rom 11:17).” Patrick Reardon explains, “Paul did not say that the Christian Church ‘branched off’ from Israel. On the contrary, it was ‘branched in’!²⁸ In Revelation, the river of life and the tree of life offer a pastoral picture

There is a hilarious scene in the movie *What About Bob?* starring Bill Murray who can’t help oohing and aahing in amazement at the scrumpish family meal.

²⁸ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, x.

of fruitful provision and peace. The Genesis curse is finally reversed. Salvation is complete. The beauty of Eden is recalled in a picture of abundance and fertility. The river runs through the city center with the fruit-bearing tree of life on either side of the river and always in season.

The image of the tree testifies to an organic spirituality – a deeply internalized faith – that bears the fruit of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” - Gal 5:22-23). Article XI of Anglicanism’s Thirty-Nine articles confess justification by faith in Christ alone. Article XII reads:

“Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”

We are saved by faith but saving faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by the fruit of faith. Martin Luther wrote:

“‘Yes,’ you say, ‘but does not faith justify without the works of the Law?’ Yes, that is true. But where is faith? What happens to it? Where does it show itself? For it surely must not be such a sluggish, useless, deaf, or dead thing; it must be a living, productive tree which yields fruit.”²⁹

“Not so the wicked!”

*Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

Psalm 1:4-6

We have different pictures of success embedded in our minds; this is the one the psalmist wants us to have. The ever-green fruit-bearing tree is in marked contrast to the windblown chaff. The psalmist nails the difference with a reverberating hammer blow, “Not so the wicked!” “The self-ambitious, the self-serving, and the proudly self-reliant are like chaff that the wind drives away.”³⁰ The psalmist draws out the ultimate meaning of this stark contrast between the wicked and the righteous by fast-forwarding to the final judgment. “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (Ps 1:5). The wicked are excluded from the presence of God because the Lord “knows the way of the righteous.” This “knowing” is continuous and personal, the kind that involves an intimate, loving, and participatory

²⁹ Luther, LW 24:264-265; WA 45:702, quoted in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 73.

³⁰ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 141.

relationship. The apostle Paul expressed it well when he said, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, *even as I am fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus drew attention to the devastating impact of being unknown by the Lord. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Head knowledge alone does not count here. The blessing defined and described in Psalm 1 and the Beatitudes does not belong to a talking-head Christianity that has the answers down pat but doesn’t know how to live in, by, and for Christ. James K. A. Smith asks, “Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to *think* about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I *love* not the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market?”³¹ The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard picked up on this truth when he said, “worldly wisdom is very willing to deceive by answering correctly the question, ‘where is the road?’ while life’s true task is omitted, that is, how one walks along the road.”³²

There are only two ways, the way of the righteous and the way of the ungodly, the Jesus way and the world’s way, the way of salvation and the way of destruction, the way of life and the way of death. There is no middle ground; no maybe this or maybe that; no both/and; no room to compromise. Only one choice is true. We might like an indecisive “maybe,” the kind of middle-of-the-road Christianity that is all too common today. But what Jesus gives us instead are either/or alternatives. The contrast is between wisdom and foolishness; the Jesus way and the world’s way. And these two ways will not remain in tension forever. There will come a day when there will be a parting of the ways. “So the two ways, and there is no third, part for ever.”³³

³¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 218.

³² Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, 57.

³³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 49.

Jesus prayed Psalm 2 at a time when the glory days of Israel's monarchy were in the distant past, when Herod was a puppet king under Roman rule, and when the cross loomed large as the fateful climax to his earthly ministry. The understanding of the psalm was being transposed into a higher key. The meaning of the "anointed one" was no longer limited to an ethnic monarch but to the coming Savior of the world. Psalm 2 is the prophetic reflection of the King of kings and Lord of lords, and the eschatological expectation of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and the Messiah's everlasting kingship (Daniel 9:25).

Echoes of Psalm 2 are heard throughout the Gospels: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. . ." (Mark 1:1); "Jesus [is] the Messiah the son of David" (Matt 1:1); "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-33). At Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, the Father's commendation echoes the psalm, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

The apostles quoted Psalm 2 explicitly to make sense of the Jewish and Gentile opposition to Jesus the Messiah. In Acts, after Peter and John were released from the Jewish ruling council they returned "to their own people" to explain what they had said to the chief priests and elders. Their understanding and their prayer was shaped by Psalm 2. They prayed, "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed'" (Acts 4:25-27). The apostles were aware of living into the fulfillment of Psalm 2. Paul used Psalm 2 to explain the gospel. "We tell you the good news: "What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father'" (Acts 13:32). Paul linked the psalmist's "today" with Jesus' bodily resurrection (Acts 13:34; Romans 1:4).

Psalm 2 shaped the perspective of the author of Hebrews, who describes the Son who is appointed heir of all things. Hebrews quotes from Psalm 2 twice: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'?" (Heb 1:5; 5:5). Psalm 2 inspired the apostles to articulate not only a high Christology but also the role of the Messiah in the coming judgment. The apostle John quoted Psalm 2 to describe the coming King of kings and Lord of lords: "He will rule them with an iron scepter" (Rev 19:15; see 2:7; 12:5).³⁴

Rage Against The King

*Why do the nations conspire (rage)?
and the peoples plot (meditate) in vain?*

³⁴ Craigie, *Psalm 1-50*, 69. Craigie sees The Revelation anticipating "the ultimate rule and triumph of the man born to be King in the language and imagery of Psalm 2 (Rev 1:5; 2:27; 4:2; 6:17; 12:5; 19:5 and others)."

*The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”*

Psalm 2:1-3

This finely crafted four stanza poem with each stanza composed of three verses gives literary balance and symmetry to a description of cultural chaos and a theology of providence. The psalmist offers a sane and sober analysis of the “crazy effort of the world to think it can fight against God.”³⁵ Thus even the beauty of the psalm with its Hebraic parallelisms and striking word pictures testify to the care with which the psalmist describes the madness of the world and the eternal purposes of God. In the Spirit, the poet captures the inexplicable and irrational war against God. This is poetry with a purpose, poetry of faith, which requires the reader to take in the “theological testimony” and “the aesthetic dimensions of the poetry.” Rolf Jacobson wisely concludes, “the aesthetic power of the poetry is as much a part of its theological witness as its semantic content.”³⁶

There is a significant emotional contrast between Psalm 1:2 and Psalm 2:1. Delight and disdain describe two radically different emotional states. The righteous person’s delight in the law of the Lord is set in stark contrast to the nations’ rage against Lord. The tension between these two states of being, love and hate, delight and disdain, persist alongside one another. Those who delight in the law of the Lord are not robbed of their delight by the outrageous upheaval of the peoples. Nor is the rebellious rage of the nations blamed on the righteous for not doing enough to change the world. The two psalms taken together capture a totality that will not change fundamentally until Christ comes again.

The psalmist used the exact same word to describe the righteous *meditating* and the peoples *plotting*. In the Old Testament, the word *hāgâ* connoted sighing or murmuring or muttering. It describes the emotional response, positive or negative, we humans have to thinking deeply. For those who delight in the law of the Lord the sighs express pleasure and joy; for those who rage against the law of the Lord the sighs express anger and hate. Those who love the truth murmur sweetly and softly; those who rebel against God mutter angrily and loudly. Their goal is expressed in a slogan: “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” They despise the law, “the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25); they reject the easy yoke that provides rest for our souls (Matt 11:30); they refuse to believe the truth that will truly set them free (John 8:31-32).

The psalmist paints a bleak all encompassing picture of the world. All the nations, peoples, kings of the earth, and rulers, have banded together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

³⁵ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 156.

³⁶ deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 42-43. Jacobson writes, “The meaning of the psalms exists ‘in, with, and under’ the poetic language. The psalms, like all theological witness, comprise a truth that wishes to grab hold of readers, shake them vigorously, and leave them forever changed. The truth of the psalms does not wish to be held at arm’s length, considered dispassionately, and then set aside.”

The Bible presents a consistently pessimistic picture of the world's response to God. Psalm 2 is consistent with the apostle Paul's description of the world in Romans 1: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21). He reminds believers that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

On the eve of the crucifixion Jesus prepared his disciples for the world's reaction to the will of God. He said, "In this world you will have trouble." Frustrated Christians feel that their culture is slipping away from them in spite of their best efforts to "bring back America" and "change the world for Christ." We need to hear what Jesus said to Pilate over and over again to stay on mission: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36). The gospel is a unique counter-cultural movement and the people of God should never expect to be the controlling voice of culture, but they should aim to impress the world with Christ's love and goodness.

The apostles took Jesus at his word: "I have overcome the world." God is in control. The victory of Christ is assured. Patient endurance and faithfulness rule out revenge and retaliation. The world should never have to fear a Christian. Those who persecute, insult, threaten, slander, swindle, and murder Christians are never in danger of receiving the same treatment they perpetrate and perpetuate. Christians defend others and themselves from violence, slander, deception and terrorism, but the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ does not fight the way the world does. "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:4). The question, "Why?" goes unanswered. There is no rational reason for this rebellion. It is spiteful and self-destructive. Evil flips good and evil and works against everything that promotes human flourishing. The rage against the King is pathetic, even laughable.

The One Enthroned in Heaven Laughs

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
[Then] He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."
Psalm 2:4-6*

The second stanza sets a stark contrast to the first three verses. The rebellious rage of the kings of the earth is nothing but a big joke with tragic consequences. The psalmist contrasts the wicked who "sit in the company of mockers" (Ps 1:1) with the One who sits enthroned in heaven laughing and mocking at the vain attempt of kings and rulers to overthrow the Lord of all. The transition from Yahweh's "inward disdain for the pagan confederacy" to his "outward intervention in history" is expressed here as an immediate response climaxing in the coronation

of the king.³⁷ *Say what you like, but as for me, “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.”*

The great unfolding story of God’s intervention in human affairs is compressed in these few poetic lines. We are still in the middle of the story. Not everything is subject to King Jesus, even though he is “crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9). The apostle John pictures the saints “who have been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” calling out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:9-10).

The long-suffering prayers of the martyrs are heard by the One who sits enthroned in heaven. The seemingly interminable delay is not a sign of indifference or impotence, but of mercy. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:9-10). Yahweh mocks the world’s vain attempt to throw off the restraints that protect the world from unchecked pride, power, and lust. They have no concept of the truth that sets them free (John 8:32).

The King’s Speech

*I will proclaim the Lord’s decree:
He said to me,
“You are my son; today I have become your father.
Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”*
Psalm 2:7-9

We have heard from the psalmist who narrates history’s turmoil. We have heard from the rebels, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” And we have heard from Yahweh, “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.” The next voice we hear is that of the King. The King speaks with the authority bestowed on him by Yahweh. He has no other speech to proclaim that the Lord’s decree. This is consistent with the picture of Jesus in the Gospels who said, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19). “For I did not speak on my own,” Jesus said, “but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken” (John 12:49). Jesus prayed, “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” (John 17:8).

The King’s speech is autobiographical. His proclamation is personal. He discloses the relationship between Yahweh and himself: “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have

³⁷ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 167.

become your father.” As we said earlier the apostles used these prophetic words to define his messianic identity at his baptism (Matt 3:17), at his Transfiguration (Matt 17:5), and in light of his Resurrection (Acts 13:33; Rom 1:4; Heb 1:5; 5:5). There was no doubt in the early church that Psalm 2 was all about King Jesus and the new kingdom made possible through his life, death, and resurrection. Nor was there any doubt as to “the ultimate rule and triumph of the man born to be King in the language and imagery of Psalm 2.”³⁸

Augustine was convinced that the only way to understand this psalm was to see it in the light of Christ. The coronation of the king on Zion meant one thing only, that Christ is the head of the Church. Yahweh’s “today” as in “You are my Son, today I have become your father,” is an eternal today: “there is nothing past as if it had ceased to be, nor future as if it were not yet, but present only, since what is eternal, always is; yet as ‘today’ intimates presentiality, a divine interpretation is given to that expression, ‘Today have begotten You,’ whereby the uncorrupt and Catholic faith proclaims the eternal generation of the Power and Wisdom of God who is the Only-begotten Son.”³⁹

Given the explicit interpretation of the apostles and the trajectory of salvation history it is mistaken to conclude that “Psalm 2 belongs in particular to the State of Israel as a focal embodiment of the Jewish people.” It would also be misguided to imply that “Christian nations” have been “in a position to implement its [Psalm 2] program and have sought to do so.”⁴⁰ Any hint of interpreting Psalm 2 nationalistically, as either politically relevant to either the Jewish state or the United States of America, is ill conceived. The scope of the inheritance promised to the Son, King Jesus, includes all the nations even to the ends of the earth. The promise of Psalm 2 is anticipated in the great commission given by Jesus (Matt 28:18-20). The Son’s promised inheritance includes salvation and judgment, both of which will be realized exclusively by Yahweh in concert with the Son. The rod of iron belongs to King Jesus and not to any particular nation (Rev 2:27; 12:5; 19:15).

Kiss the Messiah!

*Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 2:10-12

The psalm concludes with “an invitation rather than an ultimatum; grace breaks through completely in the closing line.”⁴¹ Kidner continues, “The final beatitude (see Ps 1:1) leaves no

³⁸ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 69.

³⁹ Augustine, *On the Psalms*: Psalm 2, sec. 5-6, vol. 8:3

⁴⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol 1:105.

⁴¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 52.

doubt of the grace, that inspires the call of verses 10-12. What fear and pride interpret as bondage (Ps 2:3) is in fact security and bliss. And there is no refuge from Him: only in him.”⁴² The apostles transposed this psalm from a royal psalm sung at the king’s coronation to a messianic psalm prayed on behalf of “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). In the closing summons the phrase “you kings” represents the citizens of the world and “You rulers of the earth” applies to humanity as a whole (Ps 8:6). Psalm 2 is not only addressed to kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers but to everyone. Living as we do in the age of the secular self the psalmist’s inspired call for wisdom, reverence, submission, and worship is as relevant to us as it is necessary. Earth-dwellers everywhere are put on notice by the King of kings and Lord of lords. The message is clear and straightforward, “Be wise; be warned. . . .Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.” We need not debate the difference between reverential fear and debilitating dread. Deep devotion inspires awe, not terror, adoration, not intimidation.

“Kiss the Son” symbolizes love freely given and respect sincerely felt. A soldier salutes his commanding officer. A groom kisses his bride and a subject pays homage to the king. Some traditions take this imperative literally. Parishioners come forward, kneel and kiss the icon of Christ held in the hands of a priest. But the psalmist meant it as a metaphor for true devotion and faithful obedience. To do otherwise is to provoke the king’s wrath and to invite doom and destruction. The imperial self’s rebellious refusal to worship the Messiah has dire consequences: “His wrath can flare up in a moment.” The wrath of God is not an obsolete Old Testament concept but a dependable truth that is consistent with the teaching of the Bible, especially the New Testament, the nature of God, and the even the moral sensibilities of what it means to be human.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf imagines giving a lecture in a war zone to people “whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.” The subject is “a Christian attitude toward violence” and the thesis is that “the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance.” Volf, himself a Croatian who lived and taught in Croatia during the war in former Yugoslavia, argues that non-retaliation and the possibility of reconciliation is grounded in the reality of God’s judgment. If there is no divine accountability for sin and evil, it is impossible to live out the gospel of Christ. To deny the wrath of God often means that one has not experienced the horrors of war and the tragedy of evil.⁴³ The wrath of God does not mean “the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God’s love, the manifestation of his will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts his counsels of love.”⁴⁴ The wrath of God is not an embarrassment but a blessing.

The psalm ends in the same way that Psalm 1 began, on a positive note, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:12). The King’s blessing is offered to every tribe, nation, people, and language. We can kiss the Son or turn our backs on him. There is no middle way. The gospel is

⁴² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 53.

⁴³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. 304.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Ephesians*, 231-232.

grandly inclusive of all people everywhere (“Go and make disciples of all nations”). But by God’s design we have the freedom to refuse the King’s overture. We have the freedom to cut ourselves off from the King’s blessing.

Praise “does not spring from a delusion that things are better than they are,” but in the hope of the sovereign, saving power of God that overcomes evil.⁴⁵ Like the tide flowing in and out, praise and pain, joy and sorrow, ebb and flow. The truth of Psalm 3 is summed up in a name, *Absalom*, which means in Hebrew, “my father’s peace” (*abba /shalom*). The superscription links Psalm 3 to the Absalom rebellion when David “fled from Absalom his son.”⁴⁶ Augustine wrote, “Absalom [is] called ‘father’s peace,’ because his father had the peace, which he had not.”⁴⁷ Under threat from his son, David called out to the Lord for protection and the Lord gave him such a deep sense of peace and assurance that he was able to sleep. He arose in the morning with a renewed sense of confidence in God’s protection and deliverance. The uprising that drove the king from his throne in Jerusalem is countered by the rising up of Yahweh, who alone gives lasting deliverance. The psalmist’s focus on Yahweh rather than the enemy shifts the emotional center of the psalm from lament to confidence.

Yahweh is enthroned in heaven in Psalm 2, but in Psalm 3, King David is on the run and in need of deliverance. “Symbolically, the king is driven from social-political order (his palace) to social disorder (the wilderness). Nevertheless, though the anointed king’s ‘landscape’ is in disarray, faith in God orders his spiritual ‘inscape.’ His faith expresses itself in Psalm 3 and serves as a model prayer that turns an upside-down world right-side up.”⁴⁸ The picture of God’s ultimate sovereignty in Psalm 2 shifts to a “boots on the ground” struggle with foes who do not “serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling” (Ps 2:11). Patrick Reardon draws attention to the “progressive scheme of images” in the first three psalms as “a tripod on which the whole Psalter stands.”⁴⁹ The Son of Man embodies the description of the righteous person in Psalm 1. The exalted Son of God is celebrated in Psalm 2. And the Suffering Servant is the objective correlative of David’s experience in Psalm 3.

The Back Story

The Samuel narrative (2 Samuel 13-18) describes the messy moral chaos of David’s reign after his murderous affair with Bathsheba. His family unravels. Lust, rape, murder, conspiracy, and insurrection fill a narrative that climaxes in Absalom’s covert power play for the throne. A messenger came and told David, “The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom.” David immediately called together all his officials and said, “Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword” (2 Sam 15:13-14).

The tragic history of Absalom’s coup and David’s flight from Jerusalem lie behind this inspired

⁴⁵ Kathleen Norris, “Why the Psalms Scare Us,” *Christianity Today* (July 15, 1996), 21.

⁴⁶ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 871. Waltke sees an earlier scholarly consensus against the value of superscriptions shifting because of the gravity of the evidence in favor of superscriptions and their historical identification of specific situations.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *On The Psalms*, Psalm 3, sect. 1, 5.

⁴⁸ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 194.

⁴⁹ Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, xiv.

psalm. The narrative describes a poignant scene that serves as a type for events yet to come for the ultimate Son of David: “The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. The king also crossed the Kidron Valley, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness” (2 Sam 15:23). David fled but he had not given up nor abdicated the throne. He prayed to Yahweh and set in motion strategies that would help overcome Absalom’s betrayal. As a sign of his faith in Yahweh he insisted that the ark of God remain in Jerusalem. He told Zadok the priest, “Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the Lord’s eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, ‘I am not pleased with you,’ then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him” (2 Sam 15:25-26).

The Melody

*Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”
But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.*
Psalm 3:1-3

If Psalms 1 and 2 form the prologue to the Church’s prayer book, Psalm 3 is the opening hymn. It is the first piece identified as song. Waltke writes, “A *psalm* (Heb. *mizmôr*) refers to a song that is sung to the pizzicato (plucking rather than bowing) of a stringed instrument. The psalmist takes the cacophony of his situation and composes harmony with music and song. There is a melody in Scripture.”⁵⁰ David takes a deplorable and depressing situation and writes a prayer. He composes a song to Yahweh. The spiritual and devotional discipline necessary for this work of worship, encourages us to do the same. We find in the psalms a model for our spirituality – a spirituality that respects the poet, artist, and musician. Soulcraft blends discipline and devotion, gift and grit.

Evil is best summed up succinctly. David refuses to belabor the details of an ugly story, a story of conspiracy, intrigue, and rebellion. The psalm provides a medium that does not require David to rehash his role in provoking Absalom (2 Sam 14:28). David leaves the details of the story to the narrator and refuses to cater to any fascination we may have with evil. Simone Weil warned, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”⁵¹ David summed up a tragic situation in just a few lines to be sung with musical accompaniment. He underscores the intensity of the situation by repeating “many” three times. David has many foes and many are rising up against him and many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him.’” The situation is intense, but instead of dwelling on the situation, David quickly turns to God. Yahweh is addressed directly and the struggle is framed as a testimony to Yahweh’s faithfulness. The lament

⁵⁰ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 195.

⁵¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 70.

is brief and the psalmist quickly transitions to confidence in Yahweh's protection and deliverance.

The psalmist focuses not on the evil that threatens him but on the Lord who delivers him with protection, glory, and honor. The three-fold description of the enemy ("many, many, many") is answered in the three-fold description of Yahweh's provision. First, the metaphor of the shield stands for the Lord's complete protection and recalls for Christians the full armor of God described in Ephesians 6. Second, the image of "my glory" is provocative because David fled the palace like a fugitive. However his weakness and vulnerability did not define him. Even though his royal luster was gone, he is defined by the Lord's glory. The third figure, "the One who lifts my head high," was especially poignant. Shimei, a relative of Saul, called down curses on David as he retreated from Jerusalem. David and his special guard ducked and dodged as Shimei hurled stones and curses, shouting, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The Lord has repaid you for the all the blood you shed. . . . The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!" Abishai was ready to cut off Shimei's head, but David refused. "If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, 'Curse David,' who can ask, 'Why do you do this?'" Then David said, "My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today" (2 Sam 16:5-12).

Willed Passivity

*I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.*

Psalm 3:4-6

Abishai was a warrior who was ready to fight for his king, but David was not ready to fight like your typical king. By not slaying Shimei, David showed remarkable courage and strength. David was proactive in planting his confidant Hushai in Absalom's inner circle and quick to strategize a three-pronged counter attack against Absalom's army (2 Samuel 16:16-17:16; 18:1-3). David was not giving up, but at each step of the way he was conscious of yielding completely to the will of God. Psalm 3 is prayed out action, a remarkable testimony to living by faith and living into faith, and putting our beliefs to work in real life: *I call out to the Lord / I lie down and sleep / I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.* David is going back to his spiritual roots. Perhaps Shimei's curses remind him of Goliath's curses and he recalls his words to the giant Philistine: "You come against me with a sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty" (1 Sam 17:45).

Picture David fleeing Jerusalem and ducking Shimei's stones and then picture our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ standing before an angry mob shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Willed

passivity is summed up beautifully in a single line from Jesus' prayer to the Father, "Not my will but your will be done" (Lk 22:42). The principle of divine surrender is what Jesus lived out, and what he calls us to practice: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Lk 9:23-24). Jesus' whole life has been an intentional act of willed passivity:

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:4-8).

David's strategy depended upon Yahweh's response to his call and the most pro-active thing David did was to cry for help. David prayed from the Jordanian rift, the lowest point on earth 1,385 ft. below sea level. He had descended from Mount Zion 2,500 feet above sea level. "In prayer, the saint and God are united in spirit."⁵²

There is something impressive about a good night's sleep and waking refreshed as a sign of faith and trust in Yahweh's protection. David's confidence was renewed. He refused to be afraid. "I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side" (Ps 3:6). Regardless of the size and intensity of the threat David rested in the Lord's deliverance. Long before the apostle Paul declared, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" David believed it (Rom 8:31).

Prayer

*Arise, Lord!
Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked.
From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.
Psalm 3:7-8*

David prays for total victory and vindication. He wants his wicked enemies vanquished, because they are a threat to the people of God. David knows, "It's not about *me* and *my* people." David's benediction sums it up, "May *your* blessing be on *your* people." There can be little doubt that David hoped Absalom would be included in that blessing. This is why David commanded his three generals in the hearing of all the troops not to harm Absalom, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake" (2 Sam 18:5).

David held out hope for reconciliation, but his hope was crushed by news that Absalom had been killed. The messenger who delivered the news thought he was bringing good news, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man." But David

⁵² Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 203.

was shaken to his core. He retreated to an upper room to weep but as he went he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33).

We cannot hear David’s cry without thinking of Jesus, the ultimate Son of David who gave up his life on the cross so that we might live. David’s love for Absalom – “If only I had died instead of you” – is a picture of our Heavenly Father who “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). What David wanted to do for his rebellious son is what God in Christ chose to do for us. As the apostle Paul explained, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6-8).

David’s heart for Absalom is a sign of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a world of evil and hostility, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive invitation to an exclusive Savior and Lord. We come as we are but we do not remain as we were. We are new creations created in Christ Jesus. We have a new citizenship, a new family and an entirely new indwelling Spirit. The apostle Peter reminds us that the Lord is patient, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Psalm 3 and 4 are closely linked lament psalms that express strong confidence in Yahweh. Psalm 3 is prayed in the morning as the psalmist arises to face the day confident in Yahweh's promise of deliverance. Psalm 4 is prayed in the evening as the psalmist goes off to sleep resting in Yahweh's peace. In the middle of a serious crisis, the people of God are led in morning and evening prayers. *Many* are predicting, "God will not deliver him" (Ps 3:1), and *many* are questioning, "Who will bring us prosperity?" (Ps 4:6). The psalmist responds to the menacing voice of the many by calling out to Yahweh: "I *call* out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain" (Ps 3:4); "Answer me when I *call* to you, my righteous God" (Ps 4:1). His theology reflects his confidence. Yahweh meets the challenge of the many from his holy mountain and his righteousness. Yahweh occupies the strategic high ground in both power and rightness. The Mighty God champions the rightness of David's cause.⁵³ Yahweh is the author of righteousness and "the vindicator of misjudged and persecuted righteousness."⁵⁴

Psalm 3 and 4 share a similar tone of confidence and calmness. The situation may be dire but there is a resilient restfulness conveyed in the psalmist's expectation of deliverance and vindication. Finally, both psalms talk about a good night's sleep: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me" (Ps 3:5); "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). Psalm 3 and 4 witness the daily prayer of a resilient saint who knows how to "pray continually" and rest in God's peace (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The psalm is a beautiful companion to the apostle Paul's spiritual direction to the church at Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

Trust in Yahweh

*Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.*
Psalm 4:1

From a pastoral perspective both psalms express deep confidence in Yahweh and both encourage an attitude of willed passivity. Instead of reacting to the crisis in panic or frustration, David's recourse is to trust in Yahweh. He does not see victory coming as a result of his own well-executed strategic counter-moves. He is not plotting; he's praying. Of course David did act strategically when he fled Jerusalem immediately and when he planted Hushai his confidant

⁵³ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 1:233.

⁵⁴ Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, vol. 1: 112.

inside Absalom's conspiracy, but all along he was looking to Yahweh to make all the big moves. David shows us the difference between passivity and willed passivity. He is not apathetic; he's trusting. His intentionality is strategic: "I call out to the Lord. . . I lie down and sleep . . . I will not fear . . ." (Psalm 3:4-6). His insight is definite: "Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself." His desire is certain: "Fill my heart with joy" (Ps 4:3, 7).

Israel's warrior King practices a willed passivity and reliance upon Yahweh that foreshadows a New Testament ethic in the Old Testament: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord (Rom 12:17-19; see Deut 32:35). The implicit correspondence between 2 Samuel and Psalm 4 shows how prayer and life interface. David's trust in Yahweh is prayed out in the psalm and worked out in the narrative.

His dependence upon Yahweh is evident in the following ways: in his insistence that the ark of the covenant remain in Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:24-29); in his recourse to prayer when he learned of Ahithophel's betrayal ("Lord, turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness." 2 Sam 15:31); in his refusal to take action against Shimei (2 Samuel 16:5f); in his ability to find rest (2 Sam 16:14); in his command to his troops to spare Absalom's life (2 Sam 18:5); in his cruciform grief over Absalom's murder (2 Sam 18:33); in his appeal for unity (2 Sam 19:11-15); in his forgiveness of Shimei (2 Sam 19:22-23); and in his reconciliation with Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:29-30). Each one of these situations reveals a person who is secure in his God-given identity. The sub-text here is David's total confidence in Yahweh. He embodied the truth conveyed to king Jehoshaphat years later, "For the battle is not yours, but God's" (2 Chron 20:15).

Shame

*How long will people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?
Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him. Psalm 4:2-3*

Psalm 4 combines solid theology and good therapy. David transitions from calling out to God for mercy to calling out his delusional and idolatrous enemies. He pleads with Yahweh, "Give me relief from my distress." "Distress" implies a spacial metaphor. David is hemmed in, caught in a bind, cornered in a tight spot, and he needs space. He needs room to maneuver. We all know the feeling of having run out of options; the feeling that there is no place to turn. David shows us what to do. He boldly turns to God. His plea is emphatically personal: "Answer *me* when I call to you, *my* righteous God. Give *me* relief from *my* distress; have mercy on *me* and hear *my* prayer."

Then, he pivots and addresses his enemies. Israel's ruling elite have turned on their king. The faithless rich and powerful have been persuaded by Absalom to wilfully challenge the Lord's Anointed. They have become drunk on empty words and lies. This realistic appraisal of the opposition combined with his devotion to Yahweh is therapeutic. Even though he is on the run he acquires powerful inner strength. He separates truth from falsehood and devotion from deception.

In a swirling flood of lies, he anchors himself in his God-given identity. He knows that Yahweh “has set apart his faithful servant for himself” (Ps 4:3). David’s prayer foreshadows Jesus’ high priestly glory prayer in John 17, when our Savior prayed, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John 17:22-23). As the Lord set apart his faithful servant David, he has set apart the followers of Christ. “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19).

David is asking Judah’s elite, the movers and shakers, the rich and powerful who backed Absalom, how long they plan on turning God’s glory into shame? The question points forward to Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders of his day who tried to turn his glory into shame. They refused to see the glory of God in the Lord’s Anointed One and they accused him of being demon possessed. Jesus faced the ultimate tension between glory and shame on the cross. In Hebrews we read, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb 12:2-3).

“Jesus bore shame to the cross and shamed it.” Rodney Clapp continues, “Shame was crucified, itself disarmed and publicly stripped of its ultimate malignancy (Col 2:15). By enduring the cross, Jesus suffered shame’s worst and yet was vindicated by God. The central, pivotal reality of all existence is now that our worth was secured on the cross. No shame, however just or unjust, however petty or spectacular, can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).”⁵⁵ Followers of Jesus Christ can identify with this tension between glory and shame. First Peter describes believers as chosen outsiders and elect exiles. Like David we are fugitives on the run from the ideological captivity and the false gods of success promoted by our culture. The ruling elite in religion, business, politics, sports, entertainment, and education look down on the followers of Christ.

In the wake of Absalom’s ascendancy it would have been easy for David and his loyal followers to feel washed up and ashamed. But David’s identity as the Lord’s Anointed One remained certain. The world can attempt to turn Christ’s glory into shame but it will not succeed. David’s model of resilience corresponds well to Peter’s message to believers who are “elect exiles” and “resident aliens.” He calls believers to embrace with joy the new reality chosen for them by the triune God. He reminds them that they have been given new birth into a “living hope,” into “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” Christ’s followers live into a new reality that far outweighs the social reality of being resident aliens. They eagerly await “the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” Instead of suffering deep resentment because of their ideological alienation, Christ’s “chosen outsiders” are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pet 1:3-8).

Sleep

Tremble and do not sin;

when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.

⁵⁵ Clapp, “Shame Crucified,” 28.

Many, Lord are asking, 'Who will bring us prosperity?'
Let the light of your face shine on us.
Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.
In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.
Psalm 4:4-8

After confronting his adversaries, David encouraged his loyal friends.⁵⁶ Psalm 4 reflects the leadership challenge David faced. Absalom and his fellow conspirators, whom he described as delusional idolaters, were out to kill David. But the king also needed to challenge and comfort his loyal subjects, some of whom were angry, while many others were filled with fear and doubt. David had to deal with Absalom's life-threatening opposition without and he had to persuade hot-heads and defeatists within to remain faithful. He counseled his followers to control their anger and to check their righteous indignation. "Complain if you must, but don't lash out. Keep your mouth shut, and let your heart do the talking. Build your case before God and wait for his verdict" (Ps 4:4-5, *The Message*). The apostle Paul used this same line to instruct the believers at Ephesus. He wrote, "'In your anger do not sin' (Ps 4:4, LXX): Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26-27).

Anger is a dangerous emotion, because it makes us more susceptible to sin. Not all anger is bad, but nothing good comes from an anger that is allowed to metastasize. Abishai would have surely killed Shimei if David had not intervened (2 Sam 16:9-10). When anger metastasizes it robs the soul of life and vitality and replaces it with bitterness and malice. One of the tell-tale marks of righteous anger is its quick dissipation of emotion, leaving only the enduring and persevering commitment to righteousness. Our anger becomes suspect when we allow it to fester and grow into bitterness. Even righteous anger can quickly grow into an evil anger that is nursed and cherished as one's dearest possession. Why give the devil an easy advantage? Why allow the devil a foothold to climb all over you? Angry believers are easy game for the devil who "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). David's counsel is consistent with his own example of willed passivity: "When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent." Instead of nursing fear and resentment, David challenged the people to give themselves to God in heartfelt worship and trust.

What does David say to the many who are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Their king is on the run and they feel threatened. Who is going to look out for them? David refused to promise what political leaders and power-brokers invariably promise. He did not say, "Believe in me. Trust me." He did not attempt to trump Absalom's promises (2 Sam 15:4). David did what any good prophet/priest/king would do. He pronounced the benediction. He focused on Yahweh and

⁵⁶ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 234-5, see v. 4 directed to "the apostate highborn" who should tremble in fear before their impending doom. Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:236, argues that "David was calling for his enemies to be shaken to the core so that they would stop sinning." Craigie, *The Psalms*, 81, agrees that the psalmist is still addressing the "sons of man" (v. 3) and offers this paraphrase, "You can tremble with anger and rage, but don't sin by doing anything! You can speak your evil words within your hearts, but don't speak them out loud! Lie still and silent on your beds, where you can do no harm." Craigie suggests that this advice might also apply to the psalmist himself. Another possibility that I believe fits the situation better and corresponds to the apostle Paul's use of this text in Ephesians 4:26 sees David giving direction to his loyal followers in how to remain faithful in the crisis.

echoed Aaron's blessing, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his face toward you and give you peace" (Num 6:24-26). David revels in a joy that rivals the joy of the harvest. His inner joy transcends material abundance. "You have put joy in my heart, more than when their grain and their wine abound."⁵⁷

Psalm 4 is prayed in the evening after a long hard day. The psalmist's prayer for space to maneuver out of a tight place has been answered. Circumstances have not changed but David's cry has been heard and his heart has been changed. In the presence of Yahweh David has been empowered to confront his foes and challenge his friends. At the end of the day his world is clearly God-centered: "Let the light of your face shine on us" (Ps 4:6). He began the day feeling trapped and insecure. He ends the day in shalom, because Yahweh is his righteousness, exaltation, joy, and peace.⁵⁸ The psalmist's testimony is clear, "For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." This makes it possible for those who put their trust in Yahweh to lie down and fall asleep at once. Delitzsch writes, "In the last line the evening hymn itself sinks into rest. The iambs with which it closes are like the last strains of a lullaby which die away, softly and as though falling asleep themselves."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:239.

⁵⁸ Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, 118.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

David is passionate about being heard by God, not only his well-chosen words but his inarticulate groans and sighs. One can almost hear the tone of desperation in his voice. “Listen, God!” The psalmist is like a swimmer caught in rip current crying for help. Or, like a mother seeking answers for her critically ill child. Some traditions are familiar with the liturgical term Morning Prayer. It is used to describe an orderly and reverent worship service. Psalm 5 is a unique morning prayer because it conveys with passion that everything is on the line. “The piling up of appeals strengthens the urgency of the petition.”⁶⁰

Oh, Lord, Listen!

*Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
In the morning, Lord, hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly. Psalm 5:1-3*

King David directs his cry for help to the Lord, my King and my God. Prayer puts his kingship in its true perspective. “He accepts that he is a man under authority, not one who must struggle for his own ends by his own means.”⁶¹ The king’s personal involvement is underscored by the repetition of “my” seven times: “my words,” “my sighs,” “my cry,” “my King,” “my God,” “my voice,” and the seventh one is implied, “my requests.” There is no confusion here. David is all in. We hear him pray and we know that he means business. My colleague Dr. Robert Smith utters the expression, “My, my, my,” as a kind of exclamation mark in response to a meaningful truth or a moving story. As I hear David pray the first few verses of Psalm 5 I can hear Robert Smith saying, “My, My, My.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German pastor and martyr, was a strong advocate for morning meditation and prayer. He reasoned that since Jesus rose “very early in the morning” and “went off to a solitary place” to pray, so should we (Mark 1:35). Bonhoeffer insisted that our first thoughts should not be “our own plans and worries, not even for our zeal to accomplish our own work, but for God’s liberating grace, God’s sanctifying presence.”⁶² “Before our daily bread should be the daily Word. Only thus will the bread be received with thanksgiving. Before our daily work should be the morning prayer. Only thus will the work be done as the fulfillment of God’s command. The morning must yield an hour of quiet time for prayer and common devotion. That is certainly not wasted time. How else could we prepare ourselves to face the tasks, cares, and temptations of the day?”⁶³ Bonhoeffer makes his case with Psalm 5: “Morning by morning,

⁶⁰ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:246.

⁶¹ Kidner, *The Psalms*, 58.

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 33.

O Lord, you hear my voice; morning by morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” His almost lyrical description of the value of meeting with God in the morning deserves to be heard by all who seek to pray to the Lord.

“Each morning is a new beginning of our life. Each day is a finished whole. The present day marks the boundary of our cares and concerns (Mt 6:34; James 4:14). It is long enough to find God or to lose him, to keep faith or fall into disgrace. God created day and night for us so we need not wander without boundaries, but may be able to see every morning the goal of the evening ahead. Just as the ancient sun rises anew every day, so the eternal mercy of God is new every morning (Lam 3:23). Every morning God gives us the gift of comprehending anew his faithfulness of old; thus, in the midst of our life with God, we may daily begin a new life with him. . . . Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his.”⁶⁴

Scholars have wondered how to interpret, “in the morning I lay *my requests* before you. . . .” because the verb *to prepare* or *to lay* or *to present* has no direct object stated in the verse. The verb is used customarily in reference to offering sacrifices, specifically to laying wood on the altar for a sacrifice.⁶⁵ The psalmist appears to be associating sacrificial offerings with prayer requests. This relationship between sacrifice and prayer recalls the ancient example of Job. Following family gatherings, it was Job’s regular custom to offer sacrifices and presumably prayers on behalf of his family. “Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts’” (Job 1:5). Perhaps the apostle Paul drew a similar association between sacrifice and prayer. Immediately following his doxological prayer (11:33-36) he urges brothers and sisters, in Christ in view of God’s mercy, to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). The psalmist links the material tangibility of sacrifices with his concrete and specific prayer requests. Prayer was just as real as the wood and the sacrifices laid on the altar. And just as they went up in fire and smoke he expected answers to his prayers. He has placed himself in the presence of God and he will wait expectantly. But not everyone has access to the one and only Holy God – Yahweh.

The Arrogant

*For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.
The arrogant cannot stand in your presence.*

*You hate all who do wrong;
you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 31-33.

⁶⁵ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:247. (See Lev 6:5; Num 28:4).

you, Lord, detest. Psalm 5:4-7

We begin to see more clearly the danger that lies behind David's cry for help. He feels the pressing need for God's deliverance from the evil people who threaten to destroy him. David makes his appeal on the basis of God's holiness and righteousness. Every facet of evil is described in relationship to God's judgment. God rejects the arrogant, hates the wrong-doer, destroys the liar, condemns the violent, and detests the deceitful. God and David share a common enemy – an identifiable, definable, and definite enemy. Since Yahweh rules a moral universe it is imperative that David discern the difference between good and evil.⁶⁶ The psalmist's relationship with God is such that God's enemies are his enemies. Imprecation makes spiritualizing evil impossible. Evil is personal, but revenge is not. Judgment is in the hands of God.

Today's ethos challenges the notion of right and wrong. Truth and falsehood are relative to the individual and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. "What we suffer from today," G. K. Chesterton wrote, "is humility in the wrong place."

A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason.⁶⁷

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with an admonition to enter the narrow gate, "for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Mt 7:13). This narrow gate does not imply that the way of life designed by God is narrow-minded. The followers of Jesus have chosen to follow the path of revelation instead of the highway of relativism. On the road that leads to destruction there is room for every kind of ideology, system, loyalty, and belief, but there is only room for truth on the way that leads to life.

The Gospel

*But I, by your great love, can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple.
Lead me, Lord in your righteousness because of my enemies –
make your way straight for me.* Psalm 5:7-8

David's boldness in naming evil and identifying the enemy is not based on his own righteousness. He makes no attempt here to prove his moral superiority. He depends completely on the steadfast love (*hesed*) of the Lord. This is the gift of God's unmerited favor and saving grace freely given beyond anything deserved. "But as for me" forms a striking contrast. "He has

⁶⁶ Psalm 5 is often listed as an imprecatory psalm (5,10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, 140). The word "imprecatory" means "to pray evil against" or "to invoke a curse upon." It is important to understand how evil is described and dealt with in each psalm. The value of venting our hatred of evil to God in prayer rather than taking matters into our own hands is important for the Christian to grasp. It is wise to consider the imprecatory Psalms in relationship to imprecations in the New Testament: Mark 11:13-14, 23-24; Acts 23:1-6; Gal 1:8-9; 5:12; 1 Cor 16:22; 1 Tim 1:19-20; 2 Tim 4:4; James 5:1-6; Rev 6:9-10; Matthew 23:32-35.

⁶⁷ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. 31.

by faith entered into covenant with the Lord, and because of the Lord's loyal love for his people, he has access into the sanctuary ('your house' // 'your temple,' where evil-doers cannot stand)."⁶⁸

The apostle Paul echoes Psalm 5 when he describes the human condition: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world . . . gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts." Then, he quickly turns to the powerful, positive message of the gospel. His emphasis on God's love is emphatic: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (Eph 2:4-5). The intervention of God's grace is "set in contrast to the bankruptcy and doom of a humanity left to itself, left to what it is 'by nature.'"⁶⁹ This bold transition from being dead in our transgressions to being alive in Christ is not based on anything we have done. Neither Psalm 5 nor Ephesians 2 offers any method or formula for obtaining God's great love. There is no step-by-step process for acquiring this relationship. Repentance for sin and belief in God's redemptive power is assumed, but it is only God's action that is declared. All attention is given "to the special nature of God's saving action as one of gratuitous generosity to an undeserving sinful humanity."⁷⁰ Our role is passive. We are receptive to the gift of God's grace and mercy.

God's gracious acceptance of David allows him to come into God's presence. Although the temple was not built until the time of Solomon, David describes his experience of the real presence of Yahweh analogically by referring to concrete physical structures. He refers to the Lord's "house" and the "holy temple" drawing on a tradition that used "house" and "temple" to describe the tabernacle at Shiloh (Josh 6:24; 1 Sam 1:9; 3:3; 2 Sam 12:20). Once again, echoes of Psalm 5 can be heard in the apostle's description of the household of faith. Although not a single word about church facilities can be found in the New Testament, the apostles enjoyed elaborating on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God's people. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that "the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (Acts 7:48). All the metaphors in Ephesians 2 describe the real presence of Christ in the household of faith. The foundation is made up of people—the apostles and the prophets. The chief cornerstone is Christ Jesus. The "holy temple in the Lord" is the dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. The "house" built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel.

David prays, "Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make your way straight before me" (Ps 5:8). This line, too, may have been in the apostle Paul's mind as he elaborated on the meaning of salvation to the church at Ephesus. Having insisted that all self-justifying religious effort is in vain, Paul stressed that "we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10).

⁶⁸ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:250

⁶⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 104.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

Salvation by grace through faith destroys boasting and produces the fruit of salvation. The gift of salvation leads to the fruit of the Spirit.

Guilty!

*Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.
Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you.*
Psalm 5:9-10

Absalom's deceit, Ahithophel betrayal, and Shimei's curses illustrate the nature and perversity of the evil described in Psalm 5. The emphasis focuses on speech – lying, deceptive, abusive, and rebellious speech. David's prayer for judgment is not vindictive but just, because the rebellion is not against him alone but against God. "He does not ask for thunderbolts from heaven; he asks only that their evil might reverberate upon themselves, that they might be tripped up in their own devious schemes, and thus become their own victims."⁷¹ As it happened, God gave them up to their own evil schemes. Absalom was murdered and Ahithophel committed suicide. Thankfully, Shimei repented and turned to David for forgiveness (2 Sam 19:20) and all along David hoped for forgiveness and reconciliation with his son Absalom (2 Sam 18:33).

Psalm 5 may be echoed in the apostle Paul's description of being dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1), but he quotes Psalm 5:9 explicitly when he describes the wicked in Romans 3:13, "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." Paul used this text along with Psalm 14:1-3; 140:3; 10:7; Isa 59:7; and Psalm 36:1 to make the case that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Thus, we find ourselves included in this description of depravity. Like Absalom and Ahithophel we are on the wrong side. We participate in their lying, deceptive, and treacherous rebellion against God. Our throats are like open graves and the stench is repulsive. Our tongues practice deceit. The apostle Paul applied Psalm 5 to humanity as a whole and to each of us personally. The enemies of the psalmist symbolize all persons without God.⁷² But like David we are welcomed by the steadfast love of the Lord. It is true, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and it also true, as Paul emphasized, "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24). "Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies." Bonhoeffer continued, "I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him. Thus the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ."⁷³

⁷¹ Craigie, *The Psalms*, 88.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 58-59.

Shielded By God

*But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.* Psalm 5:11-12

Psalms 3-5 provide a three-day sequence of morning, evening, and morning psalms. David's descent into the Kidron Valley and his climb up the Mount Olives weeping as he went with his head covered and walking barefoot forms a picture of the experience of Jesus, the Son of David, on the night he was betrayed and tried (2 Sam 15:30). What Absalom and his fellow conspirators did to David corresponds to what the religious and political leaders did to Jesus. David's passion narrative points forward to Christ's passion and helps shape our expectations of the life of discipleship. David's example inspires our courage in the face of opposition and instructs us in how to defend God's truth. Praying the psalms helps transform the trials of life into the trials of faith for the sake of the gospel.

This sequence of psalms (Pss 3-5) begins with David acknowledging that the Lord is his *shield* (Ps 3:3) and ends on a similar strong note of confidence and praise: "Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a *shield*" (Ps 5:12).⁷⁴ The Lord's *blessing* (Ps 3:8; 5:12) also serves as an *inclusio* knitting the three psalms together. These psalms mentor believers in resilience and faithfulness. Lament quickly shifts to confidence. David's conclusion comforts the followers of Christ. We are invited to take refuge in Christ to be glad, to sing for joy and to rejoice, because we are surrounded by the Lord's redemptive favor and everlasting protection.

In his hymn *Morning*, Charles Wesley calls out, "*Sun of Righteousness, arise! Triumph over the shades of night.*" He admits in the second stanza, "*Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee.*" Resolution comes in the third stanza in answer to his plea, "*Visit then this soul of mine! / Pierce the gloom of sin and grief! / Fill me, radiancy divine; / scatter all my unbelief; / more and more thyself display, / shining to the perfect day.*"⁷⁵

⁷⁴ The psalmist references two different kinds of shields. The *māgēn* is a small light weight shield that is carried by the infantry for protection in hand to hand combat (Ps 3:3). The *sinna* is a larger shield (Ps 5:12) carried by an armor barrier for greater protection (See Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 201).

⁷⁵ Charles Wesley (1707-1788), "Morning", in *The Hymnal* 1982. New York: The Episcopal Church. 1985.

The trajectory of pain and confrontation that began in Psalm 3 continues in Psalm 6. The three day sequence of morning, evening, and morning prayers in Psalms 3-5 is climaxed in Psalm 6 by an intensely personal plea for deliverance from the threat of imminent death and God's wrath. Psalm 7 brings this long dark night of the soul to a cathartic and redemptive end. The psalmist makes his final appeal to God Most High, the Lord of righteousness, for vindication and deliverance on grounds of his innocence and integrity. This five psalm unit ends on a strong note of thanksgiving and praise: "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High" (Ps 7:17). But first we were meant to experience Psalm 6.

The historical landscape for David's cartography of the soul is the narrative in 2 Samuel. The psalms reveal a soulful self in sync with a storied account of sin and judgment, betrayal and treachery, violence and hatred. This paralleling of history and spirituality is explicit enough for us to identify the occasion in David's life but implicit enough for us to commend these powerful psalms to our own circumstances and experiences. The psalms are rooted not only in a particular place and time but in the shared personal experience of our fallen human condition and God's redemptive provision.

These five psalms born out of David's passion foreshadow Jesus' Gethsemane prayers. We imagine his troubled soul (John 12:27) taking comfort in David's dependence on God's deliverance. These are the psalms Jesus may have prayed in the morning as he faced another day of building tension and these are the psalms he prayed at night before drifting off to sleep. David gave him the words that matched his heart: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). When Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley and climbed the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, he would have remembered David as he fled Jerusalem, with his head covered, walking barefoot, weeping as he went (2 Sam 15:30). We pray these psalms today when the world, the flesh, and the devil seek to overwhelm us; when the world denies "that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant(s) for himself" (Ps 4:3); and when arrogant, bloodthirsty, deceitful, and deceptive enemies threaten to destroy the righteous.

Our tendency may be to shy away from David's intensity. A popular version of Christianity claims Jesus came to bolster self-esteem, improve marriages, and give us our best life now. We are tempted to think of religion in the same way we think of sports and entertainment, as a necessary mood changer. We go to church the same way we go to the movies, to lift our spirits, escape our troubles, and embrace a positive attitude. The impulse is strong to live in denial of sin and death. We are addicted to habits that divert our attention away from the harsh realities of living in a fallen and broken world. David's psalms make such an escape impossible. At every turn the psalmist brings us face to face with our need for God in our very troubled world.

Deep Anguish

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger

*or discipline me in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?*

Psalm 6:1-3

Matthew Henry wrote, “This psalm is like the book of Job.”⁷⁶ It is true, the broad outlines of Job’s experience are captured in this ten verse psalm. Psalm 6 is a prayer for today, so we remember how to pray when life turns ugly. For it is only a matter of time before we need to pray this prayer. If David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14) and God’s anointed king (2 Sam 7:5-16), suffered in this way, so can we! David is walking down a road that we all will travel.

Until now David’s complaint has been mainly against his many foes (Ps 3:1). Absalom’s treachery has played a significant role in David’s distress, but many others have also turned on the king, ranging from those who want him dead to those who question his ability to lead. These enemies reappear explicitly toward the end of this psalm, but most of Psalm 6 dwells on the extreme chastening David is experiencing from God. What is noteworthy is that David attributes his severe trial to the corrective and disciplinary actions of God. He definitely feels like he is the subject of God’s angry rebuke and wrathful discipline.

This adds a crucial dimension to this sequence of psalms that David acknowledged and wrestled with. He was the victim of Absalom’s betrayal, Ahithophel’s deception, Shimei’s slander, and all those who joined forces against the Lord’s anointed king. But David knew that the root problem was his own sin. Nathan delivered God’s judgment against him in words that undoubtedly reverberated in David’s mind: “Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take away your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this in broad daylight before all Israel” (2 Sam 12:12). His enemies were thoroughly evil and deserved God’s judgment, but the Lord used their evil to rebuke and discipline David. The consequences of his actions were being played out in his family and kingdom, even though David had experienced repentance and forgiveness (Psalm 51).

When Jesus prayed this psalm it was not the burden of his sin, but ours that he wrestled with. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds are we healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:4-6).

Psalm 6 challenges our denial of sin. The apostle John confronted this problem head on when he wrote, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8).

⁷⁶ Matthew Henry, *Psalms*, 38.

The author of Hebrews took up this matter as well. He wrote, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” He goes on to make the case for the Lord’s corrective and disciplinary actions. Our heavenly Father disciplines us in order to train us in holiness. God uses the hardships and disappointments of life “for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb 12:10).

David makes no explicit confession of sin in this psalm, but his passionate plea for mercy acknowledges God’s just rebuke and redemptive discipline. He knows he deserves the Lord’s chastening, but now he desires mercy if he is going to survive. He can’t hold on much longer. His bones are in agony and his soul is in deep anguish. There is nothing left to hurt. He is in pain within and without, from his head to his heart, from the soles of his feet to the depths of his soul. The acute bone-pain and heartache of his desperate situation is unrelenting. All he can do is cry out, “How long, Lord, how long?”

David’s heart-wrenching cry for mercy may correspond to his lonely agony over Absalom’s brutal murder. His troops are eager to celebrate the death of a traitor, but David is in anguish. He grieves the loss of his son. David is like our heavenly Father, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). “The king was shaken,” the narrator writes. “He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, David said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33).

Loyal Love

*Turn, Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?
I am worn out from groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.*

Psalm 6:4-7

David’s only grounds for appeal is Yahweh’s unfailing loyal love. Mercy over merit makes deliverance possible. God’s grace is the only sufficient means for salvation. David knows that every self-justifying attempt is bound to fail. “For it is by grace are you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8), was just as true then as it is today. The Gospel of love pervades both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Nevertheless, David offers an incentive that is meant to underscore his last ditch effort to get God’s attention more than it is meant to impress God with a benefit. He says in effect, “I’m no good to you dead, am I? I can’t sing in your choir if I’m buried in some tomb!” (Ps 6:5).

David shows us how to confront the denial of death by stating its stark possibility with clarity. Death looms large in the Samuel narrative. Uriah is murdered. David's newborn son dies. Amnon is killed by his brother Absalom and Joab murders Absalom. Ahithophel commits suicide. Death pervades the story. Now, David faces the real possibility of his life ending abruptly in tragedy not testimony. It is not surprising that David pleads for more time to proclaim God's name. Instead of thinking about his own name and legacy, he is intent on praising God. It did not occur to him to do what his son Absalom did. Absalom erected a tower in the King's Valley as a monument to himself and called it Absalom's Monument. Since he had no son to carry on the memory of his name, he wanted people to remember him with his monument (2 Samuel 18:18). A line from William Faulkner may help to clarify, "A monument only says, 'At least I got this far,' while a footprint says, 'This is where I was when I moved again.'"⁷⁷ David was intent on leaving a testimony of faithfulness; Absalom was afraid he would be forgotten.

David gives vivid description to his weeping: "All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow. . ." (Ps 6:6-7). For seven days and nights David pleaded with God to spare his newborn son. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground crying out to God (2 Sam 12:15-17). When Amnon was murdered by Absalom, King David "wept bitterly" and "mourned many days for his son" (2 Sam 13:36-37). And when David fled Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, and continued up the Mount of Olives, he was "weeping as he went" (2 Sam 15:30).

Once again this sequence of psalms and David's experience reminds us of the Lord Jesus when he wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and when he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and when in Gethsemane he was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" and wept so hard "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Matt 26:38; Luke 22:44). This psalm is a reminder to us that it is impossible to follow Christ without tears. We weep because we live in a fallen and broken world. We weep because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We weep because of our human frailty. We weep because we take up a cross and follow Jesus. We weep because our Lord and Savior wept. We weep because the Lord hears our weeping.

Defiance

*Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.
The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
All my enemies will be overwhelmed
with shame and anguish;
they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.*

Psalm 6:8-10

The psalmist suddenly shifts from a visceral feeling of defeat to a vigorous confidence in the defeat of his enemies. One moment he is weeping and the next moment he is boldly warning the

⁷⁷ Holmes, *Annotations to William Faulkner's Hamlet*, 16.

wicked, “Get out of here!” He sends the evil opposition packing. He switches from despair to defiance in a blink of the eye. The sudden change comes not because his situation has changed but because the Lord has heard his cry for mercy. He repeats this game-changing assertion three times for emphasis. Knowing that the Lord has heard him changes everything. It is as if he suddenly realized in the middle of his lament that the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away (Ps 1:4). John Calvin insisted that we take notice of David’s confidence and learn from him: “From this, we are taught that there is nothing in the whole world, whatever it may be, and whatever opposition it may make to us, which we may not despise, if we are fully persuaded of our being beloved by God. . . .”⁷⁸ “This sudden access of confidence,” writes Derek Kidner, “is the most telling evidence of an answering touch from God.”⁷⁹

Jesus alluded to this psalm in the Sermon on the Mount when he described the outwardly religious types who seemingly performed well but did not do the will of his Father in heaven. “I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. *Away from me, you evildoers!*’” (Matt 7:23). By echoing Psalm 6 in this way Jesus demonstrated that the eschatological judgment of the gospel is in harmony with the eschatological expectation of the psalmist. The redemptive trajectory is tracking along the same path. Jesus’ use of Psalm 6 confirms and validates the theology of the psalmist and further opens up the practical pastoral use of the psalms for his followers today. Jesus used this psalm twice: first to describe his path to the cross (John 12:27), and second to affirm the eschatological judgment for those who refuse to come to him (Matt 7:23).

David ends the psalm on such a strong note of confidence that we may forget how the psalm began, “Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.” But it is important that we keep in mind that the arc of redemptive resilience begins with our own sense of culpability and sinfulness even when the opposition against us may be blatantly evil. David’s defense of Shimei is significant: “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today” (2 Sam 16:11-12). Like the psalmist, we pray, “See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:24).

⁷⁸ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 74.

⁷⁹ Kidner, *The Psalms*, 62.

Psalms 3-7 correspond to Absalom's conspiracy and the rebellious reaction of Saul's ancestors from the tribe of Benjamin (2 Samuel 13-20). The arrangement of these psalms at the beginning of the psalter focuses on the humiliation and vulnerability of Israel's Servant King. David cannot save himself. He is in desperate need of Yahweh's deliverance. He calls out to Yahweh, "Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God!" (Ps 3:7), knowing "that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself" (Ps 4:3). David confidently depends on the covenant love of Yahweh, "But I, by your great love, can come into your house" (Ps 5:7). Each psalm offers an urgent, soul-searching plea for deliverance: "My soul is in deep anguish" (Ps 6:3), and a strong, resilient song of praise: "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High" (Ps 7:17).

The raw God-dependent spirituality of these psalms with their underlying theme of sanctified willed passivity foreshadow Jesus' Gethsemane prayers. They resonate with Job's experience and may have inspired Jeremiah's prayers. King David is a prototype of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and a mentor to the apostle Paul's passion narrative (Acts 21-28). David bears the burden of faithful obedience "with a spirit of patient submission to the will and providence of God."⁸⁰ The psalmist maps the soul's trajectory through enemy territory. David finds himself in the cross-hairs of his enemies' slander and malice, a victim of their deception and duplicity. His only safe zone is in the refuge Yahweh provides. "For you alone, Lord make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). Only those "who take refuge in you. . . sing for joy" (Ps 5:11).

Vulnerability

*Lord my God, I take refuge in you;
save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
or they will tear me apart like a lion and rip me to pieces
with no one to rescue me.*

*Lord my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands –
if I have repaid my ally with evil
or without cause have robbed my foe –
then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;
let him trample my life to the ground
and make me sleep in the dust.*

Psalm 7:1-5

Psalm 7 brings this sequence of deliverance psalms to a climax in several ways. The psalmist's vulnerability has reached its limit. The evils of the tongue (slander, betrayal, accusations, lies) have escalated to life-threatening violence. His ferocious enemies are like lions ready to pounce and tear him apart and rip him to pieces. All five psalms reference the dark night of soul. The double sequence of morning and evening prayers makes the reader conscious of a daily cycle and the psalmist's desire for rest in the midst of the trial. But now the psalmist weeps all night and

⁸⁰ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 90.

floods his bed with his tears (Ps 6:6), and in Psalm 7 he fears being trampled to death and made to “sleep in the dust” (Ps 7:5). As the danger escalates, David’s prayers intensify. He calls out to the Lord (Ps 3:4), saying, “Have mercy on me and hear my prayer” (Ps 4:1). His pleas become more desperate, “Listen to my words, Lord, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray” (Ps 5:1). He is compelled to examine his soul and plead for mercy, “Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (Ps 6:1).

Finally, he makes his ultimate appeal based on his innocence and righteousness – an innocence based on Yahweh’s righteousness. David is confident that his prayers have been answered: “Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies make my way straight before me” (Ps 5:8). Like Job before him he argues his case before God the righteous judge (Job 31). He does not defend himself before those who have turned his glory into shame (Ps 3:2) or leveled slanderous accusations against him (Ps 5:9). He does not respond to those who have conducted a smear campaign against him. He comes before God’s bar of justice with boldness, not by means of his own merit, but by the mercy of God (Ps 6:9). Three if-clauses make his case: If he has committed evil; if he has betrayed his friends; if he has ripped off his enemies; then he deserves to be pursued by his enemy, overtaken and trampled. But the psalmist is confident that his integrity is true and flows from his covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Decree Justice

*Arise, Lord, in your anger;
rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Awake, my God; decree justice.
Let the assembled peoples gather around you,
while you sit enthroned over them on high.
Let the Lord judge the peoples.*

Psalm 7:6-8a

David, the defendant, rests his case. He boldly appeals to the Lord for justice. Psalms 3:7 and 7:6 form a striking parallel, an *inclusio* that binds the sequence of psalms together:

Arise, Lord!	Arise, Lord, in your anger;
Deliver me, my God!	rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked (3:7).	Awake, my God, decree justice (7:6).

Altogether these psalms shed considerable light on David’s response to Absalom’s rebellion, Shimei’s slander, Ahithophel’s defection, and Joab’s insubordination. These psalms underscore David’s dependence upon God to bring about justice. He is intent on letting God resolve the crisis and bring about justice. King David is a model of willed passivity in passionate determination and holy dependence upon the Lord. David envisions the exercise of God’s judgment in the full view of the “assembled peoples.” Everything is transparent – subject to public witness. Everything is under the absolute authority of the one who sits enthroned over them on high. All the Lord has to do is “decree justice.”

Vindication

*Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness,
according to my integrity, O Most High.
Bring to an end the violence of the wicked
and make the righteous secure – you, the righteous God
who probes minds and hearts.*

*My shield is God Most High,
who saves the upright in heart.
God is a righteous judge,
a God who displays his wrath every day.*

*If he does not relent,
he will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
He has prepared his deadly weapons;
he makes ready his flaming arrows.*

*Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives
birth to disillusionment.
Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made.
The trouble they cause recoils on them;
their violence comes down on their own heads.*

*I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness;
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.*

Psalm 7:8b-17

The plea for vindication is in full public view of the assembled peoples who are gathered around the throne of the Lord who judges all the nations. The scene envisions the future judgment of God when the Son of Man comes in his glory and “all the nations are gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats” (Matt 25:31-32; see Rev 20:11-15). For David the vindication is personal: “Vindicate me.” He looks to “my righteous God” (Ps 4:1), “my King and my God” (Ps 5:2), and the “Lord my God” (Ps 7:1, 3) for lasting justice. He seeks vindication “according to my righteousness, according to my integrity” (Ps 7:8). Like Job before him, David claims to abide in the wisdom of God’s law. His reference to “my righteousness” and “my integrity” is not an attempt to merit God’s favor or justify his ways to God. He knows he is a sinner saved by God’s grace. But he is also honest with the benefits of obeying the will of God, even when it comes to dealing with his sin. His integrity conveys a sense of wholeness, completeness, and soundness rather than sinless perfection. In the New Testament, Paul aims for a similar conviction when he strives with all his energy to present believers “fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). David’s confidence is in keeping with Jesus’ challenge to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). David knew that we would never feel secure in our own righteousness. It is only when the righteous God, who probes

minds and hearts, makes the righteous secure that we experience God's deliverance (Ps 7:9). Righteousness is received by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24).

True vindication, the kind sought by David, requires an end of evil. Righteousness cannot exist alongside violence. Salvation is impossible apart from the wrath of God. We cannot defeat evil, but God can. "My shield is God Most High" is the third reference to "shield" in this sequence of psalms (Ps 3:3; 5:12; 7:10). Martin Luther insisted that those who pray, "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they will be done," must also pray: "Curses, maledictions and disgrace upon every other name and every other kingdom. May they be ruined and torn apart and may all their schemes and wisdom and plans run aground."⁸¹ David's militancy against evil called for prayer and willed passivity. He was dependent upon God to act on behalf of himself and the people. Jesus-style militancy is consistent with this willed passivity and is marked by the cross. The apostolic commitment to combat readiness is intentional, but instead of being armed with the "weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:4), the apostle Peter called for a Christ-like mind-set that was willing to suffer for the good (1 Pet 2:21; 3:17-18). Karl Barth describes the believer's militancy:

"The militant revolt demanded of Christians — and this distinguishes it from all kinds of other revolts — is not directed *against* people: not even against the host of unbelievers, false believers, and the superstitious. . . nor even. . . against the wicked. . . In terms of their commission — even though they will sometimes clash with all kinds of people in discharging it — they rebel and fight *for* all men, even, and in the last resort precisely, for those with whom they may clash."⁸²

God the righteous judge is a militant warrior who saves the upright in heart. Metaphorically, God sharpens his sword, strings his bow, readies his deadly weapons, and lights his flaming arrows. The psalmist's description of evil reflects the historical back story to these psalms. The intentional, pre-meditated evil of Absalom and Ahithophel was destined from the beginning to end in tragedy. The progression of evil from concept to finished product will always end in disaster. James captured the psalmist's thought well when he wrote, "after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:15). Romans 1 conveys a similar message. Those who suppress the truth of God in wickedness are given over to their sinful desires. They receive in themselves the due penalty for their sin. They conceive evil and give birth to depravity. They fall into the trap they dug. "Their violence comes down on their own heads" (Ps 7:16). "Mischievous backfires; violence boomerangs" (Ps 7:16 Message).

David's passion narrative ends on a strong note of praise. The psalmist declares, "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness." This righteousness includes the Lord's faithfulness to us in the midst of a fallen and broken world. God "makes good to his servants in defending and preserving their lives."⁸³ But the Lord's righteousness goes beyond our protection and deliverance from evil people and includes our final vindication and everlasting deliverance. We need a shield and a refuge to protect us from the ultimate accuser. David's passion narrative

⁸¹ Quoted in Webster and Beach, *The Essential Bible Companion to the Psalms*, 43.

⁸² Quoted in Harink, *1 Peter*, 127, from Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/4: 210 (emphasis original).

⁸³ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 92.

is a type, pointing to the passion narrative of the Righteous One who took on our sin “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). John Newton, the converted slave trader wrote, “Be Thou my Shield and hiding Place, that, sheltered by Thy side, I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him Thou has died!”⁸⁴

The Lord Most High is a title for God rarely used outside the Psalms. “Canaanite religion gave a similar title to Baal, but Abram (Gen 14:18ff), as David does here, claimed it explicitly and only for the Lord.”⁸⁵ The title may signify to all people, especially to those who do not know Yahweh, “my righteous God,” that the Lord is far superior to all would-be competitors. There is no god or ideology or power or religion that can come close to God Most High, and the Lord’s marque distinction is righteousness. The apostle Peter declared this same truth when he said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

⁸⁴ John Newton, “Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat,” *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), number 12, available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/a/p/p/approach.htm>.

⁸⁵ Kidner, *The Psalms*, 65.

David is not content “with simply giving thanks” for God’s good creation. Psalm 8 proves he is “enraptured by the contemplation of it.”⁸⁶ “This psalm is an unsurpassed example of what a hymn should be,” writes Derek Kidner, “celebrating as it does the glory and grace of God, rehearsing who He is and what He has done, and relating us and our world to Him; all with a masterly economy of words, and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe.”⁸⁷

At the heart of this hymn of praise is a question, “What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” The question, “What is man?” is asked in different ways. David’s slant in Psalm 144 is pessimistic: “O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow” (Psalm 144:3). When Job asks the question he is in agony over a significance he wishes he didn’t have: “What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18).

David asks and answers this critical question in an unusual way. Instead of lecturing, he worships. The psalm begins and ends with the refrain, “I AM [Yahweh / The Covenant Lord], our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” “This, short, exquisite lyric is simplicity itself – an expression of wonder at man and man’s place in Nature and therefore at God who appointed it. God is wonderful both as champion or ‘judge’ and as Creator.”⁸⁸ The psalm is pure worship from start to finish.⁸⁹ The psalmist accepts human reason as a divinely fashioned instrument for recognizing truth rather than a creative source of truth.⁹⁰ He is convinced that our self-understanding is dependent on and driven by our understanding of God. “The Psalms were not prayed by people trying to understand themselves,” writes Eugene Peterson. “They are not the record of people searching for the meaning of life. They were prayed by people who understood that God had everything to do with them.”⁹¹

For a number of years Armand Nicholi, professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, taught a popular course that compared Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis on the fundamental questions of God, man, life, and death. He always started the course with Socrates’ famous line: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” He went on to say,

“Within the university, students and professors scrutinize every possible aspect of our universe—from the billions of galaxies to subatomic particles, electrons, quarks—but they assiduously avoid examining their own lives. In the wider

⁸⁶ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 93.

⁸⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 65-66.

⁸⁸ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 132.

⁸⁹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 881. Psalm 8 is an example of descriptive praise that, “in contrast to declarative praise, celebrates God’s person and his works in general, not a specific act of deliverance in answer to a petition.” Waltke identifies the following psalms as “descriptive praise:” Psalms 8, 33, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 145, 146, 147, 148, 150.

⁹⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1: 225.

⁹¹ Peterson, *Answering God*, 14.

world, we keep hectically busy and fill every free moment of our day with some form of diversion—work, computers, television, movies, radio, magazines, newspapers, sports, alcohol, drugs, parties. Perhaps we distract ourselves because looking at our lives confronts us with our lack of meaning, our unhappiness, and our loneliness—and with the difficulty, the fragility, and the unbelievable brevity of life.”⁹²

David answers the critical question, “What is man?” from a God-centered perspective. Who we are depends on who God is and what God has done. All of God’s character and perfections are summed up in his name. “How majestic is your name in all the earth!” We see ourselves best when we live contentedly in the paradox of the greatness of God and the littleness of man (8:1-4) and when we understand humbly the sovereignty of God and the significance man (8:5-8).

The most telling line in Psalm 8 may be verse 2: “From the lips of children you have ordained praise to silence the foe and the avenger.” Before babies “are able to pronounce a single word” they “speak loudly and distinctly in commendation of God’s liberality towards the human race.”⁹³ God has chosen to defend his majesty and glory through young children, infants and toddlers, pre-schoolers and first graders. This truth adds unexpected dimensions to the Genesis Creation account. Eugene Peterson reminds us, “Children are our first defense against the deadening and flattening effect of words that disconnect God and life.”⁹⁴ God uses the weak and insignificant by human standards to confound his mighty enemies. The strategic value of this testimony points forward to the Incarnation when God himself was made in human weakness and assumed the very nature of a servant (Phil 2:7-8).

Jesus’ invitation echoes Psalm 8: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15). We remember the disciples asking Jesus, “Who, then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’” (Matt 18:1-5).

Jesus quoted a line from Psalm 8 on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:16). After he drove out the money changers and sacrifice peddlers from the temple courts, the children shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The chief priests and teachers of the law became indignant. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. Jesus replied, “Yes, have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have ordained praise’?” (Ps 8:2 LXX). Of course the religious leaders were familiar with this line from Psalm 8, but it never occurred to them that Jesus was the worthy object of the children’s hosannas. The direct quote not only indicates Jesus’ familiarity with the Psalms, but it demonstrates Jesus’ self-understanding as the Son of David.

⁹² Nicholi, *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God*, 6.

⁹³ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 96.

⁹⁴ Peterson, *The Pastor*, 241.

Jesus is the “objective correlative” (Eliot) who fulfills the meaning of Psalm 8 to the glory of God.⁹⁵

The Greatness of God and the Littleness of Man

*Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.
Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? Psalm 8:1-4*

The life of humankind revolves around the living God *who* is known by name. “The psalm celebrates the name of *I AM*; “*I AM*, how majestic is your name.”⁹⁶ David begins with the majesty of God, “*how majestic and great is your name.*” In doing so he chooses the essential starting point. To quote Mark Steyn’s one-liner, “The ‘who’ is the best indicator of what-where-when-why.”⁹⁷ David begins with the “who’ in order to explain the ‘what-where-when-why.’” Psalm 8 is a lyrical response to Genesis 1.

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).

We are not the product of a solitary God. We are the personal creation of the living God who is essentially social. At the core of our human identity is a capacity to relate to God and to one another like no other creature in creation, and this capacity is based on the being of God who is already a communion of persons. There is no impersonal *what* only *a three-in-one who*. In other words, there is no *what* before or independent of the *who*. This is how we take after God’s own image. We are relational beings and we were meant to be in relationship with the Lord God and with one another. John Stott expressed it well: “Our neighbor is neither a bodyless soul that we

⁹⁵ Jesus’ direct quotes from the Psalms came toward the end of his earthly ministry during Passion week. He quoted from Psalm 118:22,23, to explain Israel’s rejection of her Messiah in the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21:42). Jesus concluded his Temple Sermon (Matthew 23:1-39) with a line from Psalm 118:26 (Matthew 23:39). He challenged the Pharisees’ conception of the Messiah by quoting from Psalm 110:1 (Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36). He claimed to be the Messiah before the Sanhedrin and the high priest by quoting from Psalm 110:1 (Matthew 26:64). On the cross, Jesus quoted from Psalm 22, when he cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46).

⁹⁶ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 256.

⁹⁷ Steyn, *America Alone*, 4.

should love only his soul, nor a soulless body that we should care for its welfare alone, nor even a body-soul isolated from society. God created man, who is my neighbor, a body-soul-in-community.”⁹⁸

The psalmist is impressed with the greatness of God and the littleness of man. Whether it is a shepherd boy “sleeping out under the vast vaulted canopy of an oriental sky” or an astronomer peering through the Keck twin telescopes in Hawaii, or a molecular biologist examining a specimen under the Scanning Transmission Electron Holography Microscope, humility is in order. Against the largeness of the universe man naturally feels small. It is good for us to be awed at the greatness of God. Augustine declared the secret of spiritual growth with triple emphasis: “Humility! Humility! Humility!”

“Nothing is more becoming to man than humility,” writes John Stott, “and nothing is more unbecoming than arrogance. As great as the achievements of modern man are in science and technology, there is still an infinite greatness beyond him; and man remains a very frail, a very fragile, a very tiny creature. It's good for us to be humbled before the great God of the universe.”⁹⁹ “What we suffer from today,” G. K. Chesterton observed, “is humility in the wrong place.” Humility has moved from ambition to conviction. “A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert--himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt--the Divine Reason.”¹⁰⁰

It strikes me as absurd for the proponents of nature alone to claim that their materialistic theory of man is not reductionistic. British physicist and biochemist Francis Crick, who was instrumental in discovering the molecular structure of DNA, had this to say about the human person: “The Astonishing Hypothesis is that ‘You,’ your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules”¹⁰¹ Crick insists that this mechanistic view of the human animal “has not diminished our sense of awe but increased it immeasurably. . . . To say that our behavior is based on a vast, interacting assembly of neurons should not diminish our view of ourselves but enlarge it tremendously.”¹⁰²

Richard Dawkins argues that the perceived need for God comes from our Darwinian instinct for survival. Children are dependent upon the advice of their parents for protection and well-being. From one generation to another what we need to know for survival is mixed up with useless superstitious fantasies. Sense and nonsense are passed down from one generation to another. We imagine there is a god because we have an ingrained psychological disposition to trust others and an inability to distinguish what is real from the unreal. Dawkins contends that the “useful programmability” and “gullibility” of a child’s brain accounts for god-talk being passed down

⁹⁸ Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 29-30.

⁹⁹ Stott, “Meditation on Psalm 8,” 5.

¹⁰⁰ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 260.

from one generation to the next.¹⁰³ Dawkins points to the moth to illustrate our human gullibility when it comes to believing in a god. The reason moths fly directly into the candle flame is because they are genetically hard-wired to use moon-light to fly a straight line. Artificial light is a relatively recent phenomenon and the number of moths killed by flying directly into the flame is rare compared to the number of moths guided by moon-light. For Dawkins god-talk makes about as much sense as a moth flying directly into the flames.

C. S. Lewis came to faith in Christ in his early thirties. If there was anyone who was not programmed to believe in God and did not deserve to be labeled gullible, it was Lewis. “The things I assert most vigorously,” wrote Lewis, “are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”¹⁰⁴ He had concluded, “Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores.” Nevertheless he was searching and the more he searched the more vulnerable he felt. He likened his eventual conversion to a chess match in which his “Adversary” broke down his defenses and outmaneuvered him. He concluded that no state of mind or body could satisfy his desires. He longed for something other, something outside of himself. “I did not yet ask,” explains Lewis, “*Who* is the desired? only *What* is it? But this brought me already into the region of awe, for I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective.”¹⁰⁵

Lewis recalls sitting on a bus going up Headington Hill in Oxford when he became very conscious of making a choice. He claims he was moved neither by desire or fear. Nor was he aware of any motive or necessity. He simply chose to be open, “to unbuckle, to loosen the rein.” As he said later, “Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side. You must not do, you must not even try to do, the will of the Father unless you are prepared to ‘know the doctrine.’ “Remember,” Lewis admits, “I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with.’ I had wanted (mad wish) ‘to call my soul my own.’ But now he had gone well beyond intellectual calculations and debate. He was no longer negotiating a treaty with God. Since God is God, nothing less than “total surrender” was called for. “The demand was not even ‘All or nothing’ . . . Now the demand was simply ‘All.’” At the age of thirty-one, Lewis “gave in, and admitted that God was God.”¹⁰⁶

Twelve years after his conversion to Christ C. S. Lewis preached a sermon entitled *The Weight of Glory* at Oxford University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. In this sermon he explored what it means for those in Christ to share in God’s glory. He exposed “the evil enchantment of worldliness” which has conditioned us to think that death ends all and that all that matters is what we find here on earth.

“Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us

¹⁰³ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 170.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

that the good of man is to be found on this earth. And yet it is a remarkable thing that such philosophies of Progress or Creative Evolution themselves bear reluctant witness to the truth that our real goal is elsewhere.”¹⁰⁷

We rub shoulders with people destined for heaven or hell. “All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”¹⁰⁸

An astrophysicist can describe the earth as an insignificant speck of dust, a tiny planet, revolving around a mediocre star on the outskirts of the Milky Way. And the Milky Way is just one galaxy of millions of galaxies, each separated by about a million light years. Earth is to the cosmos what we are to the earth – an inexplicable anomaly. Against the vastness of the universe, David felt small. “I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous, your handmade sky-jewelry, Moon and stars mounted in their settings. Then I look at my micro-self and wonder, Why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way?” (Ps 8:3-4, Message). But David raises the question, “What is man?” without a “tinge of pessimism; only astonishment that ‘you are mindful’ and ‘you care.’”¹⁰⁹

The Sovereignty of God and the Significance of the Person

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*
Psalm 8:5-9

The Bible offers a beautifully balanced estimate of the human person. Compared to creation, we are tiny, but *astoundingly* when compared to God our significance grows. “Many of the earliest versions took the Hebrew word for ‘God’ or ‘gods’ to mean ‘angels’ . . . The translation ‘angels’ may have been prompted by modesty, for it may have seemed rather extravagant to claim that mankind was only a little less than God. Nevertheless, the translation ‘God’ is almost certainly

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 67.

correct, and the words probably contain an allusion to the image of God in mankind within the created order.”¹¹⁰ Elmer Martens writes, “If one were to imagine a scale of 1 to 10 with living creatures such as beasts as 1 and God as 10, then, so high is the writer’s estimation of humanity, he should have put him at 8 or 9. It is God, and not animals, who is man’s closest relative.”¹¹¹

Human significance is not measured in achievements. It is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. We are designated and endowed by God with privileges and responsibilities that we have not earned or merited. David used language reserved for kings and queens to describe human significance. Yahweh has “crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands.” C. S. Lewis commented on the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 that “the pressing of that huge, heavy crown on that small, young head is a symbol of the situation of all men. God has called humanity to be his vice-regent . . . on earth.”¹¹²

Crowned with splendor and honor, God’s image-bearers are mandated to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen.1:26). God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen.1:28).

New Testament references to Psalm 8 link the glory of God in the kingdom of nature to the glory of God in the kingdom of grace.¹¹³ Taking his lead from Hebrews 2, Matthew Henry wrote, “It is certain that the greatest favor that was ever shown to the human race, and the greatest honor that ever was put upon the human nature, were exemplified in the incarnation and exaltation of the Lord Jesus; these far exceed the favors and honors done us by creation and providence, though they also are great and far more than we deserve.”¹¹⁴ The author of Hebrews quotes the LXX version of Psalm 8:4-6:

*What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet. (Hebrews 2:6-8)*

Psalm 8 relates to the whole of mankind, but Hebrews finds its ultimate focus pre-eminently in him who is uniquely the Son of Man and in whom alone the sinfulness of mankind is healed.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 108,

¹¹¹ Martins, *God’s Design*, 202-3.

¹¹² Quoted in Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 269.

¹¹³ Henry, *Psalms*, 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹⁵ The phrase, son of man, is used several different ways in the Bible. First of all it is used for all of humankind (Num.23:19; Job 25:6; Ps.80:17; Ps.144:3). Second, it was the title used by Ezekiel, God’s prophet and a watchman for Israel, whose ministry parallels the prophetic ministry of the Messiah (used 92 times). Third, Daniel uses it in his prophecy to describe the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one who will rule and reign. “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence” (Dan.7:13). Fourth and most importantly, it was the title of choice used by Jesus. It was his favorite self-designation: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Mt.8:20). “...So that you may know that

F. F. Bruce writes, “. . . Ever since Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man, this expression has had for Christians a connotation beyond its etymological force, and it had this connotation for the writer of Hebrews.”¹¹⁶ Peter Craigie concluded, “In one sense, this is quite a new meaning, not evidently implicit in the psalm in its original meaning and context. And yet in another sense, it is a natural development of the thought of the psalm, for the dominion of which the psalmist spoke may have had theological reality, yet it did not always appear to have historical reality in the developing history of the human race. The historical reality, according to Paul and the author of the Epistle of Hebrews, is – and will be – fulfilled in the risen Christ.”¹¹⁷

God chose to invest humanity with the dignity and the personality of his own image and entrusted the human person with unique stewardship capabilities and responsibilities over creation. Jesus shows us how God intended human life to be lived. What the psalmist applied to humanity in general was now applied to Jesus specifically. Paul wrote, “For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ” (1 Cor. 15:27). “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church...” (Eph. 1:22).

the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . ‘Get up, take your mat and go home’” (Mt.9:6). “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Mt.12:8) “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt.12:40). “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Mt.16:13). “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt.20:28).

¹¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 73.

¹¹⁷ Craigie, *Psalms*, 110.

Truth in worship is prayed antiphonally, reverberating throughout soul and society. Taken together Psalms 8 and 9 offer a magnificent world-view sweep of creation and history. Psalm 8 is a creation psalm. David marvels at a great paradox. Humans are minuscule when compared to the splendor of creation but when crowned with glory and honor they are just “a little lower than God.” Psalm 9 is a history psalm. David describes the tension between the righteous judge who reigns forever and the arrogance of the nations who forget God. Israel’s king ushers us into the presence of God, leads us in praise, and then delves into the dilemma of history.

A Worship Pastor

*I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and rejoice in you;
I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.*
Psalm 9:1-2

We may be in the habit of feeling our way into worship, instead of worshipping our way into feelings. Feelings are fickle and flighty, easily shaken and shifty, but the Psalms provide solid footing for worship. They are dependable guides; feelings are not. King David takes the lead in exuberant worship. His determination to praise is emphatic in his personal commitment (“I will”) repeated four times. He is resolute and heartfelt in his praise to the Lord. This joyful call to worship is based on the name of the Lord and corresponds to Psalm 8: “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:1, 9). Once again the psalmist leads by example, urging us to worship our way into feelings rather than feeling our way into worship. We learn how to enter into worship with gratitude and gladness. David may be the king, but he is also a good worship pastor, guiding emotions and celebrating the Lord’s wonderful deeds.

Divine Intervention

*My enemies turn back;
they stumble and perish before you.
For you have upheld my right and my cause,
sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.
You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked;
you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.
Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies,
you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them is perished.*
Psalm 9:3-6

The prophetic perfects used in these verses frame the judgment of God from the divine perspective. In the everlasting present of God’s timekeeping every promise is fulfilled. All God’s work is a finished work. At every point along the salvation history time line it is the Lord who

upholds, judges, rebukes, destroys, blots out and uproots. “The divine decree of judgment stops the wicked in their tracks.”¹¹⁸ It is the Lord who rules in righteousness and remembers the needy: “For you have upheld my right and my cause” (Ps 9:4). Without the sovereign Lord securing our salvation we have no hope, for we cannot save ourselves. Worship reminds us that the one in whom we trust is sovereign over the nations. At his command nations come and go, rise and fall. The Lord alone has the power to administer “endless ruin” and wipe away even the memory of cities and civilizations.

The Name

*The Lord reigns forever;
he has established his throne for judgment.
He rules the world in righteousness
and judges the peoples with equity.
The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
Those who know your name trust in you,
for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.
Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion;
proclaim among the nations what he has done.
For he who avenges blood remembers;
he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.*

Psalm 9:7-12

“Psalm 9 is dominated by the image of the divine throne. . . . The judgment throne of God is the real and final arbiter before which all events in this world, especially the great moral and spiritual conflicts of man’s history, are summoned with a view to final assessment.”¹¹⁹ The Lord’s reign is enduring (9:7), righteous (9:8), just (9:8), and trustworthy (9:10). The Lord’s throne defends the oppressed and protects the weak (9:9). “Sing,” the psalmist commands. “Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion” (9:11). We are reminded that our primary allegiance and citizenship is to Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords. The Church sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in her heart to the Lord (Col 3:16). We sing today in anticipation of heaven’s worship. The apostle John anticipated powerful singing in the presence of God: Hymns of adoration, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come;” Songs of redemption, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...” Anthems of glory, sung with energy and enthusiasm, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 4:8; 5:9, 12).

The apostles echo Psalm 9 in their preaching. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the name to be celebrated and praised – the name that is above every name. Jesus is God incarnate, the exact representation of God’s being, and the one and only name that can be trusted. Peter, “filled with

¹¹⁸ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:307.

¹¹⁹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 18.

the Holy Spirit” announced courageously, “Rulers and elders of the people! . . . Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which you must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul declared that Jesus’ bodily resurrection confirmed the coming judgment: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). The gospel invitation is grandly inclusive of all people. We “proclaim among the nations what he has done.” The Psalms and the apostles agree: only this name, and no other, is trustworthy. Only this name, and no other, deserves to be proclaimed among the nations. Only this name, and no other, counters the ideological and idolatrous pull of the nations. King David was subject to the Lord, the righteous judge (9:4), who reigns forever from his established throne of judgment (9:7). Regardless of our earthly citizenship, we are subject to the sovereign Lord. Only this name, and no other, avenges blood and holds people accountable. “He does not ignore the crises of the afflicted” (Ps 9:12; see 10:13).

David is motivated to worship because “the sovereign judge has not forgotten the cry of the afflicted.”¹²⁰ The Lord remembers the oppressed by holding the perpetrators of injustice accountable. He requires blood. He demands “punishment for bloodthirsty oppressors (Ezek 33:6, 8; Gen 9:5).¹²¹ To argue that the judgment of God is obsolete is to argue against the teaching of the Bible, the nature of God, and even the moral sensibilities of what it means to be human.

Jerry Sittser suffered the devastating loss of his wife, daughter and mother in a terrible car crash caused by a drunk driver. He recounts his experience of God’s grace in the midst of staggering loss. Human justice failed him, but God’s righteousness and just judgment sustained him. Jerry writes:

Eight months after the accident the alleged driver of the other car was tried in federal court on four counts of vehicular manslaughter. I was issued a subpoena to be a witness for the prosecution, which meant that once again I had to face the man whom I had met on the road shortly after the accident. I dreaded this trip to Boise, where the trial was held. I was so nervous I actually got sick. I did not want revenge, but I did want justice so that the man whom I considered responsible for the deaths of four people would pay the just penalty for his wrongdoing. At least then there would be some vindication for the suffering he had caused.

The prosecution was confident of victory. The case seemed so obvious. But the defense attorney argued that no one could actually prove that the accused had been driving the car, since both he and his wife had been thrown from the vehicle. So the burden of proof was put on the prosecution. A witness saw the accused get into the driver’s seat only ten minutes before the accident occurred. Other witnesses heard the accused admit after the accident that had been the driver of the car. But the defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of the witnesses to gain an acquittal for his client.

¹²⁰ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 1:309.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

I was enraged after the trial, which in mind turned out to be as unjust as the accident itself. The driver did not get what he deserved any more than the victims, whether living or dead, had gotten what they deserved. The travesty of the trial became a symbol for the unfairness of the accident itself. I had to work hard to fight off the cynicism. . . .

I think that I was spared excessive preoccupation with revenge because I believe God is just, even though the judicial system is not. Ultimately every human being will have to stand before God, and God will judge every person with wisdom and impartiality. Human systems may fail; God's justice does not. I also believe that God is merciful, in ways that far exceed what we could imagine or muster ourselves. It is the tension between God's justice and mercy that makes God so capable of dealing with wrongdoers. God is able to punish people without destroying them, and to forgive people without indulging them.¹²²

The promise of Psalm 9 is that the Lord remembers and acts according to his just judgment, “and every act of deliverance is a preview of the final deliverance to come, which is cause for greater praise.”¹²³ Oppressed believers will find comfort in the international scope of this promise: “proclaim among the nations what he has done” (9:11). Those who are living under the threat of tyrannical governments and terrorists will identify with the psalmist’s perspective and deepen their resolve to remain faithful in spite of persecution and oppression. But it is not only believers who are on the front lines of religious and political persecution that can appreciate and pray this psalm. All believers struggle with forgiveness and feelings of revenge, yet they know the only way forward is to turn to the Lord who is our ultimate refuge and judge. We can afford to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us when we have determined by God’s grace to put our lives in the hands of the holy, just and merciful God, who alone is enthroned in Zion.

The Nations

*Lord, see how my enemies persecute me!
Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,
that I may declare your praises in the gates of Daughter Zion,
and there rejoice in your salvation.
The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug;
their feet are caught in the net they have hidden.
The Lord is known by his acts of justice;
the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.
The wicked go down to the realm of the dead,
all the nations that forget God.
But God will never forget the needy;
the hope of the afflicted will never perish.
Arise, Lord, do not let mortals triumph;
let the nations be judged by your presence.*

¹²² Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 111, 127. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* is a wonderful book. Sittser translates his experience into grace-filled spiritual direction for all believers.

¹²³ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 1:310.

*Strike them with terror, Lord;
let the nations know they are only mortal.*
Psalm 9:13-20

The people of God are the *needy* and they stand in opposition to “all the nations that forget God.” These nations are described as wicked and self-destructive. They have fallen into the pit they have dug. They are ensnared by the trap they have set. They are indifferent to the plight of the needy and afflicted. The psalmist turns to the Lord for mercy and preservation. “Lift me up from the gates of death,” he cries, so that “I may declare your praises in the gates of Daughter of Zion, and there rejoice in your salvation.” The contrasting “gates” cause the Christian to remember Jesus’ contrasting metaphor of the narrow and wide gates: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt 7:13-14).

Christians know that no nation can administer justice and rule the world in righteousness. No ruler can destroy the enemy, deliver the oppressed, and attend to the cry of the afflicted. No matter how much we might wish it otherwise, human capability and culpability render the worthy quest for social justice always incomplete. Politics cannot achieve the righteousness longed for by the image-bearers of God any more than medicine can achieve everlasting life. There is a clash of kingdoms between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. The nations of the world are set in opposition to the Name that is above every name.

Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Our earthly sojourn is inspired by our citizenship in heaven: “For our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20).

French philosopher and Christian theologian Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) lamented that the West suffered from a political illusion. People assume that there is a political solution for everything and that freedom and justice can be obtained by political action. Ellul argued that people are duped into giving themselves to politics. “We talk endlessly of politics,” he wrote, “in an unconscious effort to hide the void in our actual situation.”¹²⁴ Political action is a subterfuge diverting attention from the real source of freedom and justice. The French sociologist claimed that our first priority must be “to demythologize politics and put it into its proper, limited place.”¹²⁵ He rejected that the notion that political action and engagement were capable of fundamentally changing the individual and society for the better.

Ellul saw politics as important, but only in a limited way. He wrote, “My aim is not to invite people to cease being interested in political affairs or to disregard them.” But we have to give up the notion that we can control society through political action. “The hope must be surrendered

¹²⁴ Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, 5.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

that constitutional rules, good institutions, or socio-economic changes will modify anything in a decisive fashion. The hope must be abandoned that the citizen will be able to control the state. Politics is a problem of life, and of life without respite. . . .Justice cannot be had in politics.”¹²⁶

Many believers are unnecessarily agitated and traumatized, some to the point of “delirium,” over social hostility. But the culture remains as it has been since the time of Christ, systemically and fundamentally antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. An inflated understanding of political power and control has spawned a web of related illusions that confuse and agitate well-meaning believers. We need the perspective of the psalmist, whose political philosophy is born out in his worship. “I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High” (9:2). King David acknowledged that whatever power he wielded against evil and for righteousness belonged to the Lord. He was neither a puppet in a scripted play nor a pawn in a political chess match. He was instead a loyal subject, an obedient worshiper, and a humble servant of the one enthroned in Zion.

Psalm 8 celebrates the inherent sanctity and significance of humanity now lost in the impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice described in Psalm 9. The nations (Ps 9:5, 11, 15, 19, 20) stand opposed to the righteous judge who sits enthroned in Zion. Their proud cities deserve to be uprooted, because they have ignored the cries of the afflicted. Their triumphant destiny is spoiled by their own self-serving plots and strategies. They cannot escape their self-destructive ways. The nations have forgotten God and despised God’s image-bearers. The cosmic scope of Psalm 8 is set in contrast with the psalmist’s on-the-ground reporting of human history. Psalm 2 is revisited: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”

The meaning of the person is corrupted in the aggregate. Mass man will always be a dehumanized version of God’s image-bearer. Political man is stripped of glory and honor by virtue of his ideological commitments whether it be to democratic self-government or dictatorial tyrannical rule. David gathers up the world’s unbelief and injustice into an impersonal collective and calls it “the nations.” Jesus did something similar in his highly priestly prayer in John 17 when he labeled unbelief as the world.

“I pray for them [his disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. . . .I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:9, 14-18).

David’s reference to “the nations” and Jesus’ description of “the world” describe the same collective identity. It is a society that sees the will and rule of God as bondage – a society that says to itself, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles” (Ps 2:3). It is a society that hates Christ’s followers because they live by the word of God. C. S. Lewis may have had Psalm 9 in mind when he contrasted the human person as image-bearer of God with “nations, cultures,

¹²⁶ Ibid., 202.

arts, and civilizations.” These impersonal collective descriptions of mass man hold no comparison to the person made in the image of God. Lewis writes, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”¹²⁷ King David prays, “let the nations know they are only mortal.”

Unbelief and injustice is gathered up into an impersonal collective; David used “the nations” and Jesus used “the world.” Neither David nor Jesus hold out hope for changing the nations or saving the world. The nations are what they are and the world remains the world. But there is hope that people from every nation, tribe, people group and language will “stand before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). There is hope that people in the world, people for whom Christ died, “will cease to be the world and will join those of whom Jesus says for they are yours.”¹²⁸ This is why the apostle Paul wrote, “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Cor 5:16).

¹²⁷ Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 19.

¹²⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 561.

Taken together Psalms 8, 9, and 10 do justice to the whole range of experience from the beauty of the cosmos to the depth of depravity. Theology and theodicy converge. In worship we feel the tension between the ordered universe and the chaos of evil. The person who is made a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor *self-corrupts*. He turns against God and oppresses his fellow man. A fact that we cannot deny for “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The grand plan of the universe appears vulnerable to practical atheists who prey on the weak and helpless. In their arrogance they crush the needy, revile the Lord, and trash creation. They operate their rigged system with the will to power and without moral restraint. In this sequence of psalms, David the king, acknowledges his inability to achieve the justice and righteousness that Yahweh’s creation deserves. In his helplessness he pleads, “Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God” (10:12). Out of a deep sense of his own human mortality, he prays that the wicked will come to terms with their mortality: “Strike them with terror, Lord; let the nations know they are only mortal” (9:20); “. . .so that mere earthly mortals will never strike terror” (10:18).

In most Hebrew texts Psalms 9 and 10 are treated as separate psalms. English Bibles in the Protestant tradition reflect this division. In the Greek and Latin versions of the Bible, Psalm 9 and 10 form a single literary unit. Psalm 9 ends unusually with a “selah” indicative of a pause or a stanza break. Psalm 10 is missing a title/superscription which is rare for psalms in Book I. More significantly the two psalms share an alphabetical acrostic pattern. The first word of Psalm 9:1 begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the first word of 9:3 begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet and so on. Every other verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. However, the acrostic pattern is missing a few letters. Peter Craigie explains, “Psalm 9 covers the first eleven letters of the alphabet, of which only *daleth* is missing; there is some irregularity in the length of the units or ‘strophes,’ though the normal length is four lines (usually two verses).”¹²⁹ Psalm 10 follows the acrostic pattern maintaining the alphabetical sequence with several letters either missing or reversed. Whether or not these apparent irregularities are by design or by default is hard to say. The poetic form serves the message, not the message the form.

While David structures Psalms 9 and 10 as a literary unit “the form is incomplete and uneven” making it “hazardous to reckon that the alphabetical form must once have worked perfectly.” John Goldingay continues, “The incompleteness and unevenness, like the jerkiness of the psalm’s structure, correspond to the nature of the experience the psalm expresses and thus add to its effect. The psalm looks as if it is affirming that life has the order of the alphabet but also acknowledges that this is not always so.”¹³⁰ Whether Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one psalm or two, it is clear that they interface like a diptych, an altar-piece painting with two hinged panels that can close like a book. Psalm 9:1-12 answers Psalm 10:1-11 and the changed tone of 9:13-20

¹²⁹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 118.

¹³⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol 1:168.

answers the changed tone of Psalm 10:12-18.¹³¹ The sovereign rule of God over the nations is celebrated and praised in Psalm 9. Only a single verse hints at what is to come. David cries out, “Lord, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death. . .” (9:13). In Psalm 9 the focus is on God and the wicked are dismissed (9:1-12), but in Psalm 10 the focus is on the wicked and God is absent (10:1-11), until the finale when the rule and reign of God forms the climax (10:11-18).¹³²

The order runs counter to our expectation. The answer, “The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment” (9:7), proceeds the question. “Why, Lord, do you stand off?” (10:1). David’s worship is an act of spiritual discipline. He begins with the truth before describing the problem. Theology sets the context for theodicy. The description of oppression – the focus on the wicked, is situated in a theology that has declared final judgment and ultimate victory against the impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice – the nations. David knows that salvation belongs to the Lord. When he laments the free wielding power of the wicked he does not lose situational awareness. “The Lord is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from the land” (10:16).

The Oppressor

*Why, Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,
who are caught in the schemes of his devises.
He boasts about the cravings of his heart;
he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord.
In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;
in all his thoughts there is no room for God.
His ways are always prosperous;
your laws are rejected by him;
he sneers at all his enemies.
He says to himself, “Nothing will ever shake me.”
He swears, “No will ever do me harm.”
His mouth is full of lies and threats;
trouble and evil are under his tongue.
He lies in wait near the villages;
from ambush he murders the innocent.
His eyes watch in secret for his victims;
like a lion in cover he lies in wait.
He lies in wait to catch the helpless;
he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.
His victims are crushed, they collapse;
they fall under his strength.
He says to himself, “God will never notice;*

¹³¹ Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms 1-72*, 42.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 43.

he covers his face and never sees.”

Psalm 10:1-11

David's case against the wicked is spurred on by the Lord's apparent slowness to intervene. The psalmist is not naive about the psychology of evil, but he is perplexed by Yahweh's hiddenness. He is like Job who cannot fathom God's apparent distance and indifference to his unjust pain and suffering. His graphic description of evil is offered in a prayer. It is not meant for a human jury but for God. The psalmist confronts his frustration with the hiddenness of God *in worship*. The alternative to honest worship is to lash out in anger or turn inward in resentment. But real worship knows both the high praise of Psalm 8 and the deep pain of Psalm 10. Oppression is a complex evil bearing psychological, spiritual, economic, and political consequences and frequently renders the oppressed unaware of their true situation and vulnerable.¹³³ Worship is our defense against the numbing effects of moral pain and the danger of being co-opted by the oppressor.

David paints a picture of raw personal evil. He bores down into the meaning of the monolithic evil entities described in Psalm 9 as impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice known as "the nations" and "the world." He moves beyond their abstraction and portrays the personal tragedy of everyday evil. He offers an existential picture of the oppressor. Psalm 10 does not dwell on the plight of the oppressed (10:18). They are identified in various ways as the weak (10:2), the innocent (10:8), the helpless (10:9), the afflicted (10:14,17), the victim (10:10,14), and the fatherless (10:18). They are easy prey for an ingenious predator who "lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net" (10:9).

The real story is not the oppressed, but the oppressor. Like a prosecutor standing before a judge, the praying psalmist names the evils: exploitation, abuse, deception, murder, entrapment, and domination. He lays out the facts. He gets into the mind of the wicked. He exposes motives, explores strategies, and assesses damages. The wicked are "malicious, blasphemous, and ruthless." They are "insolent and impious, practicing atheists."¹³⁴

Oppression typically arises from an elite who often have the power to subjugate others because of their wealth and privilege. The psalmist portrays a proud, arrogant man who boasts about his cravings. He "blesses the greedy" (10:3) and struts around like a master of the universe. He is so full of himself he has no room for God. He is a big shot bully, a wheeler-dealer, who aspires for the corner office and the trophy wife. He has the power to cut jobs and raise profits with the stroke of a pen. He thinks nothing of driving people out of business or slandering a competitor. He is above the law (10:5) and shielded from accountability. He swears to himself, "Nothing will ever shake me. No one will ever do me harm" (10:6). He may be religious, but for all practical purposes he's an atheist: "in all his thoughts he has no room for God" (10:4). He says to himself, "God will never notice" (10:11).

¹³³ Webster, "Oppression," 799.

¹³⁴ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:322.

Christ's followers are often naive about evil, but the Bible is not. In worship the psalmist profiles the predator. David leads us in prayer, reminding us that we are still up against the rage of Cain, the pride of Pharaoh, the narcissism of Saul, the treachery of Absalom, and the greed of Ahab. Worship informs the soul to stay on guard against the wiles of the devil. We are challenged to pay attention to the deep roots of systemic evil perpetuated by the schemes and lies of the wicked. True spirituality raises our awareness of racial, sexual, political, and economic exploitation. We understand that dehumanization is systemic to oppression. Whatever prevents people from becoming more fully human contributes to oppression.¹³⁵

The Psalms cause us to examine ourselves. We are part of systems (families, corporations, businesses, various groups and societies) that both help and hurt people. What is our role in bringing about social justice and righteousness? To what extent are we personally responsible for perpetuating discrimination and injustice? The Psalms remind us of how easy it is to fall into the hard-hearted mentality and selfish lifestyle of the oppressor. After highlighting the important themes of Psalms 9 and 10 – “the rule of God, the representative role of the king, the plea for help in time of trouble, the ways of the wicked and the righteous, and the justice of God on behalf of the weak and the poor,”¹³⁶ John Goldingay writes, “It speaks especially solemnly to powerful nations and especially encouragingly to weak ones. Most readers of this commentary therefore have to see themselves as the people who are being prayed against.”¹³⁷ Nigerian theologian Cyril Okorochoa writes:

“While it is easy for us to sit back with the psalmist and condemn such people, we also need to be aware that greed, pride and a desire for status can easily tempt us to commit similar sins. When we condemn others, we need to check that we are not doing the same things. We also need to check whether our security is rooted in God or in our own pride in our abilities.”¹³⁸

Psalm 10 is a sober warning against acquiring the mind set of the oppressor. Surrounded as we are by partners, associates, family members, classmates, and friends who boast about their cravings and take pride in disadvantaging others, we can acquire the mind set of the oppressor. The exploited are vulnerable to the same strategies and schemes that were used against them.

My friend Ray confesses that there was a time when he was the mirrored image of the hapless man in Psalm 10. He spent twenty years listening to sermons and attending Sunday School classes before he began to take Jesus seriously. He admits that his Christianity had virtually no impact on his life and business career. He ran with the big boys and he could scheme and deceive like the best of them. For Ray the Bible was a book of idealistic platitudes and pious sayings, totally impractical in the workplace. But after a serious car accident in which he almost lost his

¹³⁵ Webster, “Oppression,” 800.

¹³⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol 1:184, quotes Patrick D. Millar, “The Ruler in Zion and the Hope of the Poor,” in *David and Zion* (J. J. M. Roberts Festschrift), ed. Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 187-97, see 188-89.

¹³⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol 1:184.

¹³⁸ Okorochoa, “*The Psalms*,” 619.

life, he did some deep soul-searching. He woke up to the practical reality of what it means to follow Jesus.

Over time he began to pray – really pray for the first time in his life. He began to internalize the Word of God. This led him to change the way he did business. His priorities and values were transformed. His family became more important to him than his career. He altered his old habit of manipulating the truth to make himself and his department look better. For years he had sold customers more technology than they needed, thinking that if they were foolish enough to fall for his sales pitch, too bad for them. Now he could no longer do that. He found himself persuading customers to buy less rather than more, depending on their needs. The status symbols that had defined his self worth no longer mattered to him. Instead of disdainful those who were below him in the corporate pecking order, he began to befriend and value them. He sought to address the injustices that he had either ignored or condoned in the past. Of course, not everyone was impressed with Ray’s transformation. Living for Christ instead of the corporation meant that Ray ran against the grain of the corporate culture. He was determined not to project a holier-than-thou attitude, nor did he want to be dismissed as a self-righteous gadfly. The mix of secular values and superficial piety that he had fostered for so many years were no longer possible. He deliberately became more Christ-like, and thus more humble, vulnerable, relational, loving and truthful. His days of practical atheism were over.

Praying for the Oppressed

*Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.
Do not forget the helpless.
Why does the wicked man revile God?
Why does he say to himself,
“He won’t call me to account”?
But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked man;
call the evildoer to account for his wickedness
that would not otherwise be found out.*

Psalm 10:12-15

Worship reminds us that the end of evil is beyond our power to achieve. We are moved to pray. If the king cries out in prayer because he is relatively helpless to help the helpless then the first priority of the faithful is to pray. We know that the end of evil will not come about through legal reform and advances in education, as important as these are to pursue. Nor will it be achieved by a thriving global economy and international efforts for world peace, as good as these endeavors are. Evil will only come to an end in God’s final judgment. The will to power and the weapons of this world will not achieve the end of evil.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 224.

Augustine saw in the psalmist's profile of the wicked man a picture of the Antichrist. He drew a direct parallel between the psalmist's profile and the apostle's description of the man of lawlessness: "He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4).¹⁴⁰ Augustine went even further and tied the psalmist's opening question, "Why, Lord, do you stand off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1) to the hiddenness of the Lord's advents. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem he snuck in behind enemies lines to undermine the power of evil. And the timing of the second advent remained hidden not only to King David but to Jesus, the Son of David, during his earthly ministry. Augustine gave to Psalm 10 a decidedly eschatological perspective. "Indeed, the very day of the Lord's advent may be rightly numbered among the hidden things of the Son, although the very presence of the Lord itself will be manifest. For of that day it is said, that no man knows it, neither angels, nor powers, nor the Son of Man (Mk 13:32)."¹⁴¹ Jesus will continue to stand with us in solidarity as we await his second coming, when the Lord's hiddenness will be removed and the end of evil will be final.

Meanwhile, David is confident that God, "the helper of the fatherless" (10:14), sees all the trouble and grief of the afflicted (10:14) and is ready to act. "Break the arm of the wicked man," is a bold plea to stop evil in its tracks. "This may not seem like an appropriate prayer for New Testament believers; nevertheless, if believers pray for the Lord to come quickly, they are calling for him to come and judge the world and remove wickedness entirely."¹⁴²

Benediction

*The Lord is King forever and ever;
the nations will perish from his land.
You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.*

Psalm 10:16-18

The psalmist ends on a note of absolute confidence in the sovereignty of the Lord who is the everlasting King. These last few verses form a fitting climax to both Psalm 9 and 10. Once again the psalmist underscores the short-lived mortality of the nations. The impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice which are antithetical to the ways of the Lord "will perish from his land." But the Lord has already heard the desire of the afflicted and the Lord has already encouraged and strengthened the heart of the helpless. Yahweh will defend and vindicate the God-dependent fatherless and oppressed.

Psalm 10 recalls Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus tackles the intractable geopolitical problem of oppression and the enduring eschatological dilemma of delay by telling a story of a helpless widow seeking justice from an unjust, selfish

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *On the Psalms*, vol. 8: 38.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., vol.8: 40.

¹⁴² Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 1:330.

judge who looks out only for himself. The judge neither feared God nor cared what people thought. He refused her repeated pleas for justice, but she persisted, saying, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” Eventually, the widow wore the unjust judge down and even though he did not fear God nor care about justice he relented and reluctantly gave in to her plea for justice. Jesus’ point is direct. If an unjust judge can be brow beaten into doing the right thing, will not the holy and just God who hears the cry of his chosen ones day and night bring about justice and vindicate the righteous? The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” Jesus says, “I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” “Yes, God answers. His delays are not denials.”¹⁴³ But then Jesus closes the parable with a question that stops us in our tracks, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). The question throws us back into the struggle of the psalmist. Can we trust in the Lord’s justice, that in due time he will vindicate those who belong to him in Christ?

¹⁴³ Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 619.

The psalmist leads us in worship by clarifying the difference between the word of God and “good advice” coming from well-intentioned advisors. In worship we confess that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and “knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Psalm 11 leads us in worship so that we might know the wisdom of God even when we fear that “the foundations are being destroyed” (Ps 11:3). The poet writes, “*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.*”¹⁴⁴ Yet in spite of dreadful circumstances, when the saints gather to worship in the name of Christ, they boldly declare with David, “In the Lord I take refuge!” (Ps 11:1).

Good News

*In the Lord I take refuge.
How then can you say to me:
“Flee like a bird to your mountain.
For look, the wicked bend their bows;
they set their arrows against the strings
to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.
When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”*

Psalm 11:1-3

David’s faith in Yahweh is definitive, not tentative. His statement of trust is resolute, but his well-meaning advisors are telling him to run for it. Their advice is clear: “Get out of Dodge;” “Run for the hills;” Live to fight another day;” “Flee like a bird.” His counselors have his best interest in mind. They cannot protect him from the enemy sniper – the stealth archer who lies in wait under the cover of darkness. Their warning is urgent. The danger is imminent. The threat against the upright in heart is lethal. David’s advisors see the culture crumbling before them. They fear the break down of law and order and a rising tide of anarchy. They lament, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

Many Christians can identify with this fear. Like David’s advisors in Psalm 11 they are ready to throw up their hands and run for the hills. But David is not buying it. The pragmatic wisdom of the world runs counter to faith and trust in Yahweh. His advisors may be accurate in their description of the dangers and the threat of anarchy but their good advice does not take Yahweh into account. They are forgetting the divine alternative – the good news. Their strategy is built on fear, not faith. David’s bold statement of trust sets the tone and recalls the courage of Peter and John before the religious pragmatists of their day, the Sanhedrin, when they said, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Webster, *A Rumor of Soul: The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, 43.

There are many instances of “flight” recorded in the Bible. If David had not eluded king Saul and “made good his escape” he would have been killed by Israel’s king (1 Sam 19:10). Jonathan warned David to flee and David ran for his life. In Nazareth, at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus, the Son of David, infuriated all the people in the synagogue and they rose up and drove Jesus out of town, and took him to a cliff to throw him off. “But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Luke 4:29). At the beginning of his apostolic ministry Paul evaded assassins in Damascus by being lowered in a basket through an opening in the city wall (Acts 9:25). But all of these flights from danger were driven by faith, not fear.

David’s advisors meant well, but their advice missed the mark. Their judgment was based on external circumstances rather than internal convictions. The temptation to cut and run can be very real and it can come in various ways. It may come in the form of capitulating to the culture on matters dealing with consumer appeal and church growth or self-expression and sexual ethics. Christ’s followers are tempted to listen to the voice of “marketers” and “progressives” who want to reshape the church according to the spirit of the times. Conforming to the ways of the world can be a form of escapism.

True Wisdom

*The Lord is in his holy temple;
the Lord is on his heavenly throne.
He observes everyone on earth;
his eyes examine them.
The Lord examines the righteous,
but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.
On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur;
a scorching wind will be their lot.
For the Lord is righteous,
he loves justice; the upright will see his face.*

Psalm 11:4-7

David spells out two good reasons for trusting in Yahweh: the sovereignty of God and the justice of God. When “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” the fact remains that the Lord is in his holy temple, symbolizing the Lord’s nearness. When “the foundations are destroyed,” the Lord is on his holy throne, symbolizing his transcendence.¹⁴⁵ He is the architect and builder of the city with eternal foundations (Heb 11:10). When “the nations rage and the people plot in vain” (Ps 2:1), the psalmist knows that the Lord God is sovereign. “This King is in residence, not in flight.”¹⁴⁶ The prophet Habakkuk echoes these words to people tempted to live in denial of this immense truth: “The Lord is in holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab 2:20). The central truth of the psalm is that the “faithful fix their confidence on the heavenly sovereign and his plans, and not on earthly, human institutions. . .”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 133.

¹⁴⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:341.

The “the Lord is in his temple” is a metaphor that conveyed the powerful truth of divine sovereignty years before Solomon built his temple. The real presence of God was never housed in a building. A similar dynamic occurs in the New Testament description of the church. We don’t find a single word about church facilities, but the apostles deployed concrete images for the community of God’s people. Their strength and solidarity was not reflected in church buildings but in their union with Christ Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48). The relational and spiritual character of this “house,” built by God *of people*, is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel.

The justice of God is achieved through his perfect examination and holy judgment of the righteous and the wicked. The psalmist uses anthropomorphisms freely without fear of misunderstanding. The Lord’s eyes take everything in. He never blinks (Ps 11:4-5, Message). Nothing escapes his gaze. The apostle John’s description of the Son of Man’s fire-blazing eyes echoes David’s description.¹⁴⁸ Every idol is the object of a thousand human stares, but without a trace of any recognition. The idolater looks at the object of his admiration but the idol sees nothing, knows nothing. “Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand” (Isaiah 44:18). In the age of celebrity, idolized images demand attention. We are captivated by the daily viewing of media images of famous personalities that cannot return the gaze. But Christ’s penetrating and purifying eyes see us completely. “Search me, God, know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See, if there is an offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24).

God scrutinizes the righteous and the wicked in a process that is likened to testing metals.¹⁴⁹ In a fiery kiln of hardship the righteous are purified. The dross is burned away leaving only the precious metal. But the “fire and brimstone” of God’s judgment burns up the wicked. The righteous are subject to a purifying fire, but the wicked, “those who love violence,” provoke the wrath of God. The psalmist uses the strongest language to express God’s hatred for violence. Literally, the Lord’s *soul* hates violence.¹⁵⁰

This Old Testament perspective of the wrath of God against the wicked is in harmony with the New Testament perspective. Eternal torment and the lake of fire are not popular subjects in our day.¹⁵¹ Yet Jesus repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). The people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba will rise up at the judgment and condemn a generation that had every advantage to receive the gospel but stubbornly refused (Luke 11:29-32). Jesus stated it plainly, “There is a judge for those who reject me and do not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day” (John 12:48). Repent or

¹⁴⁸ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 51.

¹⁴⁹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 134.

¹⁵⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:342.

¹⁵¹ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 274-275.

perish was a refrain that ran through his ministry (Luke 13:2-5). Jesus warned that even if a person were to gain the whole world, what good would it be if he lost his soul? (Matthew 16:26). “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus said. “Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Jesus uses graphic language to describe judgment. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Jesus warned, “Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22). And again, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8-9). Jesus offered these words of condemnation at the final judgment: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). On the theme of judgment the language of Jesus and the Psalms draw on the same truth. “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Matthew 13:41-43).

Psalms 11 begins with a statement of trust and ends on a promise of love. The counsel to flee has been effectively countered by a courageous faith. The Lord is in his temple, let the faithful say “Amen.” “Things fall apart” but the Lord is on his throne. The upright in heart are under sniper fire but the Lord has them covered. His devastating counter attack is a firestorm of fiery coals, burning sulfur and a scorching wind. The Lord hates those who love violence and he defends the cause of the righteous. Security, stability, and unshakeable confidence are important, but for the upright in heart there is even more at stake. “God as ‘refuge’ may be sought from motives that are all too self-regarding; but to ‘behold his face’ is a goal in which only love has any interest.”¹⁵²

¹⁵² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*,. 74.

Psalm 12 is a corrective to the false and misleading effort to wall off the problems of the world from worship. We come into the presence of God, not to escape the world, but to deal with the world. When the foundations begin to crumble (Ps 11:3) truth and truthfulness are the first to go. David laments the tsunami of smooth talking lies corrupting the human race and sweeping away the faithful. The psalmist is honest with his despair. He feels dominated by his home culture's faithlessness. Lies, flattery, deception, and boasting have swamped his soul.

Speech has become the weapon of choice in a daily assault on hearts and minds, pummeling the nation's soul. And the most dangerous speech act is not what you might think. It is not the bombastic rhetoric of the braggart or the in-your-face raunchy pop-song lyrics or the gratuitous profanity that has infiltrated everyday speech or the bellicose political fact-twisting and spin-casting on talk radio or the vulgarity that has become common place on social media.

David's lament bypasses the worthy concern of common decency and civility and heads right for the verbal factor that undermines the truth and destroys the faithful. His focus is on those who evade the truth with polite deception and easy to swallow lies. The crafty deceivers profiled in Psalm 12 couch their duplicity and double standard in "evangelical" language. They have taken a page out of the devil's play book. Posing as sincere believers they ask, "Did God really say that gay sex is wrong? Did God really say that Jesus is the only way to salvation? Did God really say that hell is real?"

Help!

*Help, Lord for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.
Everyone lies to their neighbor;
they flatter with their lips
but harbor deception in their hearts.
May the Lord silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue –
those who say, "By our tongues we will prevail;
our own lips will defend us – who is lord over us?"*

Psalm 12:1-4

The back story for this psalm is unknown, but Absalom's conspiracy against King David illustrates the type of speech described and condemned in this psalm. The king's estranged son posted up at the city gate with his power team entourage of fifty men for the purpose of endearing himself to the people. He solicited their complaints, stoked their pride, and sold them on his version of justice. What could be more enticing and popularizing? Absalom gave his pitch: "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you. If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come

to me and I would see that they receive justice.” Through flattery and deception Absalom “stole the hearts of the people of Israel” (1 Sam 15:3-6).

The psalmist laments the seductive power of talk that sounds sincere, but is manipulative and malicious. “Empty talk, smooth talk, and double talk” break down the meaning, worth, and integrity of human communication.¹⁵³ The capacity to trust one another is eroded. The faithful are destroyed. The psalmist describes lies and deceitfulness as double-hearted speech – literally “with a heart and a heart.”¹⁵⁴ Double-hearted speech is intentionally deceptive, whereas double-minded speech is simply confused.¹⁵⁵ The double-hearted speaker prefers to tell smooth lies to achieve his selfish goals. He deliberately uses a pseudo version of the truth to promote deceit. In the book of Proverbs the tongue and heart are almost interchangeable metaphors for a person’s character: “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value” (Prov 10:20; see 17:20).

The addictive and empowering impact of this kind of rhetoric leads to feelings of invincibility and superiority. They boast, “By our tongues we will prevail – who is lord over us?” Asaph captured the ethos of these communicators when he wrote, “Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Ps 73:9). John Calvin located this deceitfulness not among pagans but among the people of God. Calvin wrote, “David does not here accuse strangers or foreigners, but informs us that this deluge of iniquity prevailed in the Church of God.”¹⁵⁶ Is this why the psalmist felt like the prophet Elijah “when it seemed to him that he was the only person left in the land serving God” (1 Kgs 19:10).¹⁵⁷ It is one thing to defend the truth in the world where you expect to be attacked, but it is far more disheartening to defend the truth among professing believers who reject the truth. No wonder David felt no one was faithful and that loyal believers had vanished.

The apostle James was concerned with how Christians influenced one another with their words. Opinionated Christians were garbling biblical truth on a host of issues. They were sharing their well-meaning but misguided thoughts rather than submitting to the word of God. And the result was heresy – the heresy of neglecting the poor, favoritism, spiritual apathy and ethical complacency. James attributed much of the problem to the tongue. He saw the battle raging between the propaganda of self-appointed authorities and the truth of God’s word. James called the tongue “a world of evil” and “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8).¹⁵⁸

If we take this psalm to heart we will make it our earnest desire and prayerful concern not to deceive our neighbor or obscure the truth of the gospel. We are committed to this communicational strategy lest our “flattering lips” be silenced and we end up cut off from the people of God. Calvin admonished those “who are resolved to act truthfully” to “lay open their

¹⁵³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 75.

¹⁵⁴ Ross, *Psalms* vol 1: 354. Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 44: “Deceitful lips, with a heart and a heart they have spoken evil things. The repetition, ‘with a heart and a heart,’ signifies a double heart.”

¹⁵⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 138.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, 171.

¹⁵⁷ Okorocho, “Psalms,” 620.

¹⁵⁸ Webster, *Finding Spiritual Direction*, 89-97.

whole heart” to their neighbor. Sincere speech allows “the uprightness of heart” to shine through.¹⁵⁹ However, this psalm pivots not on our action but the Lord’s. The psalmist has been speaking to God, but now the Lord offers a definitive answer to the lament. The proud boast of the wicked-insiders is decisively cut off by the pure word of God.

Arise!

*“Because the poor are plundered
and the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the Lord.
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”
And the words of the Lord are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold refined seven times.*

Psalm 12:5-6

The Lord’s bold announcement, “I will now arise,” is predicated on the plight of the poor and needy. The verbal assault against the poor in the form of flattery, lies, and deception is equated with violence against the poor causing the Lord to act on their behalf. The Old Testament understanding of the poor distinguishes them from the slothful, the vagrant, the thief, and the addict. The poor are oppressed because they are orphaned or widowed or victims of injustice (Job 29:12-17; Psalm 12:5; Isaiah 3:14). The law protects the poor (Exodus 22:22f) and the Lord is seen as rescuing the poor “from those too strong for them” (Psalm 35:10).

The primary meaning of the poor and needy is that they acknowledge their dependence on the Lord. Even the king cries out, “Hear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy” (Psalm 86:1). David prays, “This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles” (Psalm 34:6). The Old Testament meaning of the poor describes those who are helpless and humble, who turn to God in prayer, acknowledge their great need for his salvation. .

Augustine linked Psalm 12 to the first beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁶⁰ Jesus came to preach good news to the poor (Matt 11:5), because he was the ultimate answer promised in the psalm (12:5). Augustine insisted the psalmist’s inspired word underscored the truth of the gospel, because the poor acknowledge their need for God and their inability to merit salvation. For Augustine there was never a greater *now* than when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).¹⁶¹ He linked “‘I will now arise,’ says the Lord” (Ps 12:5), to “the set time” when “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.” We have gone from being poor and needy to being God’s children, calling out “Abba, Father” and becoming heirs of the kingdom (Gal 4:4-7). There was never a greater *arising* than when in these last days the Father has “spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Psalms* (12), 172.

¹⁶⁰ Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 45.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:1-3).

There was never a greater *protection* from the forces that malign the poor than the saving power of Jesus Christ. The weapon of choice in the war of words is the Word of God. There was never a greater *purity* of truth than the words of Jesus. God's word, the Living Word, is better than silver purified in a crucible or gold refined seven times. The empty, smooth, and double-hearted talk of the wicked is filled with impurities and empty of value. But the word of Christ is "devoid of the dross of flattery, vanity, and lies, and can therefore be relied upon absolutely."¹⁶² The crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching, "because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt 7:28-29). In the company of the Master, Peter testified, "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). In the war of words, to know the truth is to hold to the teaching of Jesus – the truth that will set us free" (John 8:32).

Safe

*You, Lord, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,
who freely strut about when what is vile is honored
by the human race.*

Psalm 12:6-8

The conflict is far from over. The struggle continues. The wicked continue "to stalk us with lies" and "collect honors for their wonderful lies" (Ps 12:8, Message). On this side of eternity the barrage of vain and vile speech will continue and believers have to determine how they will respond. If we take God at his word and trust in him with our lives then we will know that the solution is not found in matching evil for evil. The personality and vocabulary of the old sin nature is characterized by malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander, but the new nature in Christ is nourished on the "pure unadulterated" word of God (see 1 Pet 2:2). We refuse to insult, "put down," "bad-mouth," or "disparage" others.¹⁶³ The apostle Peter's emphasis on ridding ourselves of *all* malice and *all* deceit and slander of *every kind* stresses a "no-tolerance" policy for evil in the born-again Christian. When we "grow up in our salvation" it is evident in our speech and actions. There is no room here for a vindictive spirit or resentment. We see this emphasis on the word of God and ethical transformation throughout the New Testament (Rom 12:1-2; James 1:21; Col 3:12-17). Fed up with the rhetoric of lies and boasting, true worshipers should be starving for the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet 1:23). Calvin admonished patience in the on-going daily conflict: "And if the guardianship which God exercises over the faithful is sometimes hidden, and is not manifest in its effects, let them wait in patience until he arise; and the greater the flood of calamities which overflows them, let them keep themselves so much the more in the exercise of godly fear and solicitude."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Craigie, *Psalms*, 138.

¹⁶³ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 398.

¹⁶⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 180.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) began his ministry at the Presbyterian church in Chester, England in the spring of 1687. On that very first Thursday he preached on Psalm 1 and he continued preaching on the Psalms every Thursday for the next twenty-five years. He went through the entire psalter five times.¹⁶⁵ On Psalm 13, Henry wrote, “In singing this psalm and praying it over, if we have not the same complaints to make that David had, we must thank God that we have not . . . [and] sympathize with those that are troubled in mind, and encourage ourselves in our most holy faith and joy.”¹⁶⁶ Henry understood that the value of Psalm 13 lies in its enduring message, not in our immediate emotional affinity with David’s lament. We may not be feeling today what the psalmist felt then, but we pray this psalm in solidarity with those who do. Our situation may be different from the psalmist’s, but within the Body of Christ someone is crying out, “How long, Lord, how long?” And undoubtedly someday we will to.

City Hymns on their *Fragments of Grace* album have a wonderful setting of Psalm 13 entitled, *How Long, O Lord?* A worship pastor led his praise team in this song for several months before one of the members of the praise team was diagnosed with breast cancer. The song took on special meaning for her. She said, “I was so grateful to have a prayer for my moment of need. I needed words and language to be able to cry out to God in my pain.” One verse in particular gave her the words to pray: *How long shall my poor troubled breast / Be with these anxious thoughts oppressed? / My heart shall feel thy love and raise / My fainting voice to songs of praise.* Then the chorus repeats: *But I have trusted in thy grace / And shall again behold thy face.*¹⁶⁷

Christian spirituality is often fueled by emotions untethered to genuine faithfulness. This is why it is so important to take in the whole psalm and not just a line or two that catches our interest. Plenty of devotional material appeals to the subjective self and focuses the “Christian life” on feelings. But the Psalms locate our devotion to God in the word of God. They are the Holy Spirit’s devotional literature.

Psalm 13 may lead us where we do not want to go, but we pray this psalm on behalf of those who share in its painful lament and we pray this psalm because we know that we are never far from asking, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?” The lament is as simple and as desperate as it could be. We do not know the circumstances that gave rise to this prayer, but we recognize the poet’s careful craftsmanship in constructing the lament. Three pairs of verses, composed mainly in monosyllables, give remarkable shape to David’s heartfelt cry, his earnest prayer, and his resolute praise.¹⁶⁸

Complaint

*How long, Lord—? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*

¹⁶⁵ Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, vol. 5: 32.

¹⁶⁶ Henry, *The Psalms*, 64.

¹⁶⁷ <http://cityhymns.com/track/how-long-o-lord-2>

¹⁶⁸ Wilcock, *Psalms*, 51.

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*
Psalm 13:1-2

The up-front, four-fold repetition of the rhetorical question, “How long?” confronts us with the force of the psalmist’s pain. The first sentence is incomplete: “How long?” is followed by a pause to let the message sink in. The psalmist does not need to finish his thought because “God knows precisely what the afflicted mean when they cry out, ‘How long, O Lord. . . .?’”¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the psalmist goes on to explain with escalating intensity the threats he faces. He feels abandoned by God, oppressed by his thoughts, and condemned by his enemies. On all three fronts, the theological, psychological, and the sociological, he’s in real trouble.¹⁷⁰

We can imagine fellow worshipers at a loss for words. They mean well, but any attempt to answer this lament with anything pat or glib is bound to fail. The question “How long?” is addressed to the Lord and not to just anyone in ear-shot. The psalmist is not looking for counsel or sympathy from his friends. If anything, he’s asking for space to make his complaint. He’s hoping for the companionship of silence. Wise friends will overhear his lament and pray with him.

The psalmist begins at the top with God and works through his depression and down to his enemies. Nothing in his life feels right. Everything is out of sync. And it has been that way for awhile. His perception of reality may be skewed but it is an honest perception. He links *forgotten* and *forever* in the same breath as if they were two sides of the same experience. To feel forgotten by God always feels like forever. No one complains about being abandoned by God *only recently*. Everything about being God-forsaken is interminable. Rejection is pictured with a metaphor: “until when will you hide your face from me?” Aaron’s benediction (Num 6:24-26) described in reverse feels like a curse: “The Lord curse you and forget you; the Lord turn his face away from you and condemn you.” The psalmist asks “how long?” because he knows he cannot live long apart from God’s grace and peace.

David’s spiritual depression is compounded by his inner thoughts and his futile efforts to resolve his situation. The more he wrestles within the greater the sorrow of his heart. His “day after day” brokenhearted sorrow corresponds to feeling God-forsaken *forever*. In his heart these two realities merge, the absence of God and the futility of his thinking. We know there were times in David’s life when he was overwhelmed by sorrow, but Psalm 13 ignores the narrative and concentrates on the soul. By freeing the psalm from a set of circumstances the psalmist invites us to identify with David’s sorrow.

One of the ways “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” is by giving us the psalms to pray. The apostle’s comforting spiritual direction corresponds with David’s lament: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he

¹⁶⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:364.

¹⁷⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 206.

who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Rom 8:26-27).

The third factor in David's lament is an unspecified outside force identified simply as "my enemy." Speculation as to who or what constitutes this alien ascendancy ranges from physical disease and death to King Saul's enduring tenure or Absalom's rebellion. In the verses to follow (13:3-4) the psalmist appears to fear a life threatening enemy. Peter Craigie writes, "The singular enemy is no doubt the personification of death; the plural enemies are the psalmist's foes in general."¹⁷¹ The theological impact of the enemy results in an acute sense of feeling abandoned by God. The psychological effect of the enemy causes internal depression and sorrow. And the sociological impact of the enemy leads to the loss of all hope, public disgrace, and condemnation.

The power of this psalm lies in the fact that it gives voice to the shared experience of Christ's devoted followers around the world, those who feel abandoned by God, who wrestle with their dark thoughts, and who are oppressed by enemies. Jesus had much to say about the opposition of the world that fits devotionally with Psalm 13. The spirit of the antichrist pervades the world but as Jesus' apostle reminds us, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The psalm invites reflection on what gives rise to the world's opposition to the faithful follower of Christ. William Temple wrote, "The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself."¹⁷² John Chrysostom chalked it up to "the natural course of things," because Christian virtue "engenders hatred." "Let us not grieve," Chrysostom wrote, "for this is a mark of virtue." This is why Christ said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own."¹⁷³

The world's hate for the Body of Christ is "a great mystery" stemming from the fact that believers are rooted "in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission." The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: "an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission."¹⁷⁴

Prayerful recognition of evil is the first step in dealing with the enemy. Jesus does not conceal the fact that the gospel draws enemy fire. By naming the enemy, Jesus lays bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. The example of his real prayer is an antidote to boring, placid prayers. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone, but we are not alone and we are under orders. Our deep concern and prayer should be that it is truly the Word of God that draws enemy fire and not any of our obnoxious and offensive ways. We have not been called of God to flee the world or fight the world. Nor have we been called to withdraw into our own tight-knit enclaves. We were never meant to impress the world as narrow-minded,

¹⁷¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 142.

¹⁷² Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 322.

¹⁷³ Chrysostom, *John*, 302..

¹⁷⁴ Bruner, *John*, 991.

opinionated separatists. The offense of the cross ought to be the most winsome and attractive “offensiveness” that human culture has ever known.¹⁷⁵

Prayer

*Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
And my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

Psalm 13:3-4

The second stanza conveys the same monosyllable simplicity and tone of desperation as the first. All formalities are swept aside as the psalmist urgently makes his case. By placing the verbs up front he bypasses the usual reverence of the sanctuary for the urgency and intensity of the emergency room. The imperative “Look at me!” begs God to turn his face toward him. The second imperative “Answer me!” earnestly entreats an end to God’s silence. On the basis of Yahweh’s grace and mercy David cries out to Yahweh – the covenant-keeping God. His bold access relies on the personal bond between them. His passionate prayer anticipates the new reality found in Christ when the people of God will “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. . .” (Heb 10:19-20). There is clearly no hint in this psalm of a “bootstrap, triumph-of-the-individual sort of mentality.”¹⁷⁶

The third imperative, “Give light to my eyes,” calls upon Yahweh to renew his life. “The psalmist represents himself as a dying man, as one already half gone, who soon will be wholly overwhelmed with the darkness of death, if the Lord does not give him the new power of life.”¹⁷⁷ Whether the “enemy” was a physical illness or acute depression or an internal conspiracy or an external military threat the psalmist felt his days were numbered. His only hope was divine intervention. “When his eyes were enlightened, both spiritually and physically, he would not fall into the sleep of death which seemed so imminent.”¹⁷⁸ Implicit in David’s appeal is a renewed experience of Aaron’s priestly blessing:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26*

The expectation of divine action will find its ultimate blessing and brightness in the face of Jesus. The Son of David who is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:3) will fulfill David’s prayer. David’s appeal for divine intervention is for the purpose of his testimony and witness. His desire is to bring glory to God and defeat his enemies. It is not the

¹⁷⁵ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 98. .

¹⁷⁶ Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, 72.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:367.

¹⁷⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 142.

fear of dying that motivates his plea as much as it is the fear of God. If David falls and his enemies triumph over him, God's reputation is defiled and his glory tarnished. Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 corresponds with David's prayer. Jesus prayed to the *Holy Father* for protection, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). David wants for himself what Jesus wants for his disciples, "deliverance from the evil power of the world" and "immunity from evil."¹⁷⁹ When we factor in the redemptive trajectory of salvation history, the apostle Paul echoes a similar concern when he says, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me" (Phil 1:21-22).

Praise

*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.*

Psalm 13:5-6

Trust in God alone is the only explanation for the dramatic change in tone from desperation to devotion and from anxiety to confidence. Although there is no indication of a change in circumstances the psalm ends very differently than how it began. What has changed is not the situation, but the psalmist's perception of the situation. In worship he has voiced his lament and turned to God in prayer. "The confidence is expressed within the tension which exists between past experience and future hope."¹⁸⁰ Instead of feeling his way into worship, David has worshiped his way into feelings. His God-directed, God-centered lament has both challenged and comforted. David has been "faithful in pain and problem, faithful in prayer and petition, faithful in praise and song."¹⁸¹ Calvin encouraged believers to follow David's example: "We must so wrestle against temptations as to be assured by faith, even in the midst of conflict, that the calamities which urge us to despair must be overcome."¹⁸²

The third stanza begins with the force of an exclamation: "But as for me." Trust is a deliberate act, willingly embraced by the psalmist. Until now the focus has been on adversity (theological, psychological, sociological), but in prayer David's attention shifts to the steadfast love of the Lord (*hesed*), the fullness of salvation, and the story of God's goodness to him.¹⁸³ The psalmist's lament, "How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1) is effectively answered in the psalm's last line: "I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me" (Ps 13:6).

¹⁷⁹ Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 318.

¹⁸⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 143.

¹⁸¹ Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, 72.

¹⁸² Calvin, *Psalms*, 182.

¹⁸³ Jacobson and deClaisse-Walford, *The NIV Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Psalms*, 132. Jacobson writes: "*Hesed* includes elements of love, mercy, fidelity, and kindness [occurring 130 times in the Psalms]. . . . The relational nature of the term cannot be overemphasized. It describes the duties, benefits, and commitments that one party bears to another party as a result of the relationship between them. The Lord's *hesed* is the basis on which the psalmist dares to ask for deliverance and forgiveness."

Christ's followers can identify with this psalm. In six short verses the psalmist foreshadows the apostle's message in Romans 8. The psalmist's four-fold lament, "How long, Lord?" corresponds to the apostle's "wordless groans" (Rom 8:26). In stanza two, David's prayer parallels the apostle's encouragement, "He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Rom 8:27). In stanza three, the initial lament has turned to songs of praise for God's unfailing love, the joy of salvation, and the blessings of God's goodness. Or, as the apostle testified, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). We worship by faith, just as we live by faith. "We may not be wholly free from sorrow," wrote Calvin, "but it is nevertheless necessary that this cheerfulness of faith rise above it, and put into our mouth a song on account of the joy which is reserved for use in the future, although not as yet experienced by us."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 187.

We may struggle as to where to place Psalm 14 in the liturgy, but we can be certain that it is necessary for our gathered worship. Salvation is always better understood in the revealing light of evil's darkness. The psalm breaks down the abstraction of evil and focuses on the individual fool whose atheistic thoughts and deeds are exposed. The psalm defends the victims of corrupt men and women and sides with the poor whose plans are frustrated and whose lives are consumed by self-serving evildoers. Psalm 14 is a reminder that righteousness impacts people personally and evil wears a human face.

Psalm 14 echoes the thesis of Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Prov 1:7). It is a wisdom psalm that reminds us of Psalm 1's description of the wicked as chaff that the wind blows away. In book two of the psalms, Psalm 53 repeats Psalm 14. The only major difference is that Psalm 14 uses *Yahweh* for God and Psalm 53 uses *Elohim*. Ross sees the focus of Psalm 14 "on comfort for the faithful" and Psalm 53 as "a warning to the wicked."¹⁸⁵ In any case the repetition of the theme underscores the importance of the subject in the wisdom tradition.

Wisdom establishes the link between the meta-narrative of God's salvation history and our personal life stories. Salvation is intended to encompass everything in our daily lives and our eternal destiny. There is an inseparable relationship between the Cross of Jesus Christ at the center of human history and the call of Jesus to take up our cross daily and follow him. Worship and ethics converge into a meaningful whole. Reverence for Yahweh embraces the totality of life, including our family life, our work ethic, our leisure activities, and our ambitions. The same wisdom that set the stars in place and the planets in orbit calls for honest accounting practices and gossip-free conversation. Wisdom ranges from the mystery of the Big Bang to the mundane task of working for a living.

The Hebrew word for fool is *nābāl* a word "which implies an aggressive perversity, epitomized in the Nabal of 1 Samuel 25:25."¹⁸⁶ If there is a back story to Psalm 14, Nabal may be it. He personifies the fool. The storyteller in Samuel slows the narrative down so as to play out the real life drama between Nabal and David. The tension in the tale builds as Nabal, a wealthy cattle owner, is respectfully approached by a delegation of ten men from David. They reported the ways they had offered protection for Nabal's shepherds and herds and when they finished they made a simple request for hospitality. "Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them" (1 Sam 25:8). But instead of responding graciously to their request, Nabal made the delegation wait and then after deliberation, Nabal intentionally and inexcusably ignored their good will, scorned their request and mocked their leader. David's men turned around and went back to David and when they arrived "they reported every word" (1 Sam 25:12). David's response was immediate, "Put on your swords!" Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants ran to tell Abigail, Nabal's wife. In desperation the servant begged her, "Now think it over and see what

¹⁸⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:373.

¹⁸⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 79.

you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk with him” (1 Sam 25:17). We will leave the story there for now and pick up the themes of Psalm 14.

Practical Atheism

*The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.
The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good, not even one.*

Psalm 14:1-3

The psalmist defines fools as those who say in their hearts, “There is no God.” Fools live their everyday lives as if there is no God. “The fool’s lack of understanding is such that his priorities in life are entirely wrong.”¹⁸⁷ Outwardly they may confess the creed and honor religion but inwardly they are practical atheists, living according to their own selfish desires. They may commend their version of moralistic therapeutic deism – the theory that there is a good god who is remote yet nice, who wants you to have your best life now. But in reality all their religious theory and talk of spirituality is only a cover for living for themselves. “They may not plainly deny the existence of God,” wrote Calvin, “but they imagine him to be shut up in heaven, and divested of his righteousness and power; and this is just to fashion an idol in the room of God. As if the time would never come when they will have to appear before him in judgment, they endeavor, in all the transactions and concerns of their life, to remove him to the greatest distance, and to efface from their minds all apprehension of his majesty.”¹⁸⁸

Calvin reasoned that the “fool” described in Psalm 14 was not the distant enemy but the close at hand “enemy” of the faithful. Calvin saw the fool as an immediate threat to the people of God because they were part of the church. He wrote, “We know that it is a temptation which pains us exceedingly, to see wickedness breaking forth and prevailing in the midst of the Church, the good and simple unrighteously afflicted, which the wicked cruelly domineer according to their pleasure.”¹⁸⁹ The Nabal kind of fool can sit on the church board or chair the finance committee. Subtle forms of self-righteousness can be more damaging to the people of God than overt acts of corruption. The beautiful side of evil exists right alongside the horrors of the ugly side of evil. The devil’s influence is felt not only in violent acts of terrorism but in sky-rocketing sales of pharmaceuticals. The oppressive world system legitimizes abortions-on-demand and turns children into ego-boasting immortality symbols. Evil is in the dark alley mugging and the corporate windfall. There is a bull market on Wall Street even as poverty runs rampant. The street-wise pimp and the corporate CEO have something in common. The pervasiveness of evil

¹⁸⁷ Craigie, *Psalms*, 148.

¹⁸⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 191.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

and the universal sweep of idolatry fit the psalmist's description of the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God." C. S. Lewis reminds us, "A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world — and even might be more difficult to save."¹⁹⁰

People don't have to be famous atheists like Friedrich Nietzsche or Richard Dawkins to qualify as fools. All they have to do is live as if there is no God, and in our late modern secular age that is not difficult to do. Nietzsche followed-up his famous "God is dead" declaration with a question, "How shall we comfort ourselves What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?"¹⁹¹ Professing Christians may not agree with top tier philosophers and intellectuals. They may affirm biblical revelation, at least in theory, but they have joined forces with the world in a quest for a false transcendence that is idolatrous. The habit of religion persists, but as Søren Kierkegaard quipped, "Everything goes on as usual, and yet there is no longer anyone who believes in it."¹⁹²

If we're honest we would have to admit that many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, find their sense of meaning and transcendence in sports. Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly contend that a new sense of transcendence can be found most readily in sports. "Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily."¹⁹³ It is beyond dispute, they claim, that sport now plays a kind of religious role in America. "There is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass. . . ."¹⁹⁴ That is not to say that sport is sacred in "any absolute sense. But there are moments in sport. . . .during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful wave. . . .That is the moment when the sacred shines."¹⁹⁵ As Dreyfus and Kelly say, "The impersonal gods of baseball encourage no questions about the afterlife or the nature of the soul."¹⁹⁶ In the modern pantheon of American deities sports rank right alongside money, sex, and power.

We can paint the picture of a fool as a nasty evil outlier, a bad person who is vile and corrupt. But the truth of the matter is that the person I see in the mirror is the fool I know best. The apostle Paul used Psalm 14 to make his case that Jews and Gentiles alike are corrupted by the power of sin. He quoted from the first three verses of Psalm 14 in Romans 3: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Rom 3:10-12). The shocking truth is that we are all guilty of playing the fool. In countless ways we live our lives as if there is no God and we live according to our own selfish desires.

¹⁹⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

¹⁹¹ Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," section 125.

¹⁹² Kierkegaard, "Either/Or: A Fragment of Life," 81-82.

¹⁹³ Dreyfus & Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 192.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192-3.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

“Paul thus encourages us to be realistically hopeless about humanity and then grateful for what God has done in Christ.”¹⁹⁷

Evildoers

*Do all these evildoers know nothing?
They devour my people as though eating bread;
they never call on the Lord.
But there they are, overwhelmed with dread,
for God is present in the company of the righteous.
You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor,
but the Lord is their refuge.*

Psalm 14:4-6

No one is more surprised at practical atheism than the Lord God. The psalmist attributes the rhetorical question to God himself, “not because any thing can happen which is strange or unexpected to him, but in order the more forcibly to express his indignation.”¹⁹⁸ Those who live as if God does not exist devour his people as naturally as they eat a sandwich. They are consumers not only of commodities but of people. The apostle John described the great city in the Revelation, where the Lord was crucified and where people refuse to call on God, as the ultimate consumer society. The city trades in precious metals, fine fashions, luxury products, and every conceivable commodity, including the “bodies and souls of human beings” (Rev 18:13).¹⁹⁹

Calvin insists that the fool in view is not the “foreign tyrant” or the “avowed enemy of the church” but the shepherd “whose office it is to feed and to take care of the flock, who cruelly devour it, and who spare not even the people and heritage of God” (see Micah 3:1-3; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Undoubtedly Calvin’s perspective was shaped by his situation, but do we not face a similar challenge today? When the church models itself after the world it begins to see itself in a competitive marketplace with a consumer product to sell. The worldly church feels the pressure to change the gospel to fit the expectations and dreams of “spiritual” consumers. They identify their market niche and target audience, and strive to meet felt needs, pursue corporate excellence, and promote a creative, positive, upbeat, and exciting atmosphere. The worldly church has no need to call on God because it runs itself like any other secular organization.

The psalmist describes evildoers (fools) in three ways: They devour people, they never call on the Lord, and they are filled with fear. This is not the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, but the fear of life that fills the soul with overwhelming dread. The psalmist breaks down the complexities of life into two ways, wisdom and foolishness. We can either reverence the Lord in a spirit of humility and submission or we can live for ourselves in selfishness and ignorance. Those who live as if there is no God will eventually come to realize that “God is present in the company of the righteous.” And those who have “frustrated the plans of the poor”

¹⁹⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 217.

¹⁹⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*. 195.

¹⁹⁹ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 339. See Revelation 17:1-19; 21:9-22:9.

will have to acknowledge that “the Lord is their refuge.” When it finally dawns on the foolish that they have mistreated the people of God “they will be terrified with a great terror.”²⁰⁰

The principle of the world is “your life for mine;” the principle of the cross is “my life for yours.” The subject of the psalm is the fool, the Nabal-like fool, who thinks only of himself. But the positive counter-point to the description of the evildoer is the company of the righteous who seek wisdom. Therefore there is no resolution better advised “than the resolution to depend upon God, and to rest in his salvation.” Even when we are surrounded with all sorts of “calamities,” this is “the highest wisdom.”²⁰¹

Salvation

*Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the Lord restores his people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*
Psalm 14:7

Psalm 14 ends on a high note. David prays for the deliverance of the people of God. All hope and expectation can be summed up in the word *salvation*. In a word, *salvation*, comprehends all that we have been given in Christ. We are saved from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.”²⁰² We are saved for a purpose, to love God, others, and ourselves. We are saved for freedom, mission, and community. Salvation changes our relationship with God giving us acceptance with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, reception of the Spirit, and everlasting life. Salvation changes us emotionally giving us confidence, peace, courage, hopefulness, and joy. Salvation changes us spiritually giving us prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication and service. Salvation changes us personally giving us new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment. Salvation changes us socially giving us a new community in Christ, a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”²⁰³

Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. Zion as a *place* “formed the nucleus for a rich gathering of images, symbols, promises, and visions that express God’s sovereign purposes worked out on the hard, inhospitable ground of our lives.”²⁰⁴ Until Jesus Christ came, *place* rather than *person* summed up the meaning of God’s presence. But when the Incarnate One came he fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding

²⁰⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:381.

²⁰¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 200.

²⁰² White, “Salvation,” 968.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 968.

²⁰⁴ Peterson, *Leap Over the Wall*, 133.

the ultimate future of God's people."²⁰⁵ Instead of the holiness of *place*, "Christianity has fundamentally. . .substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space."²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Wright, *ibid.*, 93, from W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land*, 368.

Psalm 15 is the counterpoint to the preceding psalm. Nabal the fool gives way to Abigail the beautiful, who was wise and courageous. Taken together these two wisdom psalms offer a striking comparison. If 1 Samuel 25 is not the narrative back story, then Nabal and Abigail are at the very least illustrative respectively of self-destructive foolishness and life-fulfilling wisdom.

Psalm 15 has been described as a “liturgy at the gate.” The Levitical gate-keeper lists ten requirements for admittance into the sanctuary.²⁰⁷ Although the “ten-fold structure of conditions” is suggestive of the Decalogue “there are no precise inner correspondences between the conditions of the Commandments.”²⁰⁸ Peter Craigie points out the pedagogical value of the psalm: “Young persons were being instructed to tick off, as it were, on their ten fingers the moral conditions prerequisite to participation in worship.”²⁰⁹

The Question

*Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?
Who may live on your holy mountain?
Psalm 15:1*

The image of the sacred tent underscores Yahweh’s personal intimacy and our homecoming pilgrimage.²¹⁰ The image of the “sacred tent” points forward to the language of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the Word that was made flesh and *tabernacled* among us (John 1:14). He invited his followers to abide in him or make their home with him (John 15). Psalm 14 concludes with a reference to Zion, the holy mountain of God. “Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” (Ps 14:7). And this is precisely where the psalmist picks up the wisdom theme in Psalm 15. The question of access anticipates Mount Zion instead of Mount Sinai (see Psalm 24). The psalmist envisions genuine heartfelt worship that is filled with faith, not dread.

The possibility of communion with Yahweh is grounded in the Lord’s covenantal love and his redemptive provision of divine grace. The fundamental question of access is put in every human heart by God himself (Ecclesiastes 3:11). It is asked in various ways throughout the Bible (Ps 24:3). The rich young ruler asked it of Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). The expert in the law tested Jesus with the question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). When Peter’s Pentecost pilgrims heard the gospel they were cut to the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:27). The Philippian jailor asked it of Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30).

Patrick Reardon insists that behind this question is an “implied eschatology.” The person asking the question expects “to end up somewhere other than where he is now” and “life’s greatest

²⁰⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:386.

²⁰⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 150.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

²¹⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 81.

tragedy” would be to “fail to abide in God’s tabernacle and to rest on His holy mountain.”²¹¹ This is the deep human question that fools refuse to ask or they ask it cynically. Nabal lived his life oblivious to the question of worship-access, and as a corollary to Nabal’s practical atheism was his refusal to acknowledge David’s goodness. Even though David and his men protected Nabal’s servants and herds (“Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them.” 1 Sam 25:16), Nabal lumped David in with the rebellious rift raft. Fools like Nabal project their own evil motives and ways on others and in the process incriminate themselves.

The Answer

<p><i>The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart;</i></p> <p><i>whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others;</i></p> <p><i>who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the Lord; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind;</i></p> <p><i>who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.</i></p>	<p><i>“Walk straight, act right, tell the truth.”</i></p> <p><i>“Don’t hurt your friend, don’t blame your neighbor despise the despicable.”</i></p> <p><i>“Keep your word, even when it costs you, never take a bribe.” Message</i></p>
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Psalm 15:2-5b

The answer that follows proves that belief and obedience go hand in hand. The desire to abide in Yahweh’s sacred tent is a matter of faith, not works. As was said earlier, the image of the tent is suggestive of the Incarnation (John 1:14). Mercy, not merit, makes living on Yahweh’s holy mountain a reality. This means that saving faith is always a working faith, and the life of faith embodies a way of living revealed by God and empowered by God’s grace. Psalm 14 is about human depravity – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Psalm 15 is about the gift of justification by faith through the grace of Christ. Psalm 14 describes those who despise God. Psalm 15 describes those who desire God. Psalm 15 is not a ten point standard of perfection. It is a profile of heart righteous faithfulness. Psalm 15 does not prescribe the means of grace; it describes the state of grace. When the redemptive power of God is manifest in a person’s life this is what her behavior looks like in the light of the gospel:

- 1) Her walk is blameless because she trusts in the Lord with all her heart and leans not on her own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6);
- 2) Her actions are righteous because she seeks first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33);

²¹¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 27.

- 3) Her speech is true and edifying because she speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15);
- 4) She refuses to gossip or slander or deceive because she has rid herself “of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Peter 2:1);
- 5) She loves her neighbor as herself (Leviticus 19:18);
- 6) She refuses to bite and devour others (Galatians 5:15);
- 7) She discerns the difference between good and evil and chooses the good. She despises the despicable and honors the honorable;
- 8) She always keeps her word, remains true to her promises, and clings to the word of God (Matthew 6:37);
- 9) She helps those in need without humiliating or exploiting them. She refuses to use the poor for her own financial or social gain (James 2:5-8);
- 10) She refuses to accept a bribe and pervert the course of justice (Proverbs 17:23).

Who better to illustrate Psalm 14's foolishness than Nabal; and who better to illustrate Psalm 15's faithfulness than Abigail. The narrator introduces Abigail as “an intelligent and beautiful woman” (1 Samuel 25:3), who uses her quick wit and applied wisdom to divert a disaster. Informed by one of the young shepherds of her husband’s ugly tirade against David and his men, Abigail flew into action (see 1 Samuel 25, Message). She put her staff to work assembling a portable feast of bread and wine, lamb and roasted grains, along with raisin and fig cakes. She sent the food on ahead as an impressive good will gesture and then she followed behind on a donkey. Abigail met David and four hundred of his armed men as they raced down the ravine heading for revenge. Just moments before, David vowed to destroy Nabal, “May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!” The vow called down God’s judgment on David if he did not fulfill his word (1 Samuel 3:17; 14:44; 20:13). The only thing that stood between David and a massacre was Abigail.

Abigail dismounted and “bowed down before David with her face to the ground.” She began, “My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say.” In her speech, Abigail reveals not only her intelligence but her deep spirituality. She gave David the only possible reason that allowed a man of God and a man of his word to break his vow. She gave herself up in complete humility. She identified and named Nabal’s wickedness. “He is just like his name – his name means Fool, and folly goes with him (1 Samuel 25:25). Abigail reasoned with David causing him to see that personal vengeance was contrary to God’s will. “Now since the Lord has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal” (1 Samuel 25:26). She framed Nabal’s offensive behavior in the larger context of God’s will for David’s life. “Please forgive your servant’s offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord’s battles. Let no wrong-doing be found in you as long as you live” (1 Samuel 25:28).

Nabal scorned David’s identity and condemned David’s motives, but Abigail recognized David as the Lord’s anointed. She understood David’s life and death struggle with Saul and she vindicated David’s cause. “Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my

master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God.” (1 Samuel 25:29). These words were as amazing as they were prophetic and must have been deeply encouraging to David. An unknown woman, intelligent and beautiful, intervened in a crisis situation to affirm the justice of his cause in a way that was both compelling and comforting.

Abigail was not finished. By faith she pledged her loyalty to the Lord, saying, “When the Lord has done for my master every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the Lord has brought my master success, remember your servant” (1 Samuel 25:30-31). David commended her, accepted her offering and he worshiped Yahweh, saying, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands...Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request” (25:32-33,35). The story takes a surprising twist when Nabal suffers an apparent stroke and dies ten days later (1 Sam 25:37-38). His loss did not cause anyone grief and probably no one, including David, expected such sudden vindication. For his part, David didn’t waste any time inviting Abigail to be his wife.

The Promise

Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

Psalm 5:5c

This short five verse “liturgy at the gate” moves from the worshiper’s full acceptance to the faithful’s full assurance of his everlasting destiny. The last word of the sentence in the original Hebrew text reads “he shall not be moved, *ever*.”²¹² The promise of daily worship carries an everlasting guarantee. Those who live this way by the grace of God will not be shaken. The theme resounds through the Bible. Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount by promising that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 5:24).

The prophet Haggai describes the final judgment as a violent shake down (Hag 2:6) and the preacher in Hebrews develops this theme. Haggai’s prophecy of the coming judgment and the violent shaking of the cosmos was not meant to shake the confidence of those who have come to Mount Zion, who belong to the church of the firstborn, and who are made righteous by Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. The preacher writes, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Heb 12:28-29).

²¹² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 83.

With single-minded devotion this contemplative psalm celebrates the believer's sole dependence upon "my Lord":

for *preservation* - "for in you I take refuge;"
for *provision* - "apart from you I have no good thing;"
for *community*, "the holy people. . .in whom is all my delight;"
for *a sense of place*, "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;"
for *daily guidance*, "the Lord, who counsels me;"
for *everlasting life*, "you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead;"
and for the path of life, "you will fill me with joy in your presence."

When perceived as a singular expression of faith and trust in Yahweh Psalm 16 bears poignant testimony to the Lord's all encompassing providence and the fullness of salvation. In this moment of poetic praise the psalmist captures the essence of human flourishing. But this is no ordinary human flourishing – "not as the world gives, give I unto you" (John 14:27). This is the life that is centered on God. It is not what we achieve on our own but what we receive by the grace of God. Everything is dependent on the Lord from whom all blessings flow. The New Testament caption for Psalm 16 could be the apostle's testimony, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

Single-minded, Whole-hearted Discipleship

*Keep me safe, my God
for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."
I say of the holy people who are in the land,
'They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.'Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.
I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods
or take up their names on my lips.*

Psalm 16:1-4

Gratitude pervades the trusting believer's passionate prayer. This is not the distraught prayer of a desperate person. Faith, not fear, motivates this prayer. "I say" declares the psalmist's resolute conviction. Strictly speaking only the first sentence of the psalm is prayer. It only takes one sentence for David to capture the essence of prayer. If God is our refuge, everything from physical safety to eternal salvation is covered. The exclusivity of our God-dependence is absolute in every respect. The goal of life is knowing God, not simply human flourishing, and all temporal blessings are seen in the light of his everlasting blessings. The psalmist prays for a safety that extends into eternity. David refuses to hedge his bets. He is all in. God alone is his

everything. “Apart from you I have no good thing.” Asaph echoes a similar conviction when he prays, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Ps 73:25).

David’s confession of faith in God leads to his commitment to the people of God. He identifies with “the holy people who are in the land. They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight” (Ps 16:3). The descriptive language for the people of God resonates with the church’s high calling. To know Christ is to know and belong to his people. The solidarity of the saints is a consistent New Testament theme. Jesus used metaphors and analogies, such as the “little flock” and the vine and the branches to picture the emerging church (Luke 12:32; John 15). The apostles spoke of God’s chosen people and members of God’s household (Col 3:12; Eph 2:19). Peter emphasized, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

“We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Consequently, we no longer seek our salvation, our deliverance, our justification in ourselves but in Jesus Christ.²¹³ We belong together not because of what we bring to the community, but because of who Christ is and what he has done for us. “The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.”²¹⁴

The psalmist’s delight in the people of God is set in contrast to “those who run after other gods” (Ps 16:4). There is a tension between the faithful and the faithless running through the psalmist’s home culture. The noble people to whom the psalmist refers may be a minority among a syncretistic majority, who want Yahweh and the gods of their culture. They have no qualms about verbalizing their loyalty to Yahweh while pursuing pagan gods. They have hedged their bets. They want to honor the cultural gods as well as the God of their heritage. Libations of blood stand for costly sacrifices offered in a liturgical setting contradicting true worship. They see nothing wrong with bowing and sacrificing to the pagan gods as long as they respect Yahweh. In stark contrast, David declares, boldly and emphatically, that he will have nothing to do with this dangerous compromise. Those who set up idols alongside Yahweh are inviting disaster. He will not even mention the names of the pagan gods.

Following the giving of the Ten Commandments, Yahweh issued specific worship instructions: “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold” (Exod 20:20). These worship instructions broadened the prohibition against idolatry. They ruled out any competing visualizations or existential experience that competed with absolute fidelity to Yahweh. We might have expected the command to say, “Do not make any gods in place of me,” or “instead of me,” but the command goes further. Idols can neither substitute for God, nor be placed alongside God. Those who use visual representations of God to make worship of Yahweh more accessible are put on notice that this is unacceptable.

²¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

It is the idolatry *alongside* God that is most troublesome. Pagans are expected to worship idols, but when those who follow the one, true and living God place something *alongside* God to make worship more exciting or more visceral, they expose an even greater problem than pagan idolatry. The “alongside” variety of idolatry is a far greater problem for us than we may wish to acknowledge. When we place something alongside God to make the gospel more exciting or more attractive, we say in effect, that Jesus and his sacrifice are not enough. We need a value-added gospel. When we place something alongside God, like sports or technology or work or success we compromise our commitment to Christ and invite disaster.

Technology is a form of soft idolatry that comes alongside authentic Christian devotion and competes for our devotion. Steve Jobs, an iconic figure in today’s techno-Tower of Babel, represents a twenty-first century quest for human solidarity and salvation through technology. The people of Shinar are the ancient precursors to the modern inhabitants of Silicon Valley. Steve Jobs’ passionate drive for product perfection is a modern variation of “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly” (Genesis 11:3). The belief that innovative products meet not only physical needs but satisfy spiritual needs dates back to the ancient times. The mesmerizing myth of wholeness through sexy devices misses the reality of what our technology is doing to the self. Instantaneous connectivity substitutes for intimate community. The iconic apple is offered as the forbidden fruit that is able to make one wise. The story is turned upside down in the modern pagan myth. Now, it is God who lies and the devil speaks truth. The serpent no longer deceives, but inspires: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Soft idolatry takes its toll. Fictitious gods that masquerade as “angels of light” come alongside and compete with true faith. The escapist salvation of the gods serves only to promote a false transcendence and grandiose efforts of human achievement. Yet however devious and deceptive their demonic attraction may be, the psalmist exhorts us to resist the gods. His one verse warning against suffering for the wrong reason by paying homage to our culture’s gods ought to hit home.

The Priesthood of All Believers

*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.
I will praise the Lord who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.
I keep my eyes always on the Lord,
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

Psalm 16:5-8

At the center of the psalm is a declaration, “the Lord is my portion.” This profound statement conveys a significance that eclipses the promise of the promised land. The psalmist’s language sends a telling signal. Phrases such as “my portion,” “my cup,” and “my lot,” coupled with

“boundary lines,” “pleasant places,” and “a delightful inheritance” suggest the allocation of the promised land. The psalmist is the recipient of his allotted heritage – the beneficiary of his tribe’s physical property. But the description of this landed inheritance is a metaphor for King David’s personal relationship with Yahweh. It is not about the land at all. The psalmist is like the priestly Levites to whom the Lord said, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites” (Num 18:20). The Lord himself is the believer’s everything, his portion, his destiny, his counsel, his all in all.

The fulfillment of the promised land in King David’s relationship with Yahweh points forward to the believer’s inheritance in Christ and the priesthood of all believers. The language of Psalm 16 serves as a type preparing the people of God for the redemptive trajectory fulfilled in Christ. This new reality will exchange the territorial, ethnic, and national identity of Israel for the worldwide Body of Christ drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9). In Christ we have a *living hope*, a *lasting inheritance*, and a *coming salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (1 Pet 1:3-4). We are encouraged to live into this new reality with confidence and hope. Christ’s followers have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. This inheritance fulfills, transcends, and climaxes, the covenant promises given to Israel. The promise is no longer tied to the land or to political autonomy. “The notion of a holy land is superseded by that of a holy community (1 Pet 2:4-10; see Mark 10:29-31).”²¹⁵

The psalmist’s single-minded devotion to Yahweh is expressed in bold terms: “I will praise the Lord who counsels me . . . I keep my eyes always on the Lord.” Echoes of Psalm 16 can be heard in Hebrews when the preacher exhorts believers to fix their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, since they are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:2, 28). The psalmist is an example to the believer of how to set apart Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Pet 3:15). Through constant contemplation of the Lord, David is “ever mindful of the Lord. He gives priority to the Lord in all his thoughts and actions.”²¹⁶ “To set God before us,” wrote Calvin, “is nothing else than to keep all our senses bound and captive, that they may not run out and go astray after any other object. . . . When we shall have thus turned our eyes towards him, the masks and illusions of this world will no longer deceive us.”²¹⁷ We might say the Lord has his back; the psalmist said, “With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken” (Ps 16:8).

Resurrection Hope

*Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body will also rest secure,
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.
You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

Psalm 16:9-11

²¹⁵ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 336.

²¹⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:408.

²¹⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 228

David's exuberant joy cannot be contained. "David knew, as all the saints have known, that God did not establish a covenant with him and provide for him and guide him throughout his life, only to abandon him at the moment of his greatest need, death."²¹⁸ The distinctive testimony of the psalm points beyond the immediate crisis and deliverance and expresses an ultimate resolution to the crisis of mortality. David's words "are extravagant for his own experience" and hint at a deeper hope than temporary healing and physical well-being.²¹⁹ There is of course deep gratitude for God's daily provision of health and material well-being, but there is something more going on here than "the provision of everyday needs."²²⁰

Resurrection hope pervades the New Testament understanding of Old Testament faith. The apostles had no trouble reading the Bible backwards in the light of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus set the precedent when he challenged the religious leaders saying, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? . . . Now about the dead rising — have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" (Mark 12:24-27).

The apostles were convinced that the risen Lord Jesus Christ had "destroyed death and [had] brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10). This is why the apostle Peter quoted freely from Psalm 16:8-11 in his sermon at Pentecost. Peter credited David with the eyes of faith that saw beyond the realm of death. Peter declared, "Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did he body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of it" (Acts 2:31-32).²²¹ The apostle Paul quoted from Psalm 16 in his synagogue sermon at Pisidian Antioch. He declared, "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father.' God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessing promised to David' (Isa 55:3). So it is also stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your holy one see decay' (Ps 16:10, LXX). Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not decay" (Acts 13:32-37).

David's confidence was based on faith in God's redemptive provision. His hoped for expectation was articulated memorably, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." What David says in Psalm 16 about life liberated from death corresponds to the later explicit New Testament truth of the hope of the resurrection. We believe he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to say what he said, but to what extent he envisioned how this resurrection hope

²¹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:409.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 410.

²²⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 234.

²²¹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 256. Hays commenting on 1 Cor 15:4 writes, ". . .the Scriptures that point to the resurrection are probably those Psalms that praise God for deliverance of the righteous sufferer; for a clear example of this sort of exegesis in the early traditio, see the reading of Psalm 16 in Acts 2:24-32. The psalm is understood here as prefiguring 'the resurrection of the Christ' (Acts 2:31)."

would be realized we do not know. But what we can say is that “the later truth . . . is intimately related to the truth he did know; so that, in hitting out something like it, he was in touch with the very same reality in which the fuller truth is rooted.” C. S. Lewis continues, “Reading his words in the light of the fuller truth and hearing it in them is an overtone or second meaning, we are not foisting on them something alien to his mind, an arbitrary addition. We are prolonging his meaning in a direction congenial to it. The basic reality behind his words and behind the full truth is one and the same.”²²²

David’s joyful anticipation and faith-filled expectation were realized in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The saints who lived by faith before the time of Christ and his life, death, and resurrection, experience the same hope that today’s saints who live by faith experience. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). When we leave this space / time continuum through physical death we enter into God’s presence and his eternal present time. At his right hand all things past, present, and future are present to God in that moment. In that day, memory, experience, and hope will converge.²²³ We are not subject to decay and we do not go down to the pit. “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” And we will say with the apostle Paul, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:53, 54). For “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you (Rom 8:11).

²²² Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 102-103.

²²³ Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, 35. Buechner writes, “Maybe the most sacred function of memory is just that: to render the distinction between past, present, and future ultimately meaningless; to enable us at some level of our being to inhabit that same eternity which it is said that God himself inhabits.”

Psalm 17 brings us down to earth again after the unshakeable confidence of Psalm 15 and the resurrection hope of Psalm 16. This psalm has near universal application for all Christians facing opposition. David's plea for help rests in his abiding relationship with the Lord. Although it is impossible to know the back story, Psalm 17 fits with 1 Samuel 24, when David spared Saul's life even though king Saul was hunting him down to take his life (1 Sam 24:11). The psalm also corresponds well with Abigail's prayerful prophecy: "The Lord your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the Lord's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away, as from the pocket of a sling" (1 Sam 25:28-29).

Hear My Prayer

*Hear me, Lord, my plea is just;
listen to my cry.
Hear my prayer –
it does not rise from deceitful lips.
Let my vindication come from you;
may your eyes see what is right.
Though you probe my heart,
though you examine me at night and test me,
you will find that I have planned no evil;
my mouth has not transgressed.
Though people try to bribe me,
I have kept myself from the ways of the violent
through what your lips have commanded.
My steps have held to your paths;
my feet have not stumbled.*

Psalm 17:1-5

David pleads with the covenant-keeping God, Yahweh, to hear his righteous plea, to listen to his cry and to hear his prayer. The threefold plea "strikes a note of urgency and the urgency of his vindication in the face of severe opposition."²²⁴ David's prayer reflects the confidence promised to believers in Hebrews: "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). The boldness of his prayer "is primarily a testimony to the faith of the covenant community" and anticipates the free access we have into God's presence secured for all believers through our great High Priest Jesus Christ.²²⁵ David believed in the steadfast love of the Lord and depended upon the covenant God. "Though the psalm is written in the language of individuality, it does not contain the words of a

²²⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:420.

²²⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 165.

lonely and bold pioneer of crisis; it contains rather the words of one sharing in the past and present experience of a community that had known God as deliverer.”²²⁶

David’s plea to be heard does not rest on self-righteousness. It rests on the bedrock conviction that the righteousness formed and shaped in him is by the grace of Yahweh. Like Job before him, David had a true understanding of righteousness. His righteousness grew out of loving the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength (Deut 6:5). He was not righteous in exchange for favors from God. David expressed a radical confidence in his understanding of integrity. God is God, and true righteousness is unchanging. He refused to let go of his God-centered conviction about righteousness. Psalm 17 is in the spirit of Job’s defense of righteousness: “I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live” (Job 27:5-6).

David’s profile of righteousness is worth emulating. He began by claiming that his prayer does not rise from deceitful lips and he validated that claim by turning to Yahweh, the only person who could know its validity: “Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right” (Ps 17:2). Self-righteousness makes “me” the judge and jury, but the psalmist will have none of that. Only the Lord can vindicate him. The Lord probes his heart. Only the Lord knows his motives. Alone with his thoughts at night, the psalmist examines himself to see if there is any wicked way in him and as he does this night after night. He knows the Lord is right there with him testing him. Sincerity welcomes scrutiny. Honesty is its own defense. Deception, not truth, requires a bodyguard of lies.

His righteousness has been tested by people who have tried to bribe him. Undoubtedly they have used a variety of strategies to win him over. They have appealed to his pride, questioned his loyalty, and enticed him with benefits. They have sought to intimidate and seduce. Yet at every turn he resisted and remained faithful to God’s word. The psalmist is not confident in himself, but in God. As one translation reads, “I’m not trying to get my way in the world’s way. I’m trying to get your way, your Word’s way” (Ps 17:4 Message).

The redemptive trajectory of David’s plea points forward to 1 John where the apostle lays out the believer’s Christ-centered righteousness. We are able to “to set our hearts at rest in his presence” knowing “that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” Even as David believed in the steadfast love of Yahweh, the covenant God, we believe in Jesus Christ and “keep his commands and do what pleases him.” John writes, “The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:20-24). David prays, “My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not stumbled” (Ps 17:5). He “walks in the tracks that have been made by Yhwh’s feet and thus avoids wavering in this walk and wondering into other ways.”²²⁷

²²⁶ Craigie, *Psalms*, 165.

²²⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 240.

An Urgent Plea for Action

*I call on you, my God, for you will answer me;
turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.
Show me the wonders of your great love,
you who save by your right hand those who
take refuge in you from their foes.
Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings
from the wicked who are out to destroy me,
from my mortal enemies who surround me.
They close up their callous hearts,
and their mouths speak with arrogance.
They have tracked me down, they now surround me,
with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground.
They are like a lion hungry for prey,
like a fierce lion crouching in cover.*

Psalm 17:6-12

David's earnest desire to be heard is followed by a plea for action. His well-chosen words come out of the history of redemption. David applies "four highly charged Hebrew words" to his situation: "wondrously show," "steadfast love," "savior," and "seek refuge."²²⁸ The words are reminiscent of the Exodus and the song of Moses. David appeals to the God of Moses, "majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders," who "stretches out his right hand" and shows his "unfailing love," to "the people you have redeemed," and guides them to "your holy dwelling" (Exod 15:11-12). David identifies with the Israelites fleeing Egypt and he prays for an Exodus-like deliverance from his foes.

David used two metaphors to picture his relationship with Yahweh: "Keep me as the apple of your eye" (Deut 32:10; Zech 2:8), and "Hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Deut 32:22; Ps 36:7, 57:1, 61:4; Matt 23:37). "Apple" was an Old English idiom for the eye's pupil and referred metaphorically to a person cherished above all others in the eye of the beholder. Our English word, "pupil" comes from the Latin "pūpilla," meaning a little girl or a little doll. There are two meanings for "pupil," a contractile aperture of the iris of the eye, and a young child in school. The literal meaning in Hebrew is "the little man" of the eye.²²⁹ The metaphor implies two things about the relationship, intimacy and youth. To see our own tiny image in another's eye requires us to peer into their eyes. It is the gaze of a child looking into the eyes of a parent. The psalmist's plea is for the Lord to never let him – a child of God – out of his protective, loving sight.

Although the second metaphor, "hide me under the shadow of your wings," may seem out of place it "rhymes" perfectly with the "apple of your eye" image because it conveys the same two relational elements: intimacy and youth. At the end of his ministry when the religious leaders were conspiring to bring Jesus down, he used this "under the shadow of your wings" metaphor.

²²⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 87.

²²⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:425.

He railed against the teachers of the law and Pharisees for their hard-hearted hypocrisy in his final Temple sermon. His conclusion was a lament: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt 23:37). The image of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings captures the plea of the psalmist for Yahweh’s loving and protective care.

David’s plea for God’s protective care is captured in two images and is immediately set in contrast with the wicked who are out to destroy him. The idiom he used to describe his foes is difficult to translate. It literally reads, “they have closed their fat.”²³⁰ This has led some to speculate that the midriff (“fat”) suggests the location of the heart,²³¹ meaning that David’s enemies have “closed up their callous hearts” (NIV), or “they close their hearts to pity” (ESV). Peter Craigie suggests that Deuteronomy 32 may hold the key to interpretation because all three images, “the apple of the eye” (Deut 32:10), “protective wings” (Deut 32:11), and growing “fat” (Deut 32:15) are from the Song of Moses. The Deuteronomy text reads, “Jeshurun (another name for Israel) grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Savior” (Deut 32:15). It appears that after the people of God had become fat and happy they rebelled against God and became indifferent to the real needs of others and content in their self-indulgent state. Echoes of the psalmist’s description of his foes may be found in the apostle Paul’s description of the enemies of the cross of Christ: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things” (Phil 3:18-19). Like a coalition of hungry lions the wicked have tracked him down and “with eyes alert” they are crouched and ready to kill. This immediate and pressing danger leads to a third and final plea.

The Final Plea

*Rise up, Lord, confront them, bring them down;
with your sword rescue me from the wicked.
By your hand save me from such people, Lord,
from those of this world whose reward is in this life.
May what you have stored up for the wicked fill their bellies;
may their children gorge themselves on it,
and may there be leftovers for their little ones.
As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face;
when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.*

Psalm 17:13-15

If there is a place for venting our outrage and anger against evil doers and oppressors, it is in prayer. “Hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. . . .if it is not prayed we have lost an essential insight and energy in doing battle with evil.”²³² Note that the psalmist does not threaten the wicked on

²³⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 160.

²³¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 242.

²³² Peterson, *Answering God*, 99.

Yahweh's behalf, as if he could speak for God. Instead, he prays. Nor does he lash out against Yahweh and threaten to turn from God if he does not act. Implicit in the psalmist's appeal is his powerlessness to judge the wicked, vindicate the righteous, and put an end to evil. He does not say what he will do if God does not respond, because he is confident that the Lord will respond and execute righteous judgment and vindication. What he does not say may be nearly as important as what he does say.

The only way the wicked will be brought down is if the Lord rises up. The only way the righteous will be rescued is if the Lord acts. The psalmist uses three metaphors to describe the Lord's action: rising up, wielding his sword, and raising his hand. Here at the end of the psalm the wicked are described in two simple ways. They live for this world alone and they only want what this world provides. The wicked and their children are driven by worldly appetites and they fill their bellies with everything the world has to offer. The wicked participate in their own destruction by indulging exclusively in worldly things. They "have fallen into the pit they have dug" (Ps 9:15). "Their feet are caught in the net they have hidden" (Ps 9:15). And God gives them up to their sinful desires (Rom 1:24). What Jesus said was true in David's day and remains true in our day: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21).

The sense of doom and gloom is broken with the psalmist's "But as for me." The final statement shifts from judgment to vindication, from face to face confrontation to face to face communion, and from death to resurrection. The psalm pivots sharply to a resounding note of hope, ending in harmony with the conclusion of Psalm 16, "You make known to me the path of life; and fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps 16:11).

We are impressed by the psalmist's resounding confidence in Yahweh's salvation: "I will be vindicated; I will see your face; I will awake; I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness." The psalmist's focus at the end is not on his short-term rescue and relief, but on his resurrection. His expectation is everlasting life in the presence of God (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). The psalmist has used anthropomorphic imagery for God throughout Psalm 17: "may your *eyes* see what is right" (v1); "what your *lips* have commanded" (v4); "turn your *ear* to me" (v6); "save by your right *hand*" (v7, 14); and "I will see your *face*" (v15). "If Yhwh has all these, it is logical enough to envisage Yhwh's having a form," and thus, writes Goldingay, "it is logical enough finally to ask for the involvement of Yhwh's whole person . . ." ²³³ The language imagines what the heart longs for and what the intuitive grasp of salvation history anticipates. We are being led to expect God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope purify themselves, just as he is pure." 1 John 3:2-3

²³³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 245.

Psalm 18 is a messianic/royal psalm in which David celebrates his devotion for the Lord and the Lord's unfailing love for his anointed king. The flow of the psalms is intentional. The psalmist juxtaposes pleas for help (Ps 17) with songs of praise (Ps 18) and places instruction (torah) psalms (Ps 1; 19) in positive tension with royal psalms (Ps 2; 18). With slight variations Psalm 18 is also recorded in 2 Samuel 22. "David celebrates, in lofty strains," wrote John Calvin, "the wonderful grace which God had shown toward him. . . . He also shows that his reign was an image and type of the kingdom of Christ, to teach and assure the faithful that Christ, in spite of the whole world, and of all the resistance which it can make, will, by the stupendous and incomprehensible power of the Father, be always victorious."²³⁴

This is a capstone psalm summing up the many ways God rescued David from Saul and subdued the nations under him.²³⁵ As David looks back over the many escapes and conquests he gives all the credit to the Lord for sparing his life and crushing the opposition. For all the talk about enemies and fortresses, violence and battles, disasters and deliverance, the watchword in Psalm 18 is love. David's dynamic life is all about devoted love. Love is the theme: David's love for the Lord and the Lord's love for him. The psalmist begins by using a unique word for love to describe David's "deep feeling of compassion and tender affection" for the Lord.²³⁶ He concludes this fifty verse psalm by celebrating Yahweh's "unfailing love to his anointed" (Ps 18:50). Love is not mentioned again in the forty-eight verses in-between but everything from beginning to end is framed by Yahweh's love, that is the love David has for the Lord and the love the Lord has for David his anointed.

Psalm 18 has the character of a memoir in which David describes the strength of the Lord (18:1-2), remembers the many times the Lord intervened to rescue him (18:3-19), clarifies the meaning of Lord's righteousness and faithfulness (18:20-30), details the way the Lord equipped and readied him for battle (18:31-45), and celebrates how the Lord has established his rule and reign (18:46-50). Psalm 18 is a big picture psalm that lays out the fundamental themes of David's story in the context of worship. Psalm 18 provides a precedent for how believers reflect on God's intervention in their lives. His God-centered memoir gives shape to how we tell our stories.

My Rock

*I love you, Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

Psalm 18:1-2

²³⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 256-257.

²³⁵ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 881. Psalm 18 is declarative praise in three parts: an introduction stating the intention of the psalmist to praise, followed by a description of deliverances, and a concluding testimony to the people of God of the Lord's saving work. Waltke identifies Psalms 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 92, 103, 107, 116, 118, 124, 138, as declarative praise.

²³⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:441.

David's devoted love for Yahweh is deeply personal. His ten-fold description of the Lord delights in enumerating all the ways the Lord is his strength. "Yahweh is my Rock" is the first time the "poetic imagery of a *Rock*, representing divine stability" has been used in the Psalms.²³⁷ Palmer Robertson attributes the use of this ancient imagery to the fact that David has been saved from all his enemies.²³⁸ The Rock stands "for the stability on which the messianic kingship rests" and signals a transition from David's longsuffering struggle to the establishment of his messianic kingship.²³⁹ The word used for "my fortress" describes the huge rocky plateau located on the eastern fringe of the Judean Desert near the shore of the Dead Sea, between En Gedi and Sodom, known as Masada.²⁴⁰ Herod, king of Judea, would one day build a palatial fortress on top of the plateau in the Roman style. But in David's day it was a natural fortress, rising 450 meters above the level of the Dead Sea (or 492 yards or five football fields), covering a plateau measuring 650 meters long (710 yards) and 300 meters wide (328 yards). The meaning of these militant metaphors and impressive descriptions is meant to underscore the saving power of Yahweh to deliver no matter who or what is the enemy.

My Rescuer

*I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.
Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.
He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew;*

²³⁷ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 76

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77. Robertson writes: "The ancient imagery of the Lord's unshakable stability goes back to the prophetic pronouncement of the patriarch Jacob over his favored son Joseph. The 'Rock' of Israel steadied Joseph's bow in the face of all his opponents (Gen 49:24). Moses' final song also hails the unwavering faithfulness of God as 'the Rock' whose ways are always just, a God who does no wrong (Deut 32:4). Israel erred greatly when the nation rejected 'the Rock' their Savior (Deut 32:15). They deserted the 'Rock' who had fathered them (Deut 32:18). In no way could they lose a battle, unless their 'Rock' abandoned them (Deut 32:30). For the 'rock' of other nations cannot compare to Israel's 'Rock' (Deut 32:31). Again, Samuel's mother Hannah anticipates her son's role when the time comes for God to give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed (1 Sam 2:10c). With that future prospect before her, she delights to declare, 'There is no Rock like our God' (1 Sam 2:2)."

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁴⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:442.

*he soared on the wings of the wind.
 He made darkness his covering,
 his canopy around him – the dark rain clouds of the sky.
 Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
 with hailstones and bolts of lightning.
 The Lord thundered from heaven;
 the voice of the Most High resounded.
 He shot his arrows and scattered the enemy,
 with great bolts of lightning he routed them.
 The valleys of the sea were exposed
 and the foundations of the earth laid bare
 at your rebuke, Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.
 He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
 he drew me out of deep waters.
 He rescued me from my powerful enemy,
 from my foes, who were too strong for me.
 They confronted me in the day of my disaster,
 but the Lord was my support.
 He brought me into a spacious place;
 he rescued me because he delighted in me.*

Psalm 18:3-19

David’s message might have been compressed into a few succinct propositions, such as, “The Lord is my strength. I have kept his ways. He has saved me from my enemies.” Instead, the creativity of David’s praying imagination is put on full display. In the Spirit and with poetic freedom he compares the coming of the Lord to earthquakes, volcanos, lightning strikes, and tornadoes. Calvin reasoned that it was impossible for David to extol the power of God’s aid “sufficiently and as it deserved” without turning to the power of nature.²⁴¹ Yahweh’s voice is like thunder and his actions are like great lightning bolts. David used high impact language, because we are so slow to comprehend God’s saving greatness. Our “sluggish and weak understandings” required David to dig deep in metaphor and imagery to impress us with “the omnipresent majesty of God.”²⁴² Like a good preacher David opts for soulful word pictures over flat indicative statements. He wants us to recall the time we witnessed first hand an earthquake or a blizzard or experienced the sheer terror of a tornado. David wanted the worshiper to associate nature’s upheaval with the great truth of the Lord’s coming. The Lord makes his powerful presence felt in unforgettable ways. An actual encounter with the living God and his awesome power is life-changing. Moses and all Israel experienced the untamed presence of God at Mount Sinai. The disciples experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The apostle Paul experienced the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus.

David’s earth shattering cataclysmic language also applies figuratively to the much less spectacular but no less dramatic encounters with God that we experience. When he describes

²⁴¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 267.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 268-269.

God reaching down from on high and taking hold of him and “drawing him out of deep waters,” we are invited to recall the times when God intervened to save us. *Drawing me out of deep waters* triggers the imagination. The Holy Father draws us out of deep waters. He is there to protect and comfort the believer in the midst of loss and suffering. There is a poetic parallelism between the language of divine deliverance and the experience of God’s saving presence in our lives. In the Spirit, this is the language that David used to drive home the truth that the real presence of God is living, not dead; momentous, not trivial; eternal, not temporal.

My Refuge

*The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I am not guilty of turning from my God.
All his laws are before me;
I have not turned away from his decrees.
I have been blameless before him
and have kept myself from sin.
The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.
To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
to the blameless you show yourself blameless,
to the pure you show yourself pure,
but to the devious you show yourself shrewd.
You save the humble
but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.
You, Lord, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light.
With your help I can advance against a troop;
with my God I can scale a wall.
As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord’s word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 18:20-30

David lives in a state of grace that is dependent upon the word and spirit of God. His claim to righteousness is not naive like the rich young ruler who boasted of his obedience to the law since he was a boy (Luke 18:21). His testimony is not a claim to perfection but the determination of his whole being – body, mind, and soul – to honor and obey the ways of the Lord. He attributes God’s blessing to his deep desire to remain faithful to the will of God by means of the grace of God. Psalms 15, 17, and 18 pick up on this theme. Righteousness is not a vague emotional state, but a knowable reality based on the revelation of God. It is not a matter of feeling good about oneself; it is a matter of a clean conscience before God. To have clean hands in the Lord’s sight is to be committed in heart-felt surrender to the knowable revealed will of God.

David is convinced in his soul that God is being honored in his life – not in sinless perfection, for only one was without sin (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 John 3:5) – but by the grace of God. He is not obeying the law as an imposed duty but as a privileged delight. He does not perceive God as a prison warden standing over him demanding compliance, but as his heavenly Father loving him and wanting only what is best for him. The length of David’s testimony runs somewhat parallel to the length of his description of God’s intervention. Although the psalmist emphatically maintains his integrity before God because of God, the emphasis at the end of this section shifts to God’s faithfulness, God’s blamelessness, God’s purity, God’s perfection, and God’s flawless word. David is confident, not in himself, but in God. This is why he says, “You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty” (Ps 18:27). This is why he credits God with everything good in his life: “You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall” (Ps 18:28-29). If there is any boasting to be done it is in the Lord who is his refuge. He alone deserves all the praise and glory. David’s testimony rests on God’s grace, as Calvin expressed so beautifully:

“We ought not, however, to think that David, for the sake of obtaining praise among men, has here purposely indulged in the language of vain boasting; we ought rather to view the Holy Spirit as intending by the mouth of David to teach us the profitable doctrine, that the aid of God will never fail us, provided we follow our calling, keep ourselves within the limits which it prescribes, and undertake nothing without the command or warrant of God. At the same time, let this truth be deeply fixed in our minds, that we can only begin an upright course of life when God of his good pleasure adopts us into his family, and in effectually calling, anticipates us by his grace, without which neither we nor any creature would give him an opportunity of bestowing this blessing upon us.”²⁴³

My Redeemer

*For who is God besides the Lord?
And who is the Rock except our God?
It is God who arms me with strength
and keeps my way secure.
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
he causes me to stand on the heights.
He trains my hands for battle;
my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
You make your saving help my shield,
and your right hand sustains me;
your help has made me great.
You provide a broad path for my feet,
so that my ankles do not give way.*

I pursued my enemies and overtook them;

²⁴³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 280.

*I did not turn back till they were destroyed.
I crushed them so that they could not rise;
they fell beneath my feet.
You armed me with strength for battle;
you humbled my adversaries before me.
You made my enemies turn their backs in flight,
and I destroyed my foes.
They cried for help, but there was no one to save them –
to the Lord but he did answer.
I beat them as fine as windblown dust;
I trampled them like mud in the streets.*

*You have delivered me from the attacks of the people;
you have made me the head of nations.
People I did not know now serve me,
foreigners cower before me; as soon as they hear of me, they obey me.
They all lose heart;
they come trembling from their strongholds.*

*The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God my Savior!
He is the God who avenges me,
who subdues nations under me, who saves me from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes;
from a violent man you rescued me.
Therefore I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing the praises of your name.
He gives his king great victories;
he shows unfailing love to his anointed,
to David and to his descendants forever.*

Psalm 18:31-50

Three powerful messianic realities bring this psalm to a conclusion. The Lord's anointed is perfectly prepared and equipped for battle. The Lord's anointed is completely victorious over his enemies. And the Lord's anointed is rightly sovereign over the nations. The scope of the promise and the meaning of fulfillment corresponds to Psalm 2 and Psalm 8. Whatever victories David achieved were all because of the Lord's empowerment and equipping. God is the source of all his strength and security.²⁴⁴ The psalmist's description of God's hands-on-preparation, "*He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze,*" reminds believers of the apostle Paul's prayer for the saints at Ephesus that they would have power, "*together with all the Lord's people,*" to grasp the love of Christ (Eph 3:18). This power to grasp – this ability to lay hold of God's love— requires the strength of an ocean lifeguard who works out regularly to build up his

²⁴⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:455.

forearm and strengthen his grasp. Any lifeguard or carpenter can identify with the psalmist's metaphor to bend the bronze bow and Paul's metaphor to grasp the love of God.

Physical strength and prowess represent God's power to protect and deliver. God's right hand is a metaphor for God's unbeatable power and undisputed victory. Yet in the midst of all these power images of triumph, the psalmist suddenly shifts to an unexpected and personal description of God's humility and vulnerability. "Your help has made me great" (Ps 18:35c). The Hebrew noun can be translated as "humble," or "meek," and is translated "Your gentleness made (or will make) me great" (AV, RV, RSV).²⁴⁵ David's witness to God's gentleness in the context of his exalted military invincibility and his graphic portrayal of his vanquished enemies is quite remarkable. For David to reason that it was the gentleness of God that made him truly great is both profound and unexpected.²⁴⁶ David is humbled by the humility of God that would choose him to accomplish his glory.

African theologian Cyril Okorochoa writes, "When David says, 'You stoop down to make me great,' he recognizes his humble position in regard to God. But God's stooping was even greater than David realized, as we can see in the light of Christ's humbling himself."²⁴⁷ The paradoxical impulse that David sensed grows into a full blown theology of salvation. The exalted Lord of creation made himself known in the God who kneels and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13). "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). The full extent of God's humility – his ability to stoop – to transcend his transcendence – and empty himself of his divine prerogatives – only became apparent when Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8).

The humility of God towards David is given as the reason for the miraculous vindication of David over his enemies. The gentleness of God is set in marked contrast to the brutality of David against his foes. It is understandable why Christians find David's enemy talk disconcerting. Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But in Psalm 18 David revels in pulverizing his enemies into windblown dust and trampling them in the streets. His enemies cried out for help, but the Lord turned a deaf ear to their plea and David utterly vanquished them.

Two important perspectives help today's believer to understand David's response to his enemies. First, we ought to appreciate David's place in salvation history. *Where we stand on the salvation time-line makes a difference.* God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people. Yahweh honored the promise he made to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). God chose one nation among the nations to deliver the message that Yahweh was the God of all creation and the Lord of history. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations that occupied the promised land. Under no circumstance was

²⁴⁵ Kidner, *Psalms*, 95.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 95.

²⁴⁷ Okorochoa, "Psalms," 627.

Israel to accommodate herself to the surrounding cultures. These idolatrous and degenerate cultures were a serious threat to her relationship to the Lord and the message of Moses made this clear (Deut 7:2-6).

Both Israel and the Church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites (1 Pet 2:9). The Church is commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). David’s conquest strategy was necessary in his day and Jesus’ great commission strategy is necessary in our day. The power of the cross, which refuses to rely on violence and coercion, replaces political and military aggression. The Son of David came with a radically different agenda, one that was anticipated from the beginning, but only implemented with the coming of Immanuel, God with us, the Incarnate One, who came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). The world remains, “enemy-occupied territory,” wrote C. S. Lewis, and “Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”²⁴⁸

The second perspective necessary for interpreting Psalm 18 reads David’s annihilation of the wicked as foreshadowing the end of evil when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. God promises an absolute end of evil in the new heaven and the new earth. The apostle John in The Book of Revelation announces this end and plays it out live on the stage of our praying imagination so we can feel the drama of the cataclysmic end of evil.

David’s concluding doxology (Ps 18:46-50) anticipates the power of God’s Anointed One to subdue the nations (that impersonal collective of persistent unbelief) and establish his everlasting kingdom. “The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!” acclaims the psalmist. “Exalted be God my Savior!” Psalm 18 expands on the messianic themes of Psalm 2 and points forward to the coming of the king who will “rule the nations with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Rev 2:27; Ps 2:9). Yahweh will comprise his kingdom of priests from every tribe and language and nation, creating in himself “one new humanity” (Rev 5:9-10; Eph 2:15). The apostle Paul drew from Psalm 18 to prove that the gospel of Christ was intended not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles (the nations). “For I tell you,” wrote Paul, “that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name’” (Rom 15:8-9; see Ps 18:49). Psalm 18 anticipates the universal reach of the eternal gospel of salvation and judgment. The good news, made possible through Yahweh’s “unfailing love to his anointed,” will be preached boldly, throughout the world, to every nation, tribe, language and people.

²⁴⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 46.

Psalm 19, a creation torah psalm, follows Psalm 18 a royal messianic psalm. They are bound together as a high point in Book I of Jesus' Prayer Book. Psalm 19 is as fine a representation of the psalms as we might imagine. This hymn of praise celebrates the testimony of God in creation and the revelation of God through His word. We don't know the ancient Hebrew melody that the original worshipers used, but we can imagine the power of the testimony when we hear the psalm in Haydn's *Creation*. C. S. Lewis wrote, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."²⁴⁹ The clarity and beauty of Psalm 19 contrasts with the deafening din of crunching data and frenetic activity. The psalm is the language of our mother tongue, refuting the world's materialism and relativism in one short poetic prayer. The spiritual power and creative beauty of Psalm 19 is in keeping with the truth conveyed.

The Heavens Declare

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.*

Psalm 19:1-6

The apostle Paul turns to Psalm 19 to defend the universal proclamation of the gospel. He compares the global reach of the gospel through globe trotting missionaries, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:15; Isa 28:16), to creation's cosmic testimony. Paul links the testimony of God in nature to the proclamation of the gospel in the world: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.'" (Rom 10:17-18; Ps 19:4). "Just as the Gospel is God's fulfillment of the Torah, so it is God's answer to the hope that lies at the heart of nature."²⁵⁰

David is all eyes and ears to what God has to show and say. The silent testimony of God is spoken everywhere. The message is not whispered, it is *declared*. It is a universal language that

²⁴⁹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 56.

²⁵⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 36.

knows no bounds. “The glory of God is not written in small obscure letters,” wrote John Calvin, “but richly engraved in large and bright characters, which all people may read, and read with the greatest ease.”²⁵¹ This is why the apostle Paul wrote, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). The psalmist envisions an irrepressible constant flow of evidence affirming “the majesty and power of God.”²⁵² Creation is a personified choir singing the Creator’s praises from one end of the cosmos to the other.

Jesus Christ is the source and goal of all creation *and* redemption. The early church was already battling early forms of Gnosticism. The material world was inferior, inconsequential and separated from the highly valued spiritual realm. Some Gnostics argued that physical life was so inconsequential that the body could be indulged without consequence to one’s spiritual life. Other gnostics argued that evil was so tied to material existence that ordinary life needed to be strictly regulated and harshly treated. In either case, the spiritual life was divorced from the material world. However we cannot separate our significance, meaning, purpose and value from the material world of empirical fact and cognitive reason. Wonder and awe coexist in the same realm as history and science. Faith and reason belong together in one unified understanding of truth.

The Law of the Lord

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

Psalm 19:7-11

²⁵¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 313.

²⁵² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:475.

The psalmist abruptly transitions from the eloquence of God's continuous, abundant, and universal revelation in creation, to the Lord's explicit guidance and instruction in the Law. In the first six verses the name of God is used only once and it is the least specific name for God in the Bible (El). But in the next stanza the revealed name of God, Yahweh (the Lord), is heard seven times. The wisdom of God which has been inferred from the beauty and complexity of creation is now made explicit in six elements: the law of Yahweh is perfect; the statutes of Yahweh are trustworthy; the precepts of Yahweh are right; the commands of Yahweh are radiant; the fear of Yahweh is pure; and the decrees of Yahweh are lasting and reliable. Knowing how to live in God's creation is not left to fate, but fully revealed in a wisdom that is accessible and compelling. The Lord gives precise and authoritative guidance. As the apostle Paul wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16).

The only time the apostle Paul disparaged the Law was when it was treated as mere possession; when it became a source of pride and religious self-justification; when the verbal espousal of the Law became a substitute for heart-felt obedience and dependence upon the mercy of God. In his commentary on Psalm 19, John Calvin compares the apostle Paul's negative view of the law with David's positive view of the law. Calvin addresses the apparent dilemma head-on:

"For Paul seems entirely to overthrow these commendations of the law which David here recites. How can these things agree together: that the law restores the souls of men, while yet is a dead and deadly letter? That it rejoices men's hearts, and yet, by bringing in the spirit of bondage, strikes them with terror? That it enlightens the eyes, and yet, by casting a veil before our minds, excludes the light which ought to penetrate within?"²⁵³

Calvin reasoned that David saw the Law in the light of "the whole covenant by which God had adopted the descendants of Abraham to be his peculiar people."²⁵⁴ The Law from its inception to its fulfillment was a matter of God's grace. Without Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, the Law became a list of burdensome duties and obligations, "kindling in our hearts a hatred of God and his law."²⁵⁵ The apostle Paul contended with those who made the Law an end unto itself – a means by which they justified themselves. Calvin summed it up this way:

"The design of Paul is to show what the law can do for us, taken by itself; that is to say, what it can do for us when, without the promise of grace, it strictly and rigorously exacts from us the duty which we owe to God; but David in praising it as he does here, speaks of the whole doctrine of the law, which includes the gospel, and, therefore, under the law he comprehends Christ."²⁵⁶

The connection between the complexity of creation and the specificity of biblical revelation is intentional and inseparable. There is a moral and spiritual counterpart to the wonderful beauty of

²⁵³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 321.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

nature. The impressive order and design of the physical universe parallels the order and structure designed for human relationships. In both spheres we find precision and authority. These statutes, laws, precepts, and commandments, may sound burdensome to those who do not understand that the moral order is also finely tuned and a reflection of the character of God. We need this wisdom and the Lord's guidance is altogether positive, reviving the soul, making wise the simple, and giving joy to the heart. The purpose of revelation is not to fill our lives with information but "to bring God's will to bear on [us] and evoke intelligent reverence, well-founded trust, detailed obedience."²⁵⁷ "There could be no life on this planet without the sun; there can be no true human life without the revealed word of God . . ." ²⁵⁸

Ears to Hear

*But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.*

Psalm 19:12-13

There was a moment in Jesus' earthly ministry when the two themes of Psalm 19, the testimony of creation and the testimony of the word converge. The Transfiguration was the event in Jesus' earthly life when the awesome glory of God was declared in person. The glory that was hidden became visible in Jesus' humanity. "What Jesus was *within* was once made visible without. To show Jesus' *inside out*, as it were, seems to be a major reason for the Transfiguration story to be told at all."²⁵⁹ The Transfiguration pictures the theology of the supremacy of Christ and the convergence of divine revelation (Col 1:15-20). In addition to the testimony of heavenly glory and the embodiment of Old Testament Law in Moses and Elijah, Jesus and the three disciples are enveloped by cloud and a voice from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5). The voice and the message are the same as the voice heard at Jesus' baptism, except for the command at the end, "Listen to him!" "And it is in these terse words that the story reaches its sharpest point: they are what the story is finally about; they are why the cloud, the Transfiguration, the Old Testament figures, and the Voice occurred at all. The response God wishes to his priceless Son is faith's obedience: 'Listen to him!'"²⁶⁰ The heavenly manifestation of glory, the Law and Prophets, the cloud of glory, and the Voice from heaven mean nothing if Jesus is not listened to. These are all means to an end, the end being, faithful obedience to Jesus.

The voice from heaven levels Peter, James and John. They fall to the ground face down, terrified. The unmediated, direct speech of God struck terror in their hearts. "But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus" (Mt 17:6-8). Listening begins with the reassuring touch of Jesus. The first word of the gospel is

²⁵⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 99.

²⁵⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 184.

²⁵⁹ Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2:167.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 2:173.

“Do not be afraid.” Listening begins with the Lord Jesus Christ “coming down the mountain” and heading to the cross with the promise of his resurrection.

If we have ears to hear the testimony of creation and the wisdom of revelation then what follows next in this psalm will strike us as both natural and necessary. How can we hear the heavens declare the glory of God and heed the warning of the commands of God without humbly praying for forgiveness of our hidden faults and deliverance from our wilful sins?²⁶¹ “The psalmist moves in a climactic fashion from macrocosm to microcosm, from the universe and its glory to the individual in humility before God.”²⁶² Jesus often left the crowd with the refrain, “He who has ears to hear let him hear.” As if to say, “The message is clear, it's up to you whether you take it in.” In Genesis, the line, “And God said, ‘Let there be . . . ,’” is repeated nine times for emphasis, everything is responsive to the Word of God. This makes it all the more ironic that the unmistakable voice of our Creator and Redeemer should fall on deaf ears?

The Heart's Meditation

*May these words of my mouth
and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.
Psalm 19:14*

The word “meditation” draws us back to Psalms 1 and 2, the first torah psalm and the first messianic psalm. The righteous meditate on the word of the Lord day and night (Ps 1:2), while the wicked “plot” or “meditate” in vain (Ps 2:1). The verb to meditate conveys the idea of the heart's true thoughts. These moans and musings are genuine and cannot be faked. Like a dog growling over his bone, is the psalmist delighting in his abiding relationship with Yahweh and his word. David's heart for righteousness foreshadows Jesus' heart righteousness. In the Sermon the Mount Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt 5:17).

Jesus was determined to set the record straight. His promise to fulfill the Law and the Prophets is inclusive of everything the Old Testament taught, symbolized, modeled, and looked forward to. Jesus fulfilled the covenant promises made to Abraham and David. He accomplished everything anticipated in the burnt sacrifices, Passover lamb, and Tabernacle. He exemplified the perseverance of Job and the faithfulness of Abraham. He embodied the goal of the Law espoused by the Prophets in his own righteousness. In every way – doctrinally, ethically, and ceremonially – the Law finds its completion in Jesus. All this lies behind his concise affirmation that he came to fulfill the Law. When Jesus declared that our righteousness must surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees and the religious leaders he revolutionized our understanding of the Law. He rooted righteousness in God's passion for us and in our passion for God. The desire to obey and to please God comes from within through a personal relationship with God in Christ. God's law fills our minds and is written on our hearts (Jer 31:33-34). The gospel frees us to fulfill the Law

²⁶¹ Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 25.

²⁶² Craigie, *Psalms*, 183.

through the righteousness of Christ and the example of Jesus. We are free from the law of sin and death. Therefore, by God's grace, we are free for faithfulness and obedience.

The last line of the psalm, "O, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer," causes us to think of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Incarnation of God adds a third climactic movement to the revelation of God. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3) fulfills the testimony of creation and the commands of revelation with the gospel of redemption.

The conclusion of Psalm 19 takes on special significance in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are commissioned by the risen Lord "to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). As we confess our sins and pray for deliverance, we join with all creation in declaring the glory of God. We affirm the wisdom of the Lord and the good news of the gospel. By the Spirit of Christ we are the third message, following-up the witness of creation and revelation. May the words of our mouths and meditations of our hearts declare the glory and bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Psalm 20 offers a prayer liturgy for the king when the Lord's anointed is in distress. Psalms 20-23 are royal kingship psalms highlighting king David's special relationship with Yahweh. These "royal psalms are often typological of the greater king, Jesus the Messiah."²⁶³ They envision the son of David as the Shepherd King, whose "voluntary immolation on the Cross is the point of reference in the line that reads: 'All your sacrifice may He remember and accept your whole burnt offering.'"²⁶⁴ Two horizons are often in view: the immediate distress facing David and the long-range horizon of God's ultimate and everlasting salvation through Yahweh's Son of David. "Prayed in this way, our psalm is the 'Amen' of the Church to the pouring out of the redemptive blood, when 'Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb 9:28)."²⁶⁵

In Distress

*May the Lord answer you when you are in distress;
may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.
May he send you help from the sanctuary
and grant you support from Zion.
May he remember all your sacrifices
and accept your burnt offerings.
May he give you the desire of your heart
and make all your plans succeed.
May we shout for joy over your victory
and lift up our banners in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your requests.*

Psalm 20:1-5

Matthew Henry drew a straight line from king David to Jesus Christ:

"These prayers for David, are prophecies concerning Christ the Son of David, and in him they were abundantly answered; he undertook the work of our redemption, and made war upon the powers of darkness. In the day of trouble, when his soul was exceedingly sorrowful, the Lord heard him, heard him in that he feared (Heb 5:7), sent him help out of his sanctuary, sent an angel from heaven to strengthen him, took cognizance of his offering when he made his soul an offering for sin, and accepted his burnt-sacrifice, turned it to ashes, the fire that should have fastened upon the sinner fastening upon his sacrifice, with which God was well pleased. And he granted him according to his own heart, made him to see the travail of his soul, to his satisfaction, prospered his good pleasure in his hand, fulfilled his petitions for himself and us; for him the Father heareth always and his intercession is every prevailing."²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:491.

²⁶⁴ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 37.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶⁶ Henry, *Psalms*, 87.

The redemptive trajectory inspired by Psalms 18 and 19 sets up Psalm 20 in our praying imagination as a messianic psalm. This singular focus on the Lord's Anointed renders either a primitive reconstruction of a battle scene or a modern existential quest for fulfillment as relatively unimportant compared to the psalm's eschatological horizon. When once we see Jesus in this prayer it is difficult to see anyone else, but until then, it is easy for some to be distracted by the "name it and claim it" promise that the Lord will give us the desires of our heart and make all our plans succeed.

We are tempted to read God's promise as a blank check ready to be exchanged in the currency of our personal desires. If we lift out a line from the psalm the way we break open a Chinese fortune cookie, we end up catering to false hopes and misguided fantasies. Psalm 20 teaches us how to pray for Christ and his kingdom, not how to focus on our best life now. The issue here is how God's redemptive mission shapes and inspires the believer's heart's desires. Psalm 20 gives believers a template for answered prayer. Seven submissions (answer, help, support, remember, accept, give, and make) depend upon the name of the Lord. Everything prayed, centers on and flows from Yahweh's identity and action. The people of God pray for Yahweh's responsiveness, protection, and help. They depend upon his remembrance, acknowledgment, and acceptance. Everything depends on the God of Jacob, who answers "in the day of distress" (Gen 35:3). Only Yahweh's victorious action leads to shouts of joy. Only in his name do we unfurl the banners of celebration. The psalmist's bottom line sums it all up: "May the Lord grant all your requests" (Ps 20:5c).

In Confidence

Now this I know:

The Lord gives victory to his anointed.

*He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary
with the victorious power of his right hand.*

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.*

*They are brought to their knees and fall,
but we rise up and stand firm.*

Lord, give victory to the king!

Answer us when we call!

Psalm 20:6-9

David asserts his confidence boldly: "Now this I know. . . ." This "proclamation of faith" grows out of the description of faith found in the first five verses. The psalmist was a person "who admitted his need of God and in faith petitioned [Yahweh] for help, who understood God's stipulations for true worship and faithfully observed them, and who recognized the inadequacy of his own strategy and by faith submitted it to God."²⁶⁷ As a template for intercessory prayer, Psalm 20 corresponds to our Lord's encouragement in the Sermon on the Mount, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). This is how we are to pray for Christ's kingdom work. We acknowledge our dependence upon

²⁶⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:500.

the Lord. Psalm 20 invites us to leave the world of our making and to enter into the world of God's making. We are “in conspicuous need of unselfing.”²⁶⁸ The Lord's anointed is on the throne, not the imperial self, and the psalm begins with the spiritual need for deliverance rather than our felt-need for success.

David's confidence in Yahweh is set in contrast to the world's resources – the resources that belong to expressive individualism. “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Ps 20:7). Chariots and horses stand for the nearly endless variety of inadequate objects of faith. Writer David Goetz calls these “chariots and horses” in the modern suburban context “immortality symbols.” We are tempted to create an idol out of something from our “flat, mysteryless, empirical world” that stands for something that gives us a sense of glory and self-worth. It may be our bank balance or our home or our SUV or our child or our job, etc.²⁶⁹ Whatever it is, it becomes our immortality symbol, the cultural equivalent to “chariots and horses.” But David confesses, “We trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

The dashed dreams of a self-centered world cause the follower of Christ to re-examine the meaning of Psalm 20. Instead of co-opting this psalm for selfish ends and equating our desires with God's will, we align ourselves with God's kingdom purposes. We trust ourselves to the sovereign will of God. On the eve of the crucifixion Jesus said to his disciples, “Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name” (John 16:23). In the upper room we learn that prayer's promised efficaciousness, “whatever you ask,” is locked in to our relationship with the triune God. The Father is the source of every good and perfect gift. The Son, in whose name we pray, gives the purpose and the passion for “whatever” we ask. And our Advocate, the Holy Spirit, guides us into all truth. The answer to our prayers is not controlled by anything other than the will of the Father, the glory of the Son, and the wisdom of the Spirit. Any thought that Jesus writes a blank check to be filled in by our hopes and dreams misses the point not only of prayer but of our intimacy with God.

We tend to read “whatever you ask” without hearing Jesus frame our prayer in the will of the Father and in the name of the Son. “Whatever” seems broadly inclusive of anything we want it to be. But we don't want to forget the strategic transition in the life of the disciple from self-rule to Christ's rule. Our *asking* undergoes a remarkable change, because our requests are vetted by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Psalm 20 says a lot about the person who is being prayed for. Such a person looks for answers from the Lord, longs for protection from the God of Jacob, and lives to please God. This person seeks God, depends upon God, and worships God. To pray for the Lord's anointed, the King, was to pray for the people of God and to desire God's blessing on the King was to be blessed. “We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God” (Ps 20:5). The congregation's benediction for the king underscored the solidarity of the people of God and respected the true order of blessing. The individual was blessed in community. The king represents the people of God and foreshadows the Messiah, the anointed one. Today we cannot read this psalm without thinking of Christ.

²⁶⁸ Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 13.

²⁶⁹ Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 42.

Israel's hope in the Lord's anointed, the King, is superseded by the Anointed One the Messiah.
May Jesus Christ be praised.

The answers sought in Psalm 20 are gratefully received and celebrated in Psalm 21. The two psalms “are paired as petition and answer.”²⁷⁰ In the light of Christ, Christians today echo the voice of the congregation and transpose this psalm of thanksgiving into a messianic psalm of praise. The psalm is not only about David and his victories, but about Jesus and his victory over sin and death. According to Matthew Henry, the British nonconformist Presbyterian, there is more here about the Messiah than about David.²⁷¹

The typological meaning of the psalm anticipates the strength and victory that is greater than military might and royal victory. First horizon hyperbole becomes second horizon reality. For only in Jesus Christ is the ultimate strength of the Lord revealed. Only in Jesus is the truest of heart’s desires satisfied, the richest of blessings bestowed, and the promise of everlasting life received. Salvation and judgment divide this psalm in half. Psalm 21:1-7 recounts the Lord’s royal blessings and Psalm 21:8-12 describes the Lord’s definitive judgment of all the king’s enemies and foes.

The Answer

*The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.
How great is his joy in the victories you give!
You have granted him his heart’s desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips.
You came to greet him with rich blessings
and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.
He asked you for life, and you gave it to him –
length of days, for ever and ever.
Through the victories you gave, his glory is great;
you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty.
Surely you have granted him unending blessings
and made him glad with the joy of your presence.*

*For the king trusts in the Lord;
through the unfailing love of the Most High
he will not be shaken*

Psalm 21:1-7

The Lord God makes good on his promise to help and grants David’s heart desires as only Yahweh can do. The blessings exceed the requests and satisfy the longings beyond expectation. David asked for help and the Lord gave him great joy. He asked for support from Zion and the Lord gave him rich blessings and a crown of pure gold. The king asked for the success of his plans and the Lord gave him the desires of his heart. Every request from his lips was answered

²⁷⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 103.

²⁷¹ Henry, *Psalms*, 89.

better than he hoped. His prayers for victory in battle were met with victory over death itself and the gift of everlasting life. The request for the defeat of his enemies is answered with God's gracious bestowal of splendor and majesty and the very joy of Yahweh's presence.

Psalm 21 is a reminder that the Lord answers our prayers for health and success in a greater way than we ever imagined. We pray for healing and the Lord gives us new life - everlasting life. We pray for success at work and the Lord gives us the joy of his presence. Our personal "battle prayers" are met and exceeded by the all-loving and holy God. We pray for help in school or at work and the Lord gives us redemption, reconciliation and resurrection. Our survival prayers are turned into salvation praise. The world cannot understand how prayers for a dying loved one can be answered by God in the profound hope of resurrection life, but neither can the secular mind fathom the meaning of life and love nor the origin of conscience and morality. The Lord God takes our maintenance prayers - prayers for making it through the day - and answers them in the light of his eternal glory and redeeming grace. The psalm anticipates Jesus' promise, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Picture yourself praising Christ in a worshiping congregation and you can find no better words than in this psalm to articulate your praise of Christ. It is as if the Church rises in celebration to bear witness to the fulfillment of all Christ's blessings. "The voice of the Church herself is the voice of this psalm," writes Patrick Reardon, "glorifying the Father for the Son's paschal victory over sin, death, and hell." Reardon parallels Psalm 21 with Ephesians 1:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. . . .In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Eph 1:3,7-9).²⁷²

The gift of strength celebrated in the opening line of the psalm is interpreted by Augustine *Christologically*. The great patristic theologian deftly equates this particular gift of strength with the power of God to transcend his transcendence in the Incarnation. "O Lord, in Thy strength, whereby the Word was made flesh, the Man Christ Jesus shall rejoice."²⁷³ The strength of the Lord is manifest in two ways. When Paul writes, "He is before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17), the apostle bears witness to God's cosmic power. But when he speaks of Jesus "being in very nature God" yet "making himself nothing" and "becoming obedient to death" (Phil 2:6-8) he is talking about a phenomenal strength that can only be attributed to the Lord. This is the hidden strength that made salvation possible, inspiring Augustine to "exult exceedingly" in the strength of God that led to the weakness of God.²⁷⁴ "For you know the grace

²⁷² Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 39.

²⁷³ Augustine, *Psalms*, 57.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Augustine carries this further. He equates the psalmist’s “heart’s desire” with the Lord Jesus’ desire to eat the Passover (Luke 22:15) and to lay down his life (John 10:18). He links the “the request of his lips” with Jesus’ promise to his disciples in the upper room, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Even the “crown of pure gold” (Ps 21:3) points to fulfillment in Christ: “His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns” (Rev 19:12). For Augustine Psalm 21 is all about Christ, his incarnation, his teaching, his sacrifice, his resurrection, and his exaltation. Who else but Christ is bestowed with “splendor and majesty” and granted “unending blessings”? When Jesus prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5), Augustine hears echoes of Psalm 21, “Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence” (Ps 21:6).

Calvin’s pastoral application of this psalm is noteworthy. Since “the Spirit of prophecy” had “an eye on Christ, who does not reign for his own advantage, but for ours, and whose desire is directed only to our salvation . . . we need entertain no apprehension that God will reject our prayers on behalf of the church, since our heavenly King has gone before us in making intercession for her, so that in praying for her we are only endeavoring to follow his example.”²⁷⁵ We are empowered to trust in the Lord, rather than in the cultural equivalent of chariots and horses (Ps 20:7), only because Jesus trusted in the Father and in the unfailing love of the Most High” (Ps 21:7). Our confidence lies not in “human wealth and human strength” but in the salvation of the Lord. Only through his love - “the unfailing love of the Most High” - we “will not be shaken” (Ps 21:7).²⁷⁶

The unshakeable reign of king David foreshadows the reign of Christ, the King of kings. The verb “shall not be shaken” comes from a verb that means “totter, shake, move.”²⁷⁷ The verb pivots the psalm from salvation to judgment and shifts our attention from ever lasting security to the final destruction of the wicked. We have moved from the ancient military battlefield to God’s cosmic conflict with evil. The author of Hebrews draws out the meaning of this unshakeable kingdom. He causes us to imagine what it would be like to live our lives convinced that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, ruled by the Son who “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3). He exhorts himself along with all his hearers to live into this salvation-shaped reality. “Let us be thankful and let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. . .” (Heb 12:28-29).

Shake-down

*Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies;
your right hand will seize your foes.
When you appear for battle,
you will burn them up in a blazing furnace.*

²⁷⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, 345.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 348.

²⁷⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:516

*The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,
and his fire will consume them.
You will destroy their descendants from the earth,
their posterity from mankind.
Though they plot evil against you and devise wicked schemes,
they cannot succeed.
You will make them turn their backs
when you aim at them with drawn bow.*

*Be exalted in your strength, Lord;
we will sing and praise your might.*

Psalm 21:8-13

The warning and the promise of God’s ultimate “shake-down” of the wicked runs through salvation history. The author of Hebrews recalls Israel’s post-exodus experience at Mount Sinai when the people were shaken to the core and Moses trembled with fear. If the Israelites were terrified at Mount Sinai, the terror will only be greater when God comes at the final judgment. “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (Heb 12:26-27). He paraphrases the prophet Haggai to describe the final judgment as a violent shaking of heaven and earth. “To disobey the gospel incurs judgment more certain and terrible even than that incurred by disobedience to the law.”²⁷⁸

The violent shaking of the cosmos was not meant to shake the confidence of those who have come to Mount Zion, who belong to the church of the firstborn, and who are made righteous by Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. The pastor includes himself among the unshaken saints, who are destined for everlasting rest (Heb 4:3), in “the City with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). This final, ultimate judgment pictures the end of evil. And this end will be the cataclysmic end of everything that does not belong to the Kingdom of God. God’s hand will lay hold of his enemies. He will burn them up in a blazing fire. He will swallow them in his wrath and destroy their descendants. The psalmist grabs for graphic metaphors to describe the end of evil. This part of God’s character and this part of the story do not receive much attention these days in religious circles. Judgment gets poor reviews among those who admire Jesus and practice their religion. One wonders if the inability to believe in hell is not matched by the inability to believe in heaven.

Calvin believed that David has gone beyond describing a military victory. He “sets forth metaphorically the dreadful destruction which awaits all the adversaries of Christ. They may burn with rage against the Church, and set the world on fire by their cruelty, but when their wickedness shall have reached its highest pitch, there is this reward which God has in reserve for them, that he will cast them into his burning furnace to consume them.”²⁷⁹ Typologically, the

²⁷⁸ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 363.

²⁷⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 352.

extravagant language of the psalm “will be literally and historically fulfilled when the Messiah destroys all the wicked in the final judgment.”²⁸⁰ The description of judgment in Psalm 21 fits the promise of Psalm 2: “You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them in pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9). No human power is capable of extinguishing evil in this manner and no one expected David to accomplish what is being described here. Only the Lord God can mount this kind of offensive against the wicked and David knew that. The psalm anticipates the greater Son of David coming to rule and reign, the one described in Psalm 2: “You are my son; today I have become your father” (Ps 2:7).

Echoes of Psalm 21 may be found in Paul’s letter to Thessalonica. He describes the Lord coming from heaven “in blazing fire” to “punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people . . .” (2 Thess 1:7b-10a). Until then, Calvin reasoned, “The great object which the Psalmist has in view is doubtless to teach us to exercise patience, until God, at the fit time, bring the ungodly to their end.”²⁸¹ The final verse of Psalm 21 brings us full circle back to the strength of the Lord and singing songs of praise. Psalm 20 and 21 end on the same note of victory. The expectation and anticipation felt in Psalm 20, “Lord, give victory to the king! Answer us when we call!” has been boldly answered in Psalm 21, “Be exalted in your strength, Lord; we will sing and praise your might” (Ps 21:13).

²⁸⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:517.

²⁸¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 355.

Psalm 22 bears witness to the reason for our trust in Christ and to the meaning of God's costly love. The Spirit makes a bold move here. Typology jumps the banks and yields a flood of prophecy. The implicit foreshadowing of Christ in the life of David that we have seen in so many psalms is taken to a whole new level. The Spirit correlates the poetry of lament with the actual history of Jesus' suffering and death.²⁸² Good exegesis requires us to see what the apostles believed and testified to. We cannot pray a verse of this psalm without thinking of Jesus and his crucifixion. The psalmist carries us forward to Golgotha and the Passion of Christ.²⁸³

This is no ordinary lament. The psalmist moves "from torment to turmoil to triumph" in a beautifully balanced three stanza, well crafted poetic spiral of complaint and confidence.²⁸⁴ And then after death has seemingly uttered the last word, the psalmist abruptly ends the lament and breaks into full throated praise, calling everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, to worship Yahweh.

When we read Psalm 22 in the light of the apostolic witness, we see Jesus Christ as the objective correlative. He is the person the psalm is all about. Outside of him, the psalmist's description of being God-forsaken and being laid low in the dust of death is all hyperbole. But with Jesus it is all reality. No other psalm has shaped the Passion Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels the way Psalm 22 has.²⁸⁵

When Jesus met the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, he rebuked them for not understanding the prophecies about the Messiah. He chided them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer to enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). What would he say to Christians today who refuse to embrace the apostolic witness and see in Psalm 22 the testimony of Jesus? Would he not say, "How foolish you are and slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!? To evade the meaning of this Spirit-inspired

²⁸² Calvin, *Psalms*, 376. Calvin: "To teach us the more certainly that in this psalm Christ is described to us by the Spirit of prophecy, the heavenly Father intended that in the person of his Son those things should be visibly accomplished which were shadowed forth by David."

²⁸³ Spurgeon in his commentary on Psalm 22, *Treasury of David*, quotes Martin Luther as saying, "This is a kind of gem among the Psalms, and is peculiarly excellent and remarkable. It contains those deep, sublime, and heavy sufferings of Christ, when agonizing in the midst of the terrors and pangs of divine wrath and death, which surpass all human thought and comprehension. I know not whether any Psalm throughout the whole book contains matter more weighty, or from which the hearts of the godly can so truly perceive those sighs and groans, inexpressible by man, which their Lord and Head, Jesus Christ, uttered when conflicting for us in the midst of death, and in the midst of the pains and terrors of hell. Wherefore this Psalm ought to be most highly prized by all who have any acquaintance with temptations of faith and spiritual conflicts."

²⁸⁴ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 397, 415.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

psalm requires a state of denial.²⁸⁶ Those who worship in Spirit and in truth embrace Psalm 22 – the prophetic psalm of Christ’s Passion.²⁸⁷

God-Forsaken

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.*

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.
In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

*But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.
“He trusts in the Lord,” they say,
“let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.”*

*Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.
From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.*

Psalm 22:1-10

²⁸⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol 1:341. Goldingay counters this perspective: “The direct reference of the psalm is thus to the suffering of the faithful. One of the faithful who has taken it on his lips is Jesus, which reflects the depths with which it plumbs forsakenness and hope. This does not make him the primary referent of the text. It is not a prophecy. The NT use of the psalm ‘wrenches it out of its setting’ (Sheldon Tostengard, “Psalm 22,” *Int* 46 (1992): 167-70, see 167). But that did enable it to illumine Jesus for the early church.”

²⁸⁷ We see here the tension between the historical-grammatical method and the apostolic hermeneutic. Peter Craigie writes, “Though the psalm is not messianic in its original sense or setting. . .it may be interpreted from a NT perspective as a messianic psalm par excellence” (Craigie, *Psalms*, 202). It is customary to say that Psalm 22 must be read first “in the suffering of the psalmist’s experience as an urgent prayer to be delivered from enemies who are methodically putting him to death; then it may be read on the higher level to see how the psalm was applied to the greater sufferings of Jesus” (Ross, *Psalms*, vol 1:526). My sense is that apostolic preaching skipped this first step and began with Jesus’ suffering, and only after exploring the meaning of the cross, did they come back to its personal application in our experience of suffering. The apostolic hermeneutic reverses the order and begins with Christ and reads the text backwards, strengthening the application for Christians.

The juxtaposition of complaint and confidence is emphasized in the lament. The *inclusio*, “My God,” frames the first stanza (Ps 22:1-10) and is repeated four times for emphasis.²⁸⁸ No matter how God-forsaken the psalmist felt, he clung to his relationship with God. Everything else was against him, but he was still free to address God personally. *My God* “combines God’s transcendence, indicated by ’ēl, with personal intimacy of covenant relationship, indicated by ‘my.’”²⁸⁹ “When we want the faith of assurance,” wrote Matthew Henry, “we must live by the faith of adherence.”²⁹⁰ The lament itself is an act of faith prayed in the midst of hopelessness, not only venting the agony of his soul, but confessing the object of his faith – “My God.” The outcry of “Why?” is clearly heart-wrenching, but not suicidal. “The suppliant’s three calls to God demonstrate his persistence in faith, not a deluded defeatist.”²⁹¹ Matthew Henry writes, “This *may be applied* to David, or any other child of God,” who is “overwhelmed with grief and terror,” who is “forsaken of God, unhelped, unheard, yet calling him, again and again, ‘My God,’ and continuing to cry day and night to him. . . . But it *must be applied* to Christ” because “he poured out his soul before God when he was on the cross.”²⁹²

Of all Jesus’ words from the cross this is the hardest one to hear: “Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” (Matthew 27:45-46; Mark 15:34). Spurgeon said of the lament: “it is measureless, unfathomable, inconceivable. The anguish of the Savior on your behalf and mine is no more to be measured and weighed than the sin which needed it, or the love which endureth it.”²⁹³

The first three sayings from the cross show Christ’s love for others: Jesus prayed for his enemies (“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”), he promised salvation to the repentant thief (“Today, you will be with me in paradise”), and he showed his affection for Mary (“Woman, behold your son”). Everyone near the cross was prayed for and ministered to. At the cross Jesus declared *forgiveness, salvation* and *affection*. However, in his fourth statement, Jesus cried out to God in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus’ ministry has been marked by an absolute oneness with the Father, but in this anguished prayer we count the terrible price Jesus paid to free us from the power of sin and death. The very essence of Jesus’ ministry was his fellowship with the Father. Everything he did reflected his immediate and intimate fellowship with the Father. Jesus knew from the outset that he was headed to the cross and he knew why. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

“Our faith fails us, and then we think that God has forsaken us,” wrote Spurgeon, “but our Lord’s faith did not for a moment falter, for He says twice, ‘My God, my God.’ Oh, the mighty double grip of His unhesitating faith! He seems to say, ‘Even if Thou hast forsaken Me, I have not forsaken Thee.’”²⁹⁴ Herein lies the greatest paradox of all time. The one in whom fellowship with

²⁸⁸ Waltke, *Psalms*, 398.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 399.

²⁹⁰ Henry, *Psalms*, 92.

²⁹¹ Waltke, *Psalms*, 400.

²⁹² Henry, *Psalms*, 92.

²⁹³ Spurgeon, *Christ’s Words from the Cross*, 51.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

the Father was his right by virtue of his being, and the one in whom fellowship with the Father was his right by virtue of his faithfulness and obedience, was completely forsaken and totally abandoned by the Father because of us. Instead of being honored, he was condemned; instead of being praised, he was accused. “Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him” (Isa 53:10).

Jesus' cry from the cross embraces and comprehends all the lamentations of all God's people throughout all of time. All other cries of anguish, all other “Gethsemanes,” all other “Golgothas” look to this moment for resolution and hope. It is as if Jesus literally gathered up all the lamentations of God's people and shouted them from the cross in a loud voice. This cry includes Abraham's unspoken anguish on Mount Moriah and Job's passionate lament from the ash heap and David's utter feeling of God-forsakenness.

But no one ever uttered this cry the way Jesus did. For Abraham, Job, and David, the absence of God *seemed* very real, but for Jesus it was absolutely real. No one ever experienced the fellowship of the Father the way Jesus did, and no one experienced the burden and judgment of humanity's depravity the way Jesus did. Jesus' agony of soul was ultimately and most intensely spiritual. “Grief of mind is harder to bear than pain of body. . . Spiritual sorrows are the worst of mental miseries. . . We can bear a bleeding body, and even a wounded spirit, but a soul conscious of desertion by God is beyond conception unendurable²⁹⁵”

In Gethsemane and on the cross, Jesus anticipated and then experienced the wrath of God. He deliberately identified with our sin and our alienation from God. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed”(1 Pet 2:24). The intensity of his struggle came not from a fear of death, but from his real experience of God-forsakenness. “This marks the lowest depth of the Savior's grief. The desertion was real. . . It was no delirium of mind, caused by weakness of body, the depression of his spirit, or the near approach of death. His mind was clear to the last. He bore up under pain, loss of blood, scorn, thirst, and desolation. . . All the tortures on His body He endured in silence; but when it came to being forsaken by God, then His great heart burst out. . . It was a real absence he mourned.”²⁹⁶ Make no mistake about it, Jesus was truly abandoned by the Father, and having lived in the closest possible fellowship with the Father he knew in the depths of his being the significance of this terrible abandonment.

The weave of complaint and confidence continues with the psalmist's holy reverence for the Holy One in whom “our ancestors put their trust.” The psalmist remembers the covenant-keeping Holy One – “you are the one Israel praises” (Ps 22:3-4). His faithful testimony to God's trustworthiness and saving deliverance points to the psalmist's confidence in God in spite of his dire circumstances. His taunting mockers drive their message home leaving him with a very distinct impression: “But I am a worm and not a man.” The psalmist is scorned by everyone and despised by the people. He is sufficiently well-known to become a universally recognized object

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

of hate and free-rein ridicule. Peterson captures the description this way: “And here I am, a nothing – an earthworm, something to step on, to squash. Everyone pokes fun at me; they make faces at me, they shake their heads: ‘Let’s see how God handles this one; since God likes him so much, let him help him!’” (Ps 22:6-8, Message). No one fits this description of life-at-its-worst better than Jesus on the morning of Good Friday. Matthew echoes the psalm in the description of Jesus’ horrific experience:

“Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.” Matthew 27:39-44

Allen Ross concludes that some in the crowd who were taunting Jesus mercilessly, consciously drew on Psalm 22 to mock Jesus. Since Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and since “they knew that Psalm 22 was in their tradition a Messianic psalm about the suffering Messiah . . . they simply used a line from the psalm to mock him on the cross – not realizing that at that very moment they were fulfilling the psalm. It is an amazing case of spiritual blindness.”²⁹⁷

But once again the depth of complaint is contrasted with a picture of Yahweh’s intimacy and love. Instead of saying he wished he had never been born, as Job and Jeremiah had done, the psalmist recalls his fellowship with Yahweh from the moment of his birth. He frames his confidence in Yahweh’s active agency: “Yet *you* brought me out of the womb; *you* made me trust in *you*, even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast on *you*; from my mother’s womb *you* have been my God” (Ps 22:9-10).²⁹⁸ The fourth and final “my God” provides a personal note of confidence at the center of this lament. For Charles Spurgeon this picture recalls the birth of Jesus, begotten by the Holy Spirit and “watched over by the Lord when brought forth by Mary.” Spurgeon sees Joseph and Mary cherishing the hand of God “in the safe delivery of the mother, and the happy birth of the child; that Child now fighting the great battle of his life, uses the mercy of his nativity as an argument with God.” Spurgeon adds, “Faith finds weapons everywhere. He who wills to believe shall never lack reasons for believing.”²⁹⁹

Enemy-Encircled

Do not be far from me,

²⁹⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:536.

²⁹⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 369. Calvin sees this evidence of fatherly love as a spiritual discipline. The Holy Spirit means for us to “collect together. . . the evidences of the goodness of God, in order thereby to sustain and strengthen [our] faith.” Calvin comments that it is “by the operation of natural causes that infants come into the world, and are nourished with their mother’s milk, yet therein the wonderful providence of God brightly shines forth.” Calvin laments that we have taken “this miracle” for granted “because of its ordinary occurrence,” adding, “But if ingratitude did not put upon our eyes the veil of stupidity, we would be ravished with admiration at every childbirth in the world.” It is for good reason that infants are cast upon God, because if God didn’t watch over them “they would be suffocated in an instant.”

²⁹⁹ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalm 22*, (v. 9).

for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

*Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.
All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garments.*

*But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.
Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.*

Psalm 22:11-21

The poetic power of Spirit-driven prophecy is evident in the “nightmarish zoomorphic images of murderers surrounding their helpless victims.”³⁰⁰ With still no help in sight, the psalmist graphically portrays the grave dangers he is facing. He likens his suffering to being charged by a herd of raging bulls, hunted by a pride of rapacious lions, attacked by a pack of wild dogs, and gored by the horns of wild oxen. And if that were not enough, he paints a picture of excruciating physical suffering, the kind we associate with crucifixion. He is totally drained, completely empty, utterly exhausted, and in excruciating pain. It feels like every bone in his body is out of joint. His weak heart feels like “a blob of melted wax in [his] gut” (Ps 22:14, Message). His blackened and swollen tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, causing the Christian to think of Jesus’ fifth word from the cross, “I thirst” (John 19:28).

The psalmist has gone from hints of hope, “from my mother’s womb you have been my God,” to the depths of despair, “you lay me in the dust of death.” This last line may be the most “troubling part of the lamentation, that God seems not only to have abandoned him but is involved in his

³⁰⁰ Waltke, *Psalms*, 403.

destruction.”³⁰¹ On the Day of Pentecost, Peter set the record straight in history’s first Easter sermon: “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23).

The Spirit of prophecy has brought us to the foot of the cross. The smell of blood is in the air from nail spiked hands and feet. The victim is surrounded by a pack of wild dogs, canine and human, intent on lapping up every drop of blood and every opportunity to scorn. The psalmist is aware of people staring and gloating. His heaving body, gasping for air, displays all his bones. Every bone in his body can be counted but no one recognizes who it is that is dying on the cross. The last indignation is settled by a throw of the dice for his clothes. The apostle John will quote the psalm verbatim. “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (John 19:24). This reference to David’s royal lament psalm forms an “allusive connection” between Jesus’ crucifixion and his Davidic kingship. The experience of the crucifixion fits the royal lament psalms helps reconfigure the meaning of Jesus’ kingship.³⁰² The prophet Isaiah elaborates on this Davidic lament in ways that prefigure the crucifixion of Jesus (Isaiah 53:3-5).

The second stanza closes by pulling taut the tension between complaint and confidence. The murder scene appears almost complete, “you lay me in the dust of death,” but then the psalmist repeats his theme of confidence. He prays, “But you, Lord, do not be far from me.” He declares that the Lord is his strength and repeats the many dangers to his precious life from humans wielding swords, vicious attack dogs, hungry lions, and raging wild oxen. Nevertheless, the psalmist’s hopeful emphasis is on deliverance. He cries out, “Rescue me!” “Save me!” It is as Jesus promised, “though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

The Fifth Gospel

*I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his from him
but has listened to his cry for help.
From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.
The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him –
may your hearts live forever!*

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord,

³⁰¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:539.

³⁰² Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 327. Hays writes, “There is an implicit suggestion here that Jesus paradoxically fulfills the role of Davidic kingship precisely through his conformity to the extreme suffering portrayed in these Davidic lament psalms.”

*and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.*

*All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him –
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!*

Psalm 22:22-31

The first two stanzas of Psalm 22 describe the sufferings of Jesus. The third stanza describes the redemptive impact of his resurrection.³⁰³ The unexpected and abrupt turn to praise and witness pivots on an answer from God that remains hidden. All we know is that “as suddenly as resurrection” the psalmist “is in the house of God” leading the saints in worship.³⁰⁴ His desperate cries for help have been heard (Heb 5:7) and he is ready to declare the Name of Yahweh (“I Am”) to my people. He wants everyone to celebrate who God is and what God has done. The author of Hebrews interpreted this redemptive development from lament to praise Christologically. He wrote:

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.” Hebrews 2:10-12; Ps 22:22

In the third stanza, the Spirit of prophecy describes the *impact* of the resurrection, as opposed to a description of the resurrection itself. The bodily resurrection of Jesus empowers us to worship God in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:23). Delitzsch concludes, “David descends, with his complaint, into a depth that lies beyond the depth of his affliction, and rises, with his hopes, to a

³⁰³ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 84-85. Hays argues that Mark’s explicit use of Psalm 22:1, 18 in Mark 15:24, 34, along with more implicit parallels between Mark 15:29-30 with Psalm 22:7-8, signal the reader “that the whole psalm is to be read as a prefiguration of Jesus’ destiny. . . . Jesus’ dying cry of desperation evokes the full sweep of Psalm 22’s movement from desolate lament and complaint (Ps 22:1-8, 12-19) to passionate petition (Ps 22:9-11, 19-21a) to praise and thanksgiving (Ps 22:21b-31). If we read to the end of the psalm, we find an affirmation of the Lord’s universal dominion over the nations (like the everlasting dominion of the Son of Man in Dan 7:14) and even, for the reader who knows Mark’s full story, an adumbration of the resurrection in the glad affirmation that God ‘did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him’ (Ps 22:24-25).”

³⁰⁴ Waltke, *Psalms*, 408.

height that lies far beyond the height of the reward of his affliction.” He argues that the Spirit changes the hyperbolic element into the prophetic.³⁰⁵ The typical is elevated into the prophetic.³⁰⁶

The third stanza is informed by the power of Christ’s resurrection and takes on the significance of God’s redemptive mission. The global catholic Church is “the great assembly” and “the descendants of Jacob” are the true Jews, both Jews and Gentiles who have by God’s grace embraced Jesus as the true Messiah of all people. The poor and rich find their place in the Body of Christ. Everyone, everywhere is invited to receive him and “bow down before him.” Echoes of these words are found in Paul’s Christ hymn, “that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

Psalms 22 reflects the long-range vision of believers that Jesus spoke about in the upper room when he said, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who believe in me through their message” (John 17:20; see John 10:16). This is why Psalm 22 is known as the Fifth Gospel. Everything reminds us of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even Jesus’ shout from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30) recalls the last line of the psalm, “He has done it!” This is the line that the apostle John echoes in The Revelation when a loud voice from the throne, who identifies himself as “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” says, “It is done!” (Rev 16:17; 21:6).

³⁰⁵ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 306-307.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 307-8. Delitzsch writes, “For as God the Father molds the history of Jesus Christ in accordance with His own counsel, so His Spirit molds even the utterances of David concerning himself the type of the Future One, with a view to that history. Through this Spirit, who is the Spirit of God and of the future Christ at the same time, David’s typical history, as he describes it in the Psalms and more especially in this Psalm, acquires that ideal depth of tone, brilliancy, and power, by virtue of which it (the history) reaches far beyond its typical facts, penetrates to its very root in the divine counsels, and grows to be the word of prophecy: so that, to a certain extent, it may rightly be said that Christ here speaks through David, insofar as the Spirit of Christ speaks through him, and makes the typical suffering of His ancestor the medium for the representation of His own future sufferings. Without recognizing this incontestable relations of the matter Psalm 22 cannot be understood nor can we fully enter into its sentiments.”

The lyrical beauty of the most popular psalm in the psalter is beyond debate. We love the imagery and the cadence of the Shepherd Psalm. In times of grief and sorrow it's soulful rhythm brings comfort and assurance. This is the psalm children memorize and remember. Israel's Shepherd-King wrote the twenty-third psalm as a personal testimony and witness to the Lord's provision, protection, and abiding presence. David, the poet, the Shepherd King was right up there with Abraham, who was chosen by God to be the father of the nation of Israel, and Moses who was called to lead Israel out of bondage. All three were shepherds, literally and figuratively, pointing to the reality of the living God who was shepherding his people Israel. Psalm 23 recalls God's provision for Israel during the wilderness experience. The psalm is based on the big picture of God's Salvation History. Our aim is to take what is familiar, maybe too familiar, and draw out its true gospel meaning.³⁰⁷

*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.
He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalm 23:1-6

Our first concern is to pay attention to the redemptive flow of the psalter. Psalm 23 climaxes the preceding psalms and is best understood in the light of their meaning.³⁰⁸ Psalm 23 is the Spirit's response: "The Lord is my shepherd." The person in the foreground in each of these psalms is the Lord's Anointed One. These "royal psalms are often typological of the greater king, Jesus the Messiah."³⁰⁹ Two horizons are in view: the immediate distress facing David and the long-range

³⁰⁷ Like John Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace*, Psalm 23 is a cultural artifact, a piece of Americana and a reflection of popular spirituality. In the prophet Jeremiah's day, the people of Israel were already using Psalm 23 the way many religious people do today (Jer 12:2) as stained glass piety instead of life-sustaining wisdom. The words of the psalm were on their lips but the meaning of the psalm was far from their hearts.

³⁰⁸ Psalm 18 is a messianic/royal psalm dedicated to Yahweh's loyal love for his anointed king. This capstone psalm sums up the many ways God rescued David from Saul and subdued the nations under him. Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise to God in celebration of the testimony of God in creation and the revelation of God through His word. These creation / torah psalms reset the worship life of the believer. They re-frame our laments and struggles in the big picture of God's sovereign power and sacramental beauty and grace. Psalm 20 offers a deliverance liturgy on behalf the Lord's Anointed One and Psalm 21 celebrates the king's grateful response to Yahweh for answered prayer. In Psalm 22 the king is on the verge of annihilation. He cries out to God for deliverance, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

³⁰⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:491.

horizon of God’s ultimate and everlasting salvation through the Son of David. Psalm 23 is a messianic psalm that brings to a climax this sequence of redemptive psalms and celebrates the sovereign rule of our Shepherd and Host. The larger canonical context gives Psalm 23 special significance because its themes are echoed in the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Apostles. The prophet Isaiah likens the coming of the Lord to a shepherd who “tends his flock” and “gathers the lambs in his arms.” He “carries them close to his heart” and “gently leads those who have young” (Isa 40:11).³¹⁰ The ideal Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 is the standard by which the false shepherds are judged as well as the revelation of the Lord’s love and sacrifice.

Jesus builds on the metaphor of the Good Shepherd to distinguish and distance himself from the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders (John 9:39-41). He declared, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 14-15). Jesus merges the metaphor of the Good Shepherd with the metaphor of the Lamb of God.

He used the Psalm 23 metaphor when he ministered to Peter following his resurrection. Three times he asked, “Do you love me?” And Peter responded, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Each time, Jesus responded by saying to Peter, “Feed my lambs;” “Take care of my sheep;” “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). The call to “Feed my sheep,” may sound mundane. Jesus didn’t say, “Lead an army,” or “Launch a crusade,” or “Compete with Rome.” He didn’t even say, “Build my Kingdom.” There is nothing triumphant or glorious about feeding sheep; nothing complicated or sophisticated about it. Yet this little command led Peter into the large world of God’s life-changing salvation. What Jesus did for Peter set the agenda for what Peter will do for others. The apostles expounded on the meaning of being a shepherd in the Body of Christ.³¹¹

The Lord Is Our Pastor

The psalm begins and ends with the Lord. The first word, Yahweh, sets the theme for the psalm and is repeated in the last verse. Everything in life centers on the Lord. The metaphor of the Shepherd conveys intimacy and fellowship, as well as guidance and protection. The little word “my” reveals much. The personal character of this relationship is stressed throughout the psalm. There are 17 first person, personal references (I, me, my).

³¹⁰ Ezekiel delivers the Lord’s judgment against Judah’s leaders for taking care of themselves and neglecting the flock. By contrast, the Sovereign Lord is the true shepherd. He looks after the scattered flock, binds up the injured, strengthens the weak, and shepherds the flock with justice (Ezk 34:1-16). Jeremiah delivered a similar condemnation of Israel’s false shepherds when he declared the word of the Lord, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” (Jer 23:1). “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries,” promised “The Lord Our Righteous Savior” (Jer 23:1-6).

³¹¹ Peter reiterates the God-centered nature of shepherding in three ways (1 Pet 5:1-4). First, shepherds are entrusted with a flock that belongs to God, not themselves. Their work is always a matter of stewardship, not ownership. Pastors who refer to “my people” ought to be mindful that the people belong to God and God alone. Second, the willingness to do the work of shepherding is inspired and instructed by the will of God, not by an ambitious ego or a needy personality. The appearance of godliness is no substitute for the power of God (2 Tim 3:5) and a reputation for zeal, apart from the will of God is worthless (Rom 10:2). Faith in Jesus and the faith of Jesus are inseparable. Whatever is done in the name of Jesus is to be done the Jesus way. Third, all shepherds serve under the Chief Shepherd and their reward comes when Christ appears. The author of Hebrews underscores a similar truth when he calls the risen Lord Jesus, “that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb 13:20).

The two images of shepherd and host converge in this psalm forming an “emblematic parallelism.”³¹² The conventional two-line parallelism common throughout the psalms is missing, but in its place is a diptych parallelism, two matching halves corresponding to shepherd and host. Like two panels of a painting the attributes and benefits of the shepherd find a corresponding description in the gracious host.

<p><i>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. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.</i></p>	<p><i>[The Lord is my host, I lack nothing]. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.</i></p>
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The corresponding themes of the two halves of the psalm run parallel and unite the psalm. Shepherd and host are the two controlling metaphors, with each offering a unique yet shared meaning when it comes to provision, refreshment, flourishing, and security.

Wilderness Provision and Passover Delivery

The metaphors picture contentment. “*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*” Green meadows picture God’s provision and still waters run deep and clean. The biblical roots for the imagery of the Shepherd’s provision and protection go back to the Exodus when God led Israel out of bondage, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. The imagery also points forward. In the miracle feeding of the five thousand men along with women and children Jesus commanded the crowd to sit down “on the green grass” (Mark 6:39). The reference to “green grass” in a remote place stirs the imagination in the direction of the Twenty-third Psalm. Jesus looked on the large crowd with compassion, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things” (Mark 6:34). The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) meets Psalm 23. The Lord leads us through the struggles, trials, and difficulties of life to a place of provision, security and peace.

“*He guides me in paths of righteousness.*” First, we are comforted and then we are challenged. We are commissioned to act according to God’s will. “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*” This is a psalm of confidence. We depend on the well-prepared, well-armed shepherd with his rod (club) and his staff (crook).

The metaphors change from the outdoors to the indoors, from work to hospitality. “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*” The imagery of shepherd and sheep moves to host and guest. The scene shifts to an intimate thanksgiving banquet. The modern reader may see the psalmist mixing his metaphors

³¹² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:557.

and juxtaposing two incompatible images, but to the psalmist, wilderness imagery and the Passover feast blend beautifully. David describes a picture of celebration, vindication, and exaltation. “*Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” This last line is a wide-angled view of life’s landscape and inscape, offering the Lord’s blessing from start to finish. Our true home awaits us. Home is not where we are from but where we are headed.

As a practical corollary, Psalm 23 describes what we should look for in a pastor. The word *shepherd* translates into Latin as *pastor* from which we get our English word pastor. Originally it meant “feeder” or “giver of pasture.” Jesus linked this psalm to himself when he said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). “The Lord is my shepherd,” bears the force of Psalm 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Both psalms are messianic Psalms: David, the shepherd-king, acknowledges that the Lord is his Shepherd. Our understanding of who a pastor is and what a pastor does begins here: “The Lord is my Pastor.” If the Lord is not our shepherd—our pastor, then no human pastor will ever make a very good pastor for us. No pastor will ever become a satisfying substitute for the Lord, no matter how hard we try; nor should they.

Some people want to experience what it is to follow the Lord Jesus vicariously through their pastor, but this practice is a poor model for pastoral care. Instead of living by faith, they want to see their pastor live by faith. They want to look to their pastor for the feeling of reassurance that the Christ-life is being lived out. The pastor becomes a symbol for living the life they are either unable or unwilling to live themselves. Instead of receiving God’s grace and taking up the cross and following Jesus, they want to listen to their pastor talk about the cross. Instead of using their spiritual gifts for God’s Kingdom work, they want to watch their pastor use his or her gifts. Believers can get by like this, but they never really experience the pastoral care of the Lord. They can never say, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” They are always needy, always wanting more, always frustrated with their lives and their relationship to the Lord. They can never say, “Pastor so-and-so” is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”

The Flock

The shepherd and sheep analogy has some limitations. Elementary school children choose whether they are most like the lion, bold, confident, and strong, or like the otter, enthusiastic and entertaining, or like the beaver, practical, methodical and hardworking, or like the golden retriever, sensitive, calm and loyal. No one compares themselves to a sheep. In business, law, politics and sports, we identify with lions, bears, sharks and tigers. Can you imagine a sports team embracing sheep as their mascot? “As everyone knows, sheep are timid, insecure creatures, with little or no means of self-defense. They are not fast and there is no safety in numbers. They refuse to lie down in green pastures as long as they are restless or fearful. . .No other class of livestock requires more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep.”³¹³

³¹³ Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 70-71.

The biblical imagery of the shepherd and the flock has been equated with the pastor and his congregation. Tradition has reinforced the notion that the shepherd pastor is actively in charge and the congregational flock is passively submissive. One leading church figure, John Chrysostom, seemed to take the imagery of the shepherd and the flock literally. He believed that those entrusted with the care of souls must surpass all others and soar above them in excellence of spirit. John claimed women and most men were ineligible for such a high calling. He said, “Let all womankind give way before the magnitude of the task—and indeed most men. Bring before us those who far excel all others . . . Let the difference between shepherd and sheep be as great as the distinction between rational and irrational creatures, not to say even more, since matters of much greater moment are at stake.”³¹⁴ The dignity of pastors was so exalted that it was as though they were already translated to heaven and had transcended human nature and were freed from human passions.

The Reformation went a long way in correcting these unbiblical notions, but the distinction between pastor and people has persisted in the church today. Instead of an ontological or mystical superiority, there is now a functional superiority. The difference between the shepherd and his flock is not between “rational man and irrational creatures” but between professional and amateur or parent and child. In *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), Richard Baxter’s interpretation of the shepherd and flock imagery reinforces the importance of the active pastor and the passive flock. His daunting pastoral job description has persisted in the popular imagination of many Protestants. The pastor is called to serve “as every person’s evangelist, catechist, teacher, overseer, counselor, disciplinarian, liturgist, and preacher.” He must also minister to the sick, visit from house to house, and preside at weddings and funerals. For the most part, lay people “are essentially spectators,” or at best, third string players waiting for the chance opportunity to serve when the ordained minister is unable to perform his duties.³¹⁵ For Baxter the metaphor of the flock is an apt description of a docile, needy congregation, dependent on the pastor for guidance and correction.

Surely the meaning of the shepherd and sheep metaphor is not meant to reinforce our timidity and passivity, but rather to declare our confidence in the Lord. Pastors are no more a substitute for the Lord than congregations are a dumb flock. This is the Shepherd-Psalms not the spectator-psalm. The point here is not the weakness of the sheep but the goodness of the Good Shepherd and Loving Host. The secret of a sheep’s contentment is not in its own nature but in relationship to the good shepherd. Psalm 23 sketches seven responsibilities fulfilled by Jesus Christ our Shepherd, our Host, and our Pastor.

1) Rest and provision for life:

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

2) Guidance in righteousness:

“He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.”

³¹⁴ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, II. 2, 54

³¹⁵ Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, 105-107.

3) Comfort in crisis:

“Even though I walk through the deepest, darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me.”

4) Fellowship and protection through hospitality:

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

5) Affirmation for significant work:

“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

6) Goodness in providence:

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,”

7) Everlasting security in community and worship:

“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

To say that “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” is to acknowledge that our primary source of *rest, guidance, comfort, fellowship, significance, goodness and security* comes from the Lord Jesus. Pastors make poor substitutes for the Lord, but they make great shepherds if they keep pointing us to the Lord. Their job is to guide us to the Good Shepherd. From these seven we can build a model of what a pastor does and what a congregation should expect in a pastor. The picture is not so ideal as to be unreal and each of these attributes of care is essential.

Congregations can be saved a lot of wear and tear, frustration and exhaustion, if they are led by a pastor who refuses to substitute his or her activist agenda or religious programming for the rest and nourishment found in the Lord. “Be still and know that I am God,” will always be more important than a pastor’s “five year plan.” In this provision we identify the gospel. Green pastures, quiet waters, soul-refreshment depend upon the salvation and sufficiency of Christ. This is why we say with the apostle Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. . .” (Rom 1:16). *The Lord is our rest, we shall not want.*

A church guided “for his name’s sake,” will not be guided by the pastor’s ego, but by the Lord’s authority. The Word of God, and not the spirit of the times, will determine the right paths to take. This is why we “proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). *The Lord is our wisdom, we shall not want.*

Being a pastor means you are never very far from dark valleys. Somebody in the church is always in their deepest darkest valley, but the pastor was not meant to absorb that pain as if it was his or her own. The congregation cannot afford to live vicariously through the pastor and the pastor burns out if the pastor lives vicariously through the individual brother or sister in Christ. With that said, it is helpful for someone to say to a brother or sister who is going through the deepest

darkest valley, “The Lord is our comfort, we will fear no evil.” And often times it is the pastor who is called upon to say these very words, but we must not forget the essential truth of the priesthood of all believers. The resources of comfort in the Body of Christ are great. We remind each other that God’s grace is sufficient, for God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). *The Lord is our comfort, we shall not want.*

Every time a pastor leads worship at Holy Communion, the congregation is reminded that only the Lord can set this table in the presence of evil. It is the Lord’s body that is broken and it is his blood that is poured out, not the pastor’s. Only the Lord saves and redeems. “For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all people” (1 Tim 2:5-6). *The Lord is our Savior, we shall not want.*

Pastors would like to anoint, designate, call, and empower, but that’s not their calling; it is the Lord’s. Pastors have their limits. They must not play god nor think that in any way they can substitute for god. They would like to make people’s cup overflow, but they can’t. Only the Lord can do that. Together, we seek first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness, “and all these things will be given to [us]” (Mt 6:33). *The Lord is our King, we shall not want.*

Hopefully your pastor’s goodness perseveres, but often times it will falter or fail. There is not a pastor anywhere who does not regularly disappoint. Our frailty may be more noticeable than our faithfulness. But God’s goodness pursues us with dogged persistence. God doesn’t let up. God’s loving mercy does not tag along, as much as hound us. *The Lord is our goodness, we shall not want.*

Congregations know that pastors should not shape the church around their vision, their personality, their gifts, and their ego, but they often let this happen when they like a pastor. But it is not the pastor’s house; it is the Lord’s house. A long pastoral tenure, with an emphasis on the Word of God and an abiding friendship in the Lord, is a great gift to a congregation, but we must never forget that the house is the Lord’s house forever. Our security does not lie in a particular pastor, even when that pastor solidly and most assuredly emphasizes the rest, guidance, comfort, fellowship, significance, goodness and security that only the Lord can give. *The Lord is our pastor, we shall not want.*

In six verses of simple language and common images, Psalm 23 captures the simplicity, beauty and depth of a personal relationship with the living God. Like a beautiful bouquet, this simple psalm, with its earthy imagery and timeless metaphors, expresses the commitment of a redeemed life, the contentment of a saved soul, the commission of purposeful actions, the comfort of a peaceful heart and the confidence of an everlasting hope.

Only Christ’s Eucharistic meal does justice to the psalmist’s imagery of the table prepared in the presence of our enemies. We are reminded of the fulfillment of the Passover imagery in the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). We hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah saying, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not

open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth . . . For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:6-7, 12). We hear the voice of the Savior saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And then he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20). We were meant to read Psalm 23 in the light of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant, brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen

Hebrews 13:20-21

Psalm 24 is a creation psalm with a Second Coming trajectory. The enduring ministry of the Incarnate One – the Shepherd and Host (Psalm 23) is followed by a triumphant vision of the King of glory. The Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 is the King of Glory of Psalm 24. The last line of Psalm 23, “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Ps 23:6), moves the worshiper into the presence of God and sets up Psalm 24.³¹⁶

The Lord of the Universe

*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.*

Psalm 24:1-2

“When I was considering the possibility of embracing Christian faith as a young college student,” writes Mark Labberton, “what I feared most was that it would make my life smaller rather than larger – less love, less joy, less creativity, less wonder, less engagement.” But in time Labberton discovered “that Jesus saves people from the very smallness I feared. I saw that the very essence of the kingdom of God is a life bigger than I would ever find outside it.”³¹⁷ This largeness rests in the conviction that the earth belongs to the covenant-keeping, love-redeeming, Lord of the universe and hope of the world.

David begins with the fundamental truth that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen 1:1-2). Yahweh owns this earth and the cosmos in which it floats. Yahweh designed it, engineered it, and secured it. This faith-conviction counters ancient Canaanite beliefs and modern theories of materialism and naturalism. We are not told how Yahweh “founded it on the seas and established it on the waters,” that is the purview of scientific discovery, but we are told who owns the world: “the earth is the Lord’s.”

The brevity and clarity of David’s poetic declaration requires no apology or argument, but the significance of his conviction invites reflection. We are not the accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of purpose and promise. There is a sacramental cast to life that encourages life’s beauty and positive richness. Yahweh’s world is life-affirming, rather than life-rejecting.³¹⁸ We are stewards of God’s creation, not masters of the universe. God’s ownership leads to a preeminently

³¹⁶The psalter’s opening sequence of the Son of Man (Psalm 1) and the Son of God (Psalm 2) is repeated here in the two-fold picture of Christ as Shepherd (Psalm 23) and King (Psalm 24). In the context of these royal-redemptive psalms, Psalm 24 is a creation psalm linked to Psalm 25 an acrostic-torah psalm. This pattern is similar to Psalms 8 and 9-10 and encourages believers to see Christ as the center of creation and redemption.

³¹⁷ Labberton, *Called*, 5.

³¹⁸ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 173.

positive view of life. “A living Christian mind,” writes British author Harry Blamires, “would elucidate for the young a finely articulated Christian sacramentalism which would make sense of, and give value to, the adolescent’s cravings towards the grandeur of natural scenery, towards the potent emotionalism of music and art, and towards the opposite sex.”³¹⁹

The sacramental truth of Psalm 24 is expressed in the New Testament. James wrote, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). The apostle Paul quoted Psalm 24:1 when he sought to put the conscience of believers at Corinth at ease. “Eat anything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’” (1 Cor 10:25-26).

David means for us to grasp the largeness of God’s world. In his novel *Saturday*, Ian McEwan captures the general ethos of the modern world-view through the eyes of Theo, an eighteen-year-old. Theo belongs to a “sincerely godless generation.” “No one in his bright, plate-glass, forward-looking school ever asked him to pray, or sing an impenetrable cheery hymn. There’s no entity [like a loving, redeeming God] for him to doubt. His initiation, in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers [World Trade Center towers], was intense but he had adapted quickly.”³²⁰

Theo has his own unique philosophy for coping with life, but it is really not a philosophy as much as an aphorism—a maxim. It’s only a saying, not even a sentence, but it reduces everything down to a manageable size. Theo’s advice is this: “the bigger you think, the crappier it looks.” He explains, “When we go on about big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in—you know, a girl I’ve just met. . . or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto—think small.”³²¹

Think small is Theo’s strategy for self-preservation; *think big* is David’s strategy for praising God. Theo and David are both dealing with the meaning of life. Theo’s coping strategy is fairly typical of Western affluent people who have little to live for apart from the immediate moment. Theo limits his imagination out of fear, so as not to be overwhelmed by human tragedy. David is filled with praise and ready to worship Yahweh.

If the earth is the Lord and everything in it then *we the people* are not limited to *my people*. We are defined first and foremost as one human race in relationship to our Creator. Our ethnicity or our nationality or our gender does not increase our status in God’s eyes. The most important truth about us is that we are made in God’s image (Gen 1:26). The creation mandate substantiates the goal of salvation: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28); the great multitude that no one can count is drawn “from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9). Reflecting on Psalm 24:1 Charles Spurgeon wrote in the 1860s, “What a rebuke this is to those wiseacres who speak of the

³¹⁹ Ibid., 175.

³²⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, 32.

³²¹ Ibid., 35.

Negro and other despised races as though they were not cared for by the God of heaven! If a man is but a man the Lord claims him, and who dares to brand him as a mere piece of merchandise!" For Spurgeon Jesus Christ put an end to "the exclusiveness of nationalities."³²²

True Worshipers

*Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
The one who has clean hands
and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.
They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Savior.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.
Psalm 24:3-6*

What may impress the scholar and the reader as an abrupt transition serves the listener well.³²³ Effective communicators know the power of a quick turn of thought. The psalmist moves deftly from the Lord of the universe to those who seek his face so as to hold both realities in tension. The wide-angled theological lens zeroes in on the personal portrait of the worshiper. "The kingdom of God is always intimate but never small."³²⁴

We are reminded that Hebrew pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the great worship festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The city is the highest point geographically in Palestine. The whole process of "going up" involved physical effort and spiritual self-examination. The normal routines of work and family life were set aside for the people of God to participate together in a faith journey. It was in Jerusalem that Yahweh had made provision for worship. Unlike Mount Sinai, this "mountain of the Lord" was approachable through carefully prescribed rituals of cleansing and sacrifice. The expectation that the religion of Mount Sinai will one day be replaced categorically by something better is already in the works. The upward call of God to Jerusalem will be fulfilled in the upward call of God in Christ. "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

The metaphor of the mountain invokes in the Christian imagination the description in Hebrews of two mountains: the mountain of fear and the mountain of joy. The author of Hebrews writes,

"You have *not* come to a mountain that can be touched // and that is burning with fire; // and to darkness, // and to gloom, // and to storm; // and to a trumpet blast, // and to a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If

³²² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, at <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps024.php>

³²³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 356. Goldingay writes, "The psalm comprises three self-contained brief sections that are unusually unrelated to each other. The psalm is baffling in this respect. Perhaps the sections are of independent origin. . ."

³²⁴ Labberton, *Called*, 9.

even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear’” (Heb 12:18-21).

The physical, tangible, and visceral experience of God at Sinai served the Divine purpose, but now the pastor/preacher sees that purpose fulfilled and eclipsed by the gospel of Mount Zion. The pastor encourages us to embrace Sinai as the necessary ground for the better way of Christ. But what he does reject categorically is a reliance on Sinai religion. The gospel of Christ cannot be brought back into the old traditions of rituals and ceremonies and priestly orders and sacred edifices. That day has passed decisively. Any harkening back to the religious system instituted at Sinai violates the way of the cross. The contrast between the two descriptions could not be greater. All the identifying qualities of Mount Zion are relationally God-centered and culminate in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, whose sprinkled, sacrificial blood is powerful to save.

“But you have come to Mount Zion, // and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, // and you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, // and to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, // and you have come to God, the Judge of all, // and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, // and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, // and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24).

Instead of Sinai’s awful terror, darkness, and gloom, Zion is pulsating with awe-inspiring worship, joy, and love. There are “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” and all the righteous are the firstborn children of God, living by faith, known by name, and perfected by Jesus. In the parallel descriptions of Sinai and Zion, God is actively speaking and judging. At Sinai, the voice of God strikes terror and the people plead for relief. No one can bear the holy presence of God. But on Mount Zion, the saints are exhorted to hear the voice of God: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks” (Heb 12:25). The gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a new vision of the mountain of the Lord. Mount Sinai and the temple mount in Jerusalem have been replaced by the redemptive vision of Mount Zion.

True worshipers “ascend” into the presence of the Lord of Creation, who is Holy and Almighty, with “clean hands and a pure heart.” The ascent implies “a deliberate quest.”⁵²⁵ Nothing else matters. Worship involves an all-absorbing purpose, vision and passion, signified by both outward preparation (“clean hands”) and inward purification (“a pure heart”). Nothing is allowed to distract from the worshiper’s singular purpose, neither visible idols nor false motivations.

The Lord Jesus will identify the pure in heart in his sixth Beatitude by deliberately drawing on the language of Psalm 24. The purity of heart that he had in mind was a life of single-minded devotion to God. If the soul rejects all idols, then the true inner self, the real you, that is, the vital, living being of the person, the center of emotion, desire, intelligence, memory and passions, rejects everything that interferes, evades, subverts and distracts from pure devotion to God. And if the person refuses to swear by what is false it means that all deception, cleverness,

⁵²⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 114.

manipulation, flattery and flippancy are rejected in favor of truth, clarity, integrity, and honesty. Commitment and confession line-up together and the outer life is consistent with the interior life. Devotion to God is from the heart, rather than a performance to be seen by others. We should emphasize that these baseline qualifications for true worship are founded on God's gracious acceptance and forgiveness. The person who has clean hands and a pure heart is already living in a state of grace. Whoever refuses the emptiness of idolatry and the evils of deception and falsehood is living in gratitude for God's mercy.

The psalmist is not trying to impress potential worshipers with their sinfulness – a truth he undoubtedly assumed as we do (Isa 64:6; Rom 3:23). Nor is he implying that worship is based on the alleged merit of righteous deeds. His purpose is not to impose an impossible standard on potential worshipers, in order to convince them of the necessity of rituals of purification, as much as a life of faith and devotion empowered by God's grace. David leads us into the work of self-examination and personal responsibility, in much the same that the prophet Micah did when he compared extravagant religious rituals to what the Lord really wanted: "To act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

The benefits for this outward behavior and inward devotion are not man-made but God given, as is emphasized by the three-fold reference to the Lord. The simple clarity of what God expects from us is matched extravagantly by our Lord and Savior who makes himself known to us personally. The cryptic reference to Jacob at the end of the description of those who seek the face of God may be read this way: "This is the generation / seeking him, // seeking your face / Jacob."³²⁶ The company of seekers is represented by the name Jacob. We may interpret this as a reminder of Yahweh's loyal love and the divine humility that refuses to give up on the promise and the blessing, even though all there is to work with is a fast-talking, shifty-eyed, self-serving person like Jacob.

The Lord Almighty

*Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty –
he is the King of glory.*
Psalm 24:7-10

³²⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:583. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 360. Goldingay translates the line: "Such is the company of those who have recourse to him, those who seek your face – Jacob."

Psalm 24 may have been sung by a processional choir and David may have danced to the rhythm of its praise.³²⁷ The victorious description of the Lord as strong and mighty – mighty in battle, fits the occasion. As the worshipers approached the City of David, they shouted, “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” And those in the city responded antiphonally, “Who is the King of glory?” and the choir answered, “The Lord Almighty, the Lord mighty in battle.”

Echoes of this worship scene play in our praying imagination. The prophet Isaiah expressed similar themes when he announced, “You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. . .” (Isa 40:9-10).

Hints of Psalm 24 come through in the apostle Paul’s exclamation, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession. . .” (2 Cor 2:14). Psalm 24 and the apostle Paul remind us that the militancy of the Church is on an altogether different plane: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor 10:3-5).

Even the shout, “be lifted up, you ancient doors” (Ps 24:7) causes me to think of Jesus Christ standing at the door and knocking, saying, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Rev 3:20). The picture of pilgrim worshipers ascending the mountain of the Lord is eclipsed by the coming of the Lord, who not only comes as the King of kings and Lord of lords but as the Friend who stands at the door and knocks. The typology of Psalm 24 reaches its archetypal zenith in the rider who is called Faithful and True, whose eyes are like blazing fire and he is wearing many crowns. “He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God” (Rev 19:11-16).

³²⁷ The original occasion for this psalm may have been when King David brought the ark of God, “which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty,” from the house of Obad-Edom to Jerusalem. The Samuel narrative focuses on the tragic death of Uzzah. The person who committed an “irreverent act” by reaching out and touching the ark of God. Then the attention seems to shift to David’s wife Michal. She despised him in her heart because he danced before the Lord with all his might wearing only a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:1-23). These two events seem to overshadow the underlying story – the defeat of the Philistines and the safe return of the ark of God to Jerusalem. We see David presiding over a joyful processional. Every six steps the ark bearers stopped and a bull or fatted calf was sacrificed. In spite of Uzzah and Michal, the power of this victorious moment shines through.

This is an everyday, all-day prayer; a congregational prayer that is both personal and communal. The first line, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1 ESV) is a personal response to the worship requirement posted in the previous psalm: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? . . . He who has clean hands and a pure heart, *who does not lift up his soul to what is false* and does not swear deceitfully” (Ps 24:3-4 ESV). Patrick Reardon sees the rest of Psalm 25 as commentary on this first verse. The whole psalm reflects on what it means to lift up our hearts to the Lord and is succinctly expressed in the ancient Latin liturgy, *Sursum corda*, “Hearts up!”³²⁸

In concert together, Psalm 24, a creation psalm, and Psalm 25, a redemptive torah psalm, serve to re-orient the worshiping congregation. They re-fresh the worshiper by celebrating the foundational truth of the Lord’s sovereignty. They remind the faithful who remain vulnerable to shame and opposition that Yahweh is worthy of all trust and the true source of forgiveness, guidance, and deliverance.

Psalm 25, like Psalm 9 and 10, is an acrostic or alphabetical psalm. The order of the Hebrew alphabet guides the psalm but it is not perfectly followed. This poetic device helps, but does not dictate the outcome. “The alphabetical form suggests that the psalm is designed to cover the bases of prayer from A to Z.”³²⁹ Goldingay suggests that it was designed as a model prayer in order to teach people to pray.³³⁰ Psalm 25 is a “teach us to pray” psalm. It weaves lament and confidence in a real world picture of faithfulness. David is fearful of being put to shame, threatened by his enemies, conscious of his own sinfulness, and overwhelmed by his distresses. But David’s lament is overshadowed by his unwavering confidence in the guidance, loyal love, goodness, and forgiveness of Yahweh.

Lift Up Your Soul

*In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.
I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.
Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.*

³²⁸ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 47.

³²⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 367.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 368.

*Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from old.*

*Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;*

*according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.*

Psalm 25:1-7

The antiphonal response between the people of God and the processional choir in Psalm 24 is answered personally in Psalm 25. The call, “Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in,” serves as both conclusion and introduction. The call to lift up the city gates segues to a call to lift up one’s soul. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.” Fling open the ancient doors so the King of glory may come in and open up your heart to worship Yahweh your God. The NIV explains in a word what lifting up our heart and soul to the Lord means: Trust. However the use of the metaphor, “lift up our soul,” gives us an image that is important. To anyone tempted to be downcast, the psalmist’s call to worship is an encouragement and challenge. One of the first things nurses and doctors want patients to do after surgery is to get up and get out of bed. They want you to rise up and walk. If you fall off a horse, you get right back up.

We have a responsibility when it comes to worship to get up, rise up, lift our souls to the Lord. Worship is not something done to us or for us. Worship is an act of trust in the Lord. We declare our dependence upon the Lord. The psalm begins with the same essential truth that Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). This prayer while deeply personal is meant to be prayed in the company of God’s people.

In the previous psalm, David cites the alternative: if we don’t lift up our soul to the Lord, we lift it up to an idol (Ps 24:4). The danger of idolatry is real. We face tempting alternatives to trusting in the Lord. We may seek the worldly esteem of our professional colleagues and avoid the shame and vulnerability of our Christian identity. We may prefer the ideological and political bent of our social class over the teaching of God’s word. We may prefer the strategies of self-deception over the hard work of confessional humility. Worship is a true counter-cultural move that defines trust in real, concrete, practical terms.

With that said, lifting up our soul to the Lord, is not arduous but joyous. We are empowered by God’s grace to draw near to God. God takes all the initiative, gives all the grace, and offers up all the redemption. In other words, all “the heavy lifting” belongs to God. On our side we have openness, repentance, acceptance, submission, trust, and faith. Christians pray Psalm 25 well aware that the way to faith and trust in Yahweh is costly. It involves Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Glorification. All this and more, including Pentecost, the Church, and the mission of God, empowers us to lift up our souls to the Lord. On our side, we have receptive hearts, real confession, deep repentance, willed passivity, and cross-bearing, but God does the heavy lifting. The psalmist knows that genuine trust in Yahweh generates enmity with the world.

Rarely, do we gain the world's respect for trusting in the Lord with all our heart and leaning not on our own understanding. The world is not impressed with our submission to the word of God (Prov 3:5-6).

On the night that Jesus was betrayed he prayed to the Father on behalf of his disciples. He prayed, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world" (John 17:13-14). William Temple wrote, "The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself."³³¹ John Chrysostom chalked it up to "the natural course of things," because Christian virtue "engenders hatred." "Let us not grieve," Chrysostom wrote, "for this is a mark of virtue." This is why Christ said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own."³³² The world's hate for the Word and the Church is "a great mystery" stemming from the fact that believers are rooted "in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission." The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: "an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission."³³³

The world is ingenious when it comes to shaming the Church and making Christians feel inferior. If we believe that homosexual practice is wrong, we're branded homophobic. If we are pro-life, we are judged as anti-women. If we share the gospel, we're accused of proselytizing. If we believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation, we are bigots. To be dishonored in this way is to be betrayed by people who for all practical purposes live as if there is no God (Ps 14:1). When David says, "No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame," he is doubling down on what it means to be a resilient saint. He is depending on the promises of God to face the pressures designed by his enemies to erode his confidence and weaken his faith in Yahweh. Against all these attacks he declares his trust in God's ultimate vindication and victory.

The psalmist's plea, "Show me your ways . . . Teach me your paths," finds its dynamic equivalent in the apostle Peter's admonition to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Worship heightens our felt need for understanding and insight. Spirituality and ethics go hand-in-hand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus put a priority on visible righteousness – the kind of righteousness that the world needs to see – love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, honesty instead of dishonesty, reconciliation instead of retaliation, and prayer instead of revenge. Jesus emphasized the virtues that interface with the world before he discussed the hidden righteousness of prayer and fasting and giving. The psalmist is challenging us to do the same.

If this is truly our prayer, "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior," we will earnestly give ourselves to the prayerful study, discussion, and practice of God's word. We will not reduce the wisdom of God down to *Life's Little Instruction Book*. Jackson Brown's five hundred and eleven random one-liners may be a clever idea but reducing life to little proverbs is

³³¹ Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 322.

³³² Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 302.

³³³ Bruner, *John*, 991.

not what the psalmist had in mind. We need more wisdom than to be told, “Compliment three people every day,” or “Watch a sunrise at least once a year,” or “Remember other people’s birthdays.” Life is way too complicated for one line maxims.³³⁴ We need the wisdom of God.

The first section of Psalm 25 closes with the psalmist’s plea for forgiveness: “Do not *remember* the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.” But he sets up his plea by praying, “*Remember*, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.” And then immediately after his appeal, he pleads to be forgiven, “according to your love *remember* me, for you, Lord, are good.” His confessional scheme, “*remember. . . remember not. . . remember*” makes forgiveness dependent on the Lord’s great mercy. “The psalmist first establishes God’s own history of forgiveness and then seeks to participate in that history through the forgiveness of his own sins.”³³⁵

The particular sins he had in mind were the sins of his early adulthood. Worship has made him sensitive to old sins which he may have tried to forget or excuse or rationalize away. But after all these years, he remembers and the memory is painful. The British abolitionist William Wilberforce observed, “We tend to see only those things which we have recently fallen into, and overlook wrongs committed a while back. If recent, we will have deep remorse for such sins and vices. But after a few months or years, they leave but very faint traces in our recollection.”³³⁶ Thankfully, true moral sensitivity runs against the grain of our ethical amnesia.

C. S. Lewis argued that it was “indispensable to a real understanding of the Christian faith” for all believers to detect the “real inexcusable corruption under more and more of its complex disguises.” When a person is getting better, Lewis reasoned, “he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him,” but when a person is getting worse, “he understands his own badness less and less.”³³⁷ Detecting sin’s complex disguises is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Diagnostics requires prayerful diligence and the wisdom of insightful spiritual directors. We tend to overlook wrongs committed some time ago. “We have a strange illusion,” wrote Lewis, “that mere time cancels sin.” We recount past sins of our youth with laughter, as if the sins themselves make us more interesting people. “But mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of a sin. The guilt is washed out not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ.”³³⁸

A Meditation

*Good and upright is the Lord,
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.
All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
towards those who keep the demands of his covenant.*

³³⁴ Brown, *Life’s Little Instruction Book*.

³³⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 219.

³³⁶ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 114.

³³⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 58-59.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

*For the sake of your name, Lord,
forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
Who, then, are those who fear the Lord?
He will instruct them in the ways they should choose.
They will spend their days in prosperity,
and their descendants will inherit the land.
The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them.*

Psalm 25:8-14

When we lift up our souls to the Lord and put our trust in the Lord who alone is good and upright, we have come to the right place; we have come to the right Person. The plea for forgiveness causes the psalmist to meditate on the goodness of the Lord, who “instructs sinners in his ways,” and “guides the humble in what is right,” and “teaches them his ways.” The request for forgiveness prompts a meditation on the Lord’s loving and faithful investment in his people. At the center of a deeply personal psalm the psalmist realizes that what is true for him is true for all the Lord’s people. The Lord in his mercy puts his own name on the line and stands ready to instruct, guide, teach, bless, and confide in those who hear him. The bottom line is this: the Lord is good and upright and makes his covenant known to those who trust in him.

David’s meditation corresponds with the apostle’s Paul description of “God’s chosen people,” as “holy and dearly loved.” They are encouraged to clothe themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Forgiveness is the key to their life in Christ and their life together. “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:12-14).

Hope in the Lord

*My eyes are ever on the Lord,
for only he will release my feet from the snare.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart
and free me from my anguish.
Look on my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.
See how numerous are my enemies
and how fiercely they hate me!
Guard my life and rescue me;
do not let me be put to shame,
for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope, Lord, is in you.*

*Deliver Israel, O God,
from all her troubles!*
Psalm 25:15-22

The middle section of the psalm concludes confidently: “The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.” But by Sunday night or Monday morning whatever anguish or distress expressed in the first seven verses has returned with a vengeance. The psalmist feels trapped, lonely, afflicted, and hated. Dependence upon the Lord is not so much a good choice or a calculated move, but a desperate act of faith. For the psalmist there is no one else to turn to but God. Only the Lord can provide deliverance. With the line, “My eyes are ever on the Lord” (Ps 25:15), the psalm returns to the meaning of the opening line, “To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1). True spirituality explores the depths of what it means to trust in the Lord. The true worshiper acknowledges that there is no other place to find relief from “the troubles of my heart,” and there is no other place to find freedom from “all my sins” than the Lord. Only the Lord guards our lives, rescues our souls, shields us from shame, and protects us from the evil one.

David concludes, “May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you.” Are these attributes of integrity and uprightness given to the psalmist by God, or are they the “personified attributes of Yhwh?”³³⁹ Is David claiming “his penitent state and determination to obey God”³⁴⁰ or is he testifying to Yahweh’s integrity? Either way the attributes of integrity and uprightness belong to God and David clings to them as God’s protection against the troubles of his heart and the hatred of his enemies. Delitzsch writes, “These two radical virtues (see Job 1:1), he desires to have as guardians on his way which is perilous not only by reason of outward foes, but also on account of his sinfulness.”³⁴¹ There can be little doubt that in the mind of the psalmist integrity and uprightness are his earnest desire, in a way that anticipates Jesus’ imperative, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33) and his greatest blessing, in a way that anticipates God’s abundant provision of grace in the gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:17).

The postscript breaks with the alphabetical pattern and ends the psalm with a shout: “Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles!” The final word is a plea for all the people of God. It is reminiscent of the meditation in the middle of the psalm. The personal pleas for guidance, protection, forgiveness, and redemption are shared by the entire Church, not just the individual. Calvin admonished that whenever we bewail our “private miseries and trials,” we should extend our desires and prayers to the whole Church.³⁴²

³³⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 377.

³⁴⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 221.

³⁴¹ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 347.

³⁴² Calvin, *Psalms*, 436.

Sometimes we have a strange way of pitching the gospel message to the faithful and some preachers only seem to know how to target their Sunday morning sermon to the lost. In the presence of sincere believers who have been worshipping the Lord, these preachers assume the worst of the gathered congregation. “You may look all put together,” the preacher says, “but inside you are filled with deceit and guilt.” The preacher is in the habit of addressing unrepentant sinners, hard-hearted evil doers who are strangers to the grace of God, and who have no history of being forgiven and sanctified. He is used to preaching this way even though his congregation has just finished singing songs and hymns with gratitude in their hearts to the Lord.

The seeker in the congregation who has yet to come to Christ must wonder at the power of the gospel to change lives if a seemingly vibrant and redeemed congregation is so lost and in such need of saving. Psalm 26 defends the sincere worshiper against the well-meaning preacher who knows no other way to present the gospel than by turning believers into unbelievers for at least the duration of an evangelistic sermon. Even though the worshiper does not feel like damaged goods nor does she feel estranged from God, because she has received God’s redemptive grace. On the contrary she feels alive in Christ: forgiven and free. The psalms assume universal depravity. There is no question that everyone is a sinner: “Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 53:3). But the psalms also reflect the impact of the Lord’s steadfast love on the people of God. It is not prideful or unchristian to revel, as the psalmist does, in the power of God’s saving grace to change our lives.

Examine Me

*Vindicate me, Lord,
for I have a blameless life [for I have walked in my integrity -ESV];
I have trusted in the Lord without wavering,
and have not faltered.
Test me, Lord, and try me,
examine my heart and my mind;
for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.*

Psalm 26:1-3

Psalm 26, like Psalm 15, is a “liturgy at the gate,” dedicated to all the sincere souls who come before the presence of God with humility. These true worshipers have experienced the sweetness of forgiveness and the beauty of redemption. They are seeking vindication and affirmation based on God’s redeeming love. The concluding theme of the previous psalm, “May *integrity* and *uprightness* protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you” (Ps 25:21), introduces the opening theme of Psalm 26, “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my *integrity*, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering” (Ps 26:1). The words, “*integrity*,” “*uprightness*,” and “*blameless*,” describe a state of grace and a way of life rooted in the righteousness of God and received as the gift of God. These qualities are not the means of salvation, but the meaning of salvation. The

person asking for vindication is the same person who lifts his soul to the Lord. She walks in integrity and trusts in the Lord. The concern expressed here is the same as the plea in Psalm 139, “Search me, O 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” (Ps 139:23-23). The apostle Paul captures a similar desire in his prayer: “May your love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11).

Spiritual maturity is not a hopeless ideal but a real possibility. Sadly, we have developed the fine art of self-deprecation in order to win the favor of those who have little intention of growing in Christ. Ironically we put ourselves down to raise ourselves up; we belittle ourselves to impress people with our humility. The psalmist refuses to play that game. Like metal refined by fire, David prays to be tested and tried. The apostle Peter likened “grief in all kinds of trials” to a refiner’s fire that tested the genuineness of faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). Peter admonished believers, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Pet 4:12-13).

The psalmist is not ashamed to say that he is walking in integrity, that he is trusting the Lord, and that his feet are not slipping. Although this is not a egotistical boast, but an edifying testimony, C. S. Lewis judged the psalmist’s claim self-righteous and Pharisaical.³⁴³ But to say, “I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness,” is not patting himself on the back, but witnessing to the Lord’s faithfulness. The New Testament equivalent to this speech may be the testimony of Paul when he said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that bring salvation to everyone who believes. . .” (Rom 1:16).

Psalm 26 offers an Old Testament profile for a New Testament reality. The author of Hebrews exhorts believers to approach the presence of God “with *confidence*, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:16). The author’s focus is not on self-confidence or a winning attitude. The confidence or integrity he calls for is a confidence in Christ that spreads across all personality types and emotional ranges. To “hold firmly to our confidence” (Heb 3:6) means embracing wholeheartedly “the hope in which we glory” (Heb 3:6); it means holding “our original conviction firmly to the end” (Heb 3:14); it means holding “firmly to the faith we profess” (Heb 4:14). Confidence is not just an attitude but a way of life lived in anticipation of God’s great reward in heaven (Luke 6:23).

Separation

*I do not sit with the deceitful,
nor do I associate with hypocrites.
I abhor the assembly of evildoers
and refuse to sit with the wicked.*

³⁴³ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 58.

*I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, Lord,
proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.*

Psalm 26:4-7

These words are reminiscent of Psalm 1: “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, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night” (Ps 1:1-2). Hopefully, we will not misinterpret the psalmist’s testimony and cry, “Self-righteous!” The psalmist is not like the proud Pharisee in Jesus’ story of the repentant tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Nor is he like Pilate washing his hands in innocence (Matthew 27:24). The heart of the psalmist checks the popular bias against spiritual maturity. He does not claim “authenticity” as an excuse to disregard God’s will. Like Job he is faithful to his understanding of God’s righteousness and he seeks it with all his heart. Integrity and self-preservation cause him to keep his distance from the deceitful, the hypocrite, the evildoer, and the wicked. He is morally sensitive, not morally superior. He shuns moral pain, but he does not evade his moral obligation.

The line between the assembly of the wicked and the sanctuary of God is clearly felt by the psalmist. He loves the household of faith. His heart’s desire is to “proclaim aloud” the Lord’s praise and tell of all his “wonderful deeds” (Ps 26:7). His “separation” from evil does not shy away from ministry to the lost and needy; it demands it. Jesus and his followers are not of this world but they are *for* the world. Spiritual discipline and moral integrity are coupled with compassionate evangelism in the world. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). But if we hope to help the world we cannot become like the world. The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard believed that Christians were assimilated into the culture so completely that there was no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. Everyone was a Christian, because no one was a Christian. Christians cannot be at home in the world and at the same be “a stranger and a pilgrim in the world.”³⁴⁴

Household of Faith

*Lord, I love the house where you live,
the place where your glory dwells.
Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
my life with those who are bloodthirsty,
in whose hands are wicked schemes,
whose right hands are full of bribes.
I lead a blameless life;
deliver me and be merciful to me.
My feet stand on level ground;
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.*

Psalm 26:8-12

³⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon ‘Christendom,’* 42.

The psalmist finds his refuge in the glorious sanctuary of God. The image of the house of God invites reflection on the church as the body of Christ. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48). The relational and spiritual character of this “house” built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete than if it had been built with stone and steel. The good news is proclaimed and lived through the household of faith. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom of God in a fallen world.

Only the Lord can save him. He pleads for assurance that he will not be swept away in judgment along with the violent offenders, the perpetrators of wicked schemes, and the white-collar crooks who bribe their way to the top. As confident as he is in his blamelessness and in his resolve to trust in the Lord, he throws himself on the mercy of God. His plea is simple, “Deliver me and be merciful to me” (Ps 26:11). His humble plea for vindication depends upon the grace of God. His integrity and unfaltering trust evidence his earnestness. David serves as a type pointing forward to the assurance of salvation that will be found in Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God by his physical body through death and presented us as holy and blameless and above reproach in his sight (see Col 1:22).³⁴⁵ For now, the psalmist pictures assurance as standing tall on level ground in the company of God’s people and he is praising the Lord. The conclusion forms an *inclusio* with verse one. Trust in Yahweh prevents his feet from slipping and the promise of redemption gives his feet a firm place to stand. Yahweh has made his faith secure and he declares his praise openly in the great congregation. Calvin writes, “It is highly necessary that every one should publicly celebrate the experience of the grace of God, as an example to others to confide in him.”³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 50.

³⁴⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, 449.

Psalm 27 may be two psalms in one: a psalm of confidence (Ps 27:1-6) and a psalm of lament (Ps 27:7-14). The psalmist's masterful weave of these two themes ends on a resounding note of confidence in the Lord. "To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord," and to "Seek his face," unite both halves of the psalm. Translations can obscure this weave by using different words for the same Hebrew word. Peter Craigie identifies the following words that knit the psalm together: "salvation" (Ps 27:1,9); "opponent" (Ps 27:2,12); "heart" (Ps 27:3,8,14); "rise" (Ps 27:3,12); "seek" (Ps 27:4,8); and "life" (Ps 27:4,13).³⁴⁷ Psalm 27:1-6 picks up where Psalm 26 concludes. The worshiper's bold affirmation of unwavering faith is declared "in the great congregation" for all to hear. Psalm 27:7-13 echoes the conclusion of Psalm 25:15-22. Prayer expresses the besieged psalmist's desperate need for God. We discover that not only does Psalm 27 weave together confidence and lament but the sequence of royal-worship psalms unites these themes.

To Gaze Upon the Beauty of the Lord

*The Lord is my light and my salvation –
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life –
of whom shall I be afraid?
When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who stumble and fall.
Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.
One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.
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.
Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the Lord.*

Psalm 27:1-6

³⁴⁷ Craigie, *Psalms*, 231.

Two rhetorical questions open the psalm in defiance of our fears. The bold declaration of trust in Yahweh echoes throughout the psalms. David begins with an affirmation of confidence in God – “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” Three metaphors, “light,” “salvation,” and “stronghold,” open up a dynamic picture of God’s power to save. The power of these metaphors grows as God reveals himself through salvation history until they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The defiant question, “whom shall I fear,” finds its exclamation mark in the silence that follows. Augustine puts the first line in his own words, “Go on! Find someone more powerful, and be afraid! I belong so thoroughly to the most powerful one of all . . . that he both enlightens me and saves me; I shall fear no one except him.”³⁴⁸

“The Lord is my light” invokes a flood of biblical allusions. The metaphor is loaded with meaning, drawing Christian worship back to the beginning when God commanded, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3) and propelling the believer into the future when the garden city of God will have no need of the sun or the moon because “God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:23). “Light” recalls the Exodus and the pillar of fire to give the people light (Exodus 13:21; Ps 78:14) and foreshadows the prophet Isaiah’s messianic expectation, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isa 9:2). “Light” is associated with the coming of the Messiah (Ps 118:27) and the apostles bring the metaphor to a climax. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind,” wrote the apostle John. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus Christ is “the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:4-5, 9).

David’s confident declaration, “The Lord is my salvation (savior),” defines the object of his trust. Since the Lord is his light, his salvation, and his stronghold, he is able to say, “So, with him on my side I’m fearless, afraid of no one and nothing” (Ps 27:1 Message). Calvin drew out the pastoral implications of David’s confidence in God’s protection: “Let us learn, therefore, to put such a value on God’s power to protect us as to put to flight all our fears. Not that the minds of the faithful can, by reason of the infirmity of the flesh, be at all times entirely devoid of fear; but immediately recovering courage, let us, from the high tower of our confidence, look down upon all our dangers with contempt.”³⁴⁹

The psalmist’s confidence in God’s illuminating joy, invincible deliverance, and impenetrable refuge, led him to expect the great congregation’s participation in extolling the power of God, “that it would ravish our hearts with admiration” for God.³⁵⁰ In Christ we share the psalmist’s confidence. “If God be for us,” wrote the apostle Paul, “who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . Nothing . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:31-39).

David frames his confidence in the Lord by describing three worse case scenarios. Evildoers attack like wild animals seeking to devour his flesh, but in the darkness they stumble and fall. An

³⁴⁸ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms: 1-32*, 275.

³⁴⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 451.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 451.

army lays siege, but the fortress holds. Warriors wage war, but to no avail. God's provision of "light," "salvation," and "stronghold" protect him. Against seemingly impossible odds, David is confident in the Lord. Calvin writes, "Weighing, as it were, in scales the whole power of earth and hell, David accounts it all lighter than a feather, and considers God alone as far outweighing the whole."³⁵¹

David's description of evil is matched, if not exceeded in the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote, "Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:10-12). Peter wrote, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

David adds a fourth metaphor, *the house of the Lord*, to his picture of confidence. He transitions from military language with its focus on protection and deliverance to relational and kinship language. The "house" is a metaphor for the presence of God. David does not minimize the need for security and salvation, but he longs for the presence of God. He is certain that Yahweh will fight for him but he cries out for Yahweh's companionship. What good is salvation, if there is no Savior? What benefit is physical protection, if the presence of God is denied. Communion with Yahweh is the prize, not triumph over the enemy. David's desire to dwell in the house of the Lord anticipates the coming of the Messiah and the Incarnation of God. We are able to dwell in God's presence because, "The Word was made flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The risen Lord Jesus underscored the intimacy of the house of the Lord when he said, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

"The psalmist makes one of the most single-minded statements of purpose to be found anywhere in the Old Testament," writes Peter Craigie. He adds, "The expression 'one thing I have asked' has no parallels among the biblical numerical sayings."³⁵² This is King David's equivalent to the apostle Paul's statement, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). David reminds us of Jesus's story of the man who found a treasure hidden in a field and he sold everything he had to buy the field. He is like the merchant who sold everything to buy the pearl of great value (Matthew 13:44-46). David's passion for the presence of God is reflected in Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. Jesus commended her for choosing the one thing needed most and "it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

David's desire "to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life" is not literal in a physical or temporal sense. He's not asking to become a Levitical priest and work in the

³⁵¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 451.

³⁵² Craigie, *Psalms*, 232.

tabernacle for the rest of his life. The “house” to which he refers is not a four-walled structure nor an elaborate cathedral. It is a spiritual reality. David’s passion to live “permanently in God’s presence” is the focus of his desire.³⁵³ We see this in the New Testament when the apostles elaborated on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God’s people. They had a sense of place, not in a facility but in the household of faith. All believers are called to this “one thing.” We are all meant to “abide” and “make our home” with Jesus (John 15).

David’s desire “to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord” and “to seek him in his temple” is radically different from pagan religious customs “in which people gazed on the beautiful statues of their gods.”³⁵⁴ The Hebrew concept of beauty differed from the surrounding cultures. Beauty is found in “the splendor of a system of relationships” and in “the totality of meaning of the created order, which for God’s people was immediately evident in the whole and in the art.” William Dryness writes, “Clearly the enjoyment of beauty was integrated into the whole experience of worship. There the believer joined the congregation in rejoicing before the Lord, an experience of worship. And its temporal setting (the Sabbath) may be the closest approximation to what we might call today an aesthetic experience, but it was something more. It was a timeless present in which the worshiper enjoyed his or her liberty by sharing in the rest that God enjoyed after creation (Ps.46:10). . . . The whole experience is characterized as lovely.”³⁵⁵ For David it was the beauty of a God-centered life, the integration of meaning with every aspect of living, as opposed to a visual object to look at. Loveliness and beauty are conveyed in the Exodus, the City of Zion, and the Day of the Lord. Dryness observes, “It is difficult for us to imagine such a grand harmony and wholeness, for we have gotten out of the habit of seeing things as a whole. . . . We no longer understand the role beauty properly ought to play in our fragmented lives.”³⁵⁶

The primary aesthetic experience of worship was never meant to be in the spectacle but in the relationships. “I want to know Christ” is the inspiration (Phil 3:10). The vestments of New Testament worship are “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” The fragrance of Christian worship is forgiveness: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” The joy of worship is the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts. The truth of worship is the word of Christ dwelling in us richly. The sound of worship is singing “psalms, hymns, and songs of praise with gratitude in [our] hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:12-17).

The beauty of worship is related to a host of benefits including physical wellness, mental health, spiritual maturity, and social competence. Worship saves us from living dysfunctional and disoriented lives. Eugene Peterson writes, “Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference.”³⁵⁷ The purity of heart that wills one thing brings life into focus, controlling our fears, purifying our hopes, directing our energies, and calming our souls. For in the “day of

³⁵³ Craigie, *Psalms*, 232.

³⁵⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:628.

³⁵⁵ Dryness, “Aesthetics in the Old Testament: Beauty in Context,” 421-432.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 60.

trouble,” we will be kept safe in his dwelling, hidden in the shelter of his sacred tent and set high upon a rock. Or, as Peterson paraphrases verse six: “God holds me head and shoulders above all who try to pull me down. I’m headed for his place to offer anthems that will raise the roof! Already I’m singing God-songs; I’m making music to God” (Ps 27:6 Message).

The purity of heart to will one thing is the secret behind David’s confidence in the Lord. Soren Kierkegaard expressed this single-minded passion in a prayer:

“So may Thou give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend the one thing;
to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding;
to the will, purity that wills one thing;
amid distractions, concentration to will one thing;
in suffering, patience to will one thing.
Oh, Thou that giveth both the beginning and the completion,
may Thou early, at the dawn of day,
give to the young person the resolution to will one thing.
As the day wanes, may Thou give to the old person,
a renewed remembrance of his or her first resolution,
that the first may like the last, the last like the first,
in possession of a life that has willed one thing.”³⁵⁸

Seek his face!

*Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.
My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, I will seek.
Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
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.
Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.
Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.
Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.*

³⁵⁸Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart to Will One Thing*, 31.

*I will remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*
Psalm 27:7-14

David's prayer seems to come to an end on a note of praise, "I will sing and make music to the Lord" (Ps 27:6). But the lament that follows is certainly true to our experience of life. David has spoken of the Lord with a heartfelt sense of trust and devotion, but now he cries out to the Lord. He shifts from personal testimony to passionate supplication. "Hear my voice when I call, O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me." He has been leading us in worship, now he cries out for himself. "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, Lord, I will seek. 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, O God my Savior."

David's spirituality matches his theology. His understanding of God and his blessings calls for a face-to-face encounter. Contemplation invokes the need for conversation. "One thing I ask," moves the psalmist to pray, "Hear my voice when I call, Lord." The metaphor of the house of the Lord in the first half corresponds to David seeking the face of the Lord in the second half, "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'" David's psalm of confidence brings together understanding and experience, melding explanation and expression. He longs for the immediacy of God's presence, the intimacy of God's companionship, the protection of God's guidance, and the assurance of God's deliverance. David's passionate prayer assumes that the "one thing" is about everything that really matters.

David's passion for God reminds me of a child's uninhibited joy. When my daughter was two she greeted me with such exuberance. After a long day at work and a forty minute drive through city traffic, my home coming was celebrated by an ecstatic two-year-old. Her face beaming, her arms waving, and her gleeful voice announcing to the world that I was home. Her two older brothers were somewhat more restrained! The utter excitement of a two-year-old quickly passes but there is something evocative about the enthusiasm. Expressionless Christianity is surely a contradiction in terms. David is like an ecstatic two-year-old yearning for the impact of God's presence and the experience of God's beauty.

Augustine, in his sermon *On the Pure Love of God*, has God proposing to make a deal:

"I will give you anything you want. You can possess the whole world. Nothing will be impossible for you. You will have infinite power. Nothing will be a sin, nothing forbidden. You will never die, never have pain, never have anything you do not want and always have anything you do want--except for just one thing: you will never see my face."

"Would you take that deal?" Augustine wonders. "If not, you have the pure love of God. For look what you did: you gave up the world, and more – all possible worlds, all imagined worlds, all

desired worlds – just for God.” Augustine asks, “Did a chill arise in your heart when you heard the words ‘you will never see my face’? That chill is the most precious thing in you; that is the pure love of God.”³⁵⁹

David’s psalm supports his single minded devotion to God and his yearning for the immediacy of God’s companionship. Knowing God is the primary relationship from which all other relationships depend. This is the one relationship he cannot live without. He needs the Lord emotionally and ethically. “Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path. . .” Four “do nots” underscore this exclusive truth. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. Do not reject me or forsake me. Do not turn me over to my foes. He even says that if he is rejected by his parents, “the Lord will receive me.” Jesus gave this a surprising twist when he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

A believer began her letter to me with Psalm 27:10, “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” She explained how she had grown up in a mean-spirited, negative home environment. She identified with those forsaken by their parents. “Even as adults,” she said, “the pain may linger. But God can take that place in our lives, fill that void, and heal that hurt. He can direct us to adults who may take the role of father and mother for us. His love is sufficient for all our needs.” Her parents made life difficult by wrapping their twisted and negative attitudes “in their brand of Christianity.” Over time she absorbed their negative and condemning attitude, which made it extremely difficult for her to relate and find her place in the church. But with God’s help, she overcame her deeply rooted judgmental attitude. She concluded, “So many people in the church have been so loving, caring and kind to me. Their behavior is truly Christ-like. Because of my fellow church members, I am slowly letting down the walls I’ve built around myself over the years. Please continue to pray for me.”

For David the dangers of this world that threaten to undo him are not to be compared to the horror of the absence of God. The one thing he cannot face is God’s abandonment, and he is confident he never will. Every believer’s security rests on the same ground. Whether we are young or old in the faith our security rests in God alone. The dangers are real and we need the Lord’s protection. Like David, we heed his admonition, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” After two millennium of the coming of Jesus Christ, we wait for the Lord’s return, remembering that “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

³⁵⁹ Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Songs*. 94-95.

Psalm 28 is a cry for mercy framed by the strength of God that pivots on a call for justice. The psalms consistently discourage us from a rosy optimism and trivial pursuits. Confidence and lament are placed side by side in Psalms 27 and 28. Ecstatic praise and excruciating pain co-exist in life and most certainly belong together in worship. Psalm 27 begins confidently, “the Lord is my light and my salvation,” and then moves deliberately to lament, “Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.” Psalm 28 begins with lament, “Here my cry for mercy,” and then moves decisively to confidence, “Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy.” The chiasmic structure focuses on the psalmist’s fear of guilt-by-association and the perversity of polite evil. A healthy soul requires honesty and this psalm has it. The chiasmic structure may be illustrated as follows:

- A) To you, Lord, I call; you are my Rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent, I will be like those who go down to the pit.
- B) Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.
- C) *Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil,
who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.
Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work;
repay them for what their hands have done and bring back on them what they
deserve.*
- C') *Because they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord
and what his hands have done
he will tear them down and never build them up again.*
- B') Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy.
- A') The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
my heart leaps for joy, and with my song I will praise him.
The Lord is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for in anointed one.
Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

In worship, David makes a personal plea for mercy, not judgment. His prayer is motivated out of a grave concern that he might be lumped in with all those who have no regard for the will and work of God. He is fearful that his life is indistinguishable from the nominal religiosity of his day. David is disturbed by nice people who use their niceness as a cover for meanness and malice.

Plea for Help

*To you, Lord, I call;
you are my Rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those who go down to the pit.
Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.*

Psalm 28:1-2

Worship seeks to hear the voice of God, because, as Martin Luther said, God “does everything through His Word.”³⁶⁰ The psalmist is not a troubled agnostic but a fervent worshiper who knows how much he needs to hear from God. David prays against a deaf ear and a silent voice, not because God threatens a cold shoulder, but because he longs for communion with God and communication from God. He prays out of a state of grace that acknowledges his utter dependence upon the Lord in keeping with Jesus’ first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3). He is not suggesting that God is silent; he’s declaring that he might as well be dead if God is silent. “If all I get from you is deafening silence, I’d be better off in the Black Hole” (Ps 28:1 Message).

When we feel that God is silent, more often than not it is not God who has ceased to speak as much as we have ceased to listen. We can be assured that the word of the Lord is not going away. It is “flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times” (Ps 12:6), but we may be too distracted and opinionated to truly hear it. The word of God can be reduced to familiar platitudes rather than penetrating proclamation. Job struggled with God’s silence. God was silent for a purpose in order to prove the integrity of Job’s faithfulness. Ironically, it was when Job felt totally lost and alone that he was the most free to bear witness to God’s righteousness. It was when there was no worldly reason to believe in God that Job proved his true faith in God.

The psalmist backs up his direct appeal with a description of his body language. He is like one “standing as before a superior, raising one’s hands in appeal like a child in a classroom seeking to get the teacher’s attention, or opening one’s hands in readiness to receive, and opening one’s eyes to look to God.”³⁶¹ Luther saw the image of hands lifted in worship as testimony to the work of our hands lifted up to God.³⁶² The phrase recalls the description of the true worshiper in Psalm 24: “The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god” (24:4). The psalmist is about to refer to the hands of the wicked. He pleads for God to judge the work of their hands, because they have no regard for the work of the Lord’s hands (Ps 28:4-5).

Call for Justice

*Do not drag me away with the wicked,
with those who do evil,
who speak cordially with their neighbors
but harbor malice in their hearts.
Repay them for their deeds
and for their evil work;
repay them for what their hands have done
and bring back on them what they deserve.
Because they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord
and what his hands have done,*

³⁶⁰ Luther, *Psalms*, 128.

³⁶¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 405.

³⁶² Luther, *Psalms*, 128.

*he will tear them down
and never build them up again.*

Psalm 28:3-5

The focus of the psalm is a plea for justice and judgment, but the psalmist is especially concerned that he might be lumped in with the wicked. Previous psalms have expressed this fear and give every indication that the psalmist's life was closely intertwined with his enemies. David prayed, "Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise against me, spouting malicious accusations" (Ps 27:12). Clearly, David did not have much of a buffer between himself and the wicked. He cried out, "Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with those who are bloodthirsty, in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full for bribes" (Ps 26:9-10). Guilt by association was his real fear. Apparently he was in such close contact with evildoers that he feared he might be judged right along with them. He prays that Yahweh will distinguish him from these evildoers and repay them according to their evil deeds. He wants them to get what they deserve.

The argument that this is not a truly Christian prayer does not take into account the nature of the evildoer and the dire consequences for disregarding "the deeds of the Lord and what his hands have done" (Ps 28:5).³⁶³ Jesus called us to pray for our enemies. He challenged the Church to share the good news with all people. To do this requires distinguishing ourselves from evildoers, identifying our enemies, and praying for God's salvation and judgment. David's prayer is not vindictive nor mean-spirited. It is "the protest of a healthy conscience at the wrongs of the present order, and the conviction that a day of judgment is a moral necessity."³⁶⁴ Worship requires real-world discernment and engagement. Honest prayer demands it. "Psalm-prayer," writes Eugene Peterson, "enters into the way-things-are, but finds that the way-things-are is pretty bad. Evil is encountered. Wickedness confronted. . . . The Psalms are full of unsettling enemy talk. God is the primary subject in the Psalms, but enemies are established in solid second place."³⁶⁵

Psalm 28 nuances the profile of the enemy in a significant way. It is misleading to defend this prayer on grounds that we want "the Hitlers and Stalins, the Amins and Pol Pots, of history" to face justice.³⁶⁶ We certainly want those who commit mass murder and horrible atrocities to face God's judgment, but the enemy the psalmist has in mind is the person who is outwardly cordial but inwardly malicious. David is surrounded by nice people who have a talent for doing others in. Judging from appearances the psalmist is no different from the "good people" who think only of themselves and couldn't care less about "the deeds of the Lord." This makes David nervous. He isn't faking it to make it and he doesn't want to be judged as if he is. Outwardly, he sees little difference between himself and the person who is a bona fide evil doer. Remember this is coming from a man who was hunted like an animal by King Saul and betrayed by his son and key advisors. David knew first hand the poison of prestigious "friends" who used their niceness as a

³⁶³ Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 636.

³⁶⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 123.

³⁶⁵ Peterson, *Answering God*, 95.

³⁶⁶ Wilcock, *Psalms*, 99.

cover for evil and self-advancement. The enemy in view is not the terrorist or rapist, but the self-indulgent person in the pew.

David identifies the type of evil-doer who was destined to become a major focus of the prophets. The outwardly religious, inwardly evil, and deeply misguided Israelites come under withering review by Isaiah and Jeremiah (see Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 7). In Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees qualify for this category of evil. Jesus entered into the spirit of Psalm 28 when he spoke against the religious leaders: "So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. . . . Everything they do is done for people to see." He called them "hypocrites" and "blind guides. To become like them was to become "a child of hell." Clearly, talk of judgment is not inimical to the gospel, because Jesus warned the Pharisees, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt 23:3-5,13-16,33).

If we don't identify this kind of evil and find ourselves like David praying for mercy, we will be living in a fantasy world. We can imagine faithful Obadiah serving in King Ahab's court praying this kind of prayer, or Joseph second in command to Pharaoh in pagan Egypt praying, "Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil. . ." They didn't have David's psalm, but Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon did and we can imagine him praying Psalm 28. If we are serious about setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts we will enter into this call for mercy and justice.

The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard was very critical of the Christianity of his day. He was convinced that Christians were assimilated into the culture so completely that there was no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. Everyone was a Christian, because no one was a Christian. He lamented that Christianity had become an outward shell of what it was meant to be. "Orthodoxy flourishes in the land," claimed Kierkegaard, but it was "the orthodoxy which consists in playing the game of Christianity."³⁶⁷ Christ-less Christianity compels us to pray Psalm 28 along with David.

Pivot to Praise

*Praise be to the Lord,
for he has heard my cry for mercy.
The Lord is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I praise him.
The Lord is the strength of his people,
a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.
Save your people and bless your inheritance;
be their shepherd and carry them forever.*
Psalm 28:6-9

³⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom,'* 28.

“Yahweh be worshiped!” shouts the psalmist. Nothing has changed, except the conviction, that the plea for help and the call for justice has been heard by the Lord who is strong to save and worthy of all trust. David makes his praise personal with a string of seven personal pronouns: “The Lord is *my* strength and *my* shield; *my* heart trusts in him, and he helps *me*. *My* heart leaps for joy, and with *my* song *I* praise him.” But this ecstatic burst of praise expands to take in the people of God. “The Lord is the strength of his people.”

David prays as the Lord’s anointed affirming Yahweh’s power to protect and to shepherd *his people*. By identifying Israel as Yahweh’s own, David is not shirking his responsibility but humbly acknowledging his status as under-shepherd. David knows that “God’s interest in them lay nearer his heart than his own.”³⁶⁸ The imagery of *saving*, *blessing*, and *shepherding* is drawn from “the exodus-wilderness story.”³⁶⁹ Once again we are reminded, even when we are surrounded by outwardly religious, inwardly malicious enemies, that the Lord is our good shepherd who is more than sufficient for all of our needs (Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11). As the Lord’s anointed David is a type of the Messiah, pointing forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. “Let us therefore remember that David is like a mirror,” Calvin wrote, “in which God sets before us the continual course of his grace. Only we must be careful, that the obedience of our faith may correspond to his fatherly love, that he may acknowledge us for his people and inheritance.”³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Henry, *Psalms*, 119.

³⁶⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 409.

³⁷⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 474.

The spiraling intensity of lament and praise requires from time to time an emotional rest. Instead of confessing, repenting, pleading, or praising, we are summoned to take a knee and behold the wonder of the Lord of glory. Psalms 8, 19, and 29, refresh true spirituality and re-calibrate the soul. We are invited to “worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 29:2). Worship is never passive experience, but when the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars it takes our collective breath away. It is never geared to the consumer, but Psalm 29 shows us just how thrilling true worship can be.

Psalm 29 centers on the Lord, whose “I AM” Name is lifted up eighteen times in eleven verses. The opening and conclusion of the psalm, verses 1-2 and 10-11, form an inclusio, each contains sixteen words in the Hebrew text, and four of those words in each section are the divine name Yahweh.³⁷¹ The three-fold repetition of “Ascribe to the Lord,” and the seven-fold repetition of “the voice of the Lord” intensify the psalm’s advancing parallelisms. The eyes of the worshiper never wander from Yahweh.

Give God the Glory

*Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.*
Psalm 29:1-2

The call to worship does not go out to the people of God, but to “heavenly beings” or “mighty ones.” These “angels” are summoned by an unnamed source to give God the glory.³⁷² The curtain is lifted for our praying imagination to behold the cosmic realm of worship. We stand outside the picture as observers of a command performance. We are invited to be spectators to a drama beyond our usual sphere of reference. The allusion to these supernatural beings suggests to some scholars that the psalm has a Canaanite background.³⁷³ If this is the case, the expression “sons of God” may refer to “the pantheon of the gods” and reference a polemic against pagan mythology.³⁷⁴ The summons to give God the glory resounds throughout the cosmos. All the heavenly host, even pagan deities, which are non-gods, are commanded to give to the Lord the glory due his name. Yahweh is arrayed in holiness and worthy of all praise. The apostle Paul’s early Christian hymn corresponds to this imperative, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

³⁷¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 191.

³⁷² See, Ps 89:6; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7.

³⁷³ Craigie, *Psalms*, 245.

³⁷⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:656.

The impact of this worship experience is bound to impact our understanding of worship. The summons to bestow on Yahweh the honor due his name, to bow low to Yahweh in his holy majesty, and to ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, reorients our motives and feelings. The call to worship is extended to the people of God implicitly. Mark Futato writes, “Although Psalm 29:1-2 summons the angelic hosts to worship the Lord, the summons is rightly extended to humans, since Psalm 96 does just this.”³⁷⁵ Yahweh does not need our worship and when we worship Yahweh, we are not alone. The heavenly host rocks the landscape with, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). We are like the shepherds just trying to take it in. Worship does not meet any need in the Lord for praise; worship meets our need to tell the truth about God. We have not come to “worship” to get something out of it. We have come to give God the glory. We are not religious consumers looking for a spiritual high to get us through the week. We are worshipers praising God for his majesty and holiness.

In Jewish tradition Psalm 29 has been associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles or the “ingathering.” The people of Israel gathered to Jerusalem in the fall on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (September - October), five days after the Day of Atonement (Exod 23:16, 17; 34:22; Lev 23:33-43). They camped out in makeshift tents made from palm trees and willows and observed the feast for seven days with special offerings. “On the final day of this feast, according to the Septuagint, they would sing Psalm 29.”³⁷⁶ A psalm designed to refresh true worship was especially well-suited to this New Year’s festival experience.

The voice of the Lord

*The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion [Mount Hermon] like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, “Glory!”*
Psalm 29:3-9

Psalm 29 invites us to listen to the voice of the Lord and behold its thunderous impact on creation from when God said, “Let there be. . .!” to the promise of the new creation, “I am

³⁷⁵ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 212

³⁷⁶ Griedanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 198.

making everything new!” (Rev 21:5). The voice of the one who sits on the throne, declares, “Look, I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7). This is the voice of revelation, the voice that is centered in Jesus Christ: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We read Psalm 29 and imagine Jesus in a boat with his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, when suddenly a furious squall comes up and waves break over the boat. In a panic, the disciples wake Jesus up from a dead sleep, saying, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” Jesus got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” And immediately the wind died down and it was completely calm. Jesus said to the disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” But they were terrified. They were more afraid of what Jesus just did than they were of the storm. They asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:35-41).

The Lord dominates the forces of nature with a word from his lips. “‘The waters’ stand for tumultuous forces that threaten to overwhelm the regular order of life, in the way that a flood can overwhelm people, land, and even cities.”³⁷⁷ They can also stand for tumultuous experiences in political and personal life.³⁷⁸ The message of the psalm is that there is absolutely nothing in the cosmos that can stand up to the voice of God. Yahweh asserts his will over all creation.

Implicit in this positive description of Yahweh’s self-assertion is a polemic against Canaanite pagan religion and the worship of Baal, the storm god. No matter how powerful the voice of the Lord is rival gods and ideologies compete for worship. Even though “what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:19-20).

At times the people of Israel were seduced by a fascination with Baal, “the great active god of the Canaanite pantheon, who [allegedly] controlled rain and fertility.”³⁷⁹ The prophet Elijah confronted Ahab king of Israel because he had abandoned the Lord’s commands and “followed the Baals” (1 Kings 18:18). This led to the famous showdown on Mount Carmel when the prophets of Baal were defeated. Today, the people of God do not struggle with pagan nature deities but we do struggle with the myth of nature alone, the basic ideology that postulates that there is nothing besides nature. The modern equivalent to ancient superstitions is atheistic naturalism and biological determinism. We are either believing in some “Baal” god – pagan or secular – or we are believing in the Living God who is there and is not silent. We are either the holy possession of God in Christ, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God’s people, recipients of God’s grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit, OR we the accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment. G. K.

³⁷⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 417.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Cundall, “Baal,” vol.1:431-433

Chesterton came down against materialism and faulted it as an explanation for life because of its “insane simplicity.”

“Now, speaking quite externally and empirically, we may say that the strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction. The lunatic’s theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way. . . .I admit that your explanation explains a great deal; but what a great deal it leaves out!” As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has the quality of the madman’s argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out.”³⁸⁰

There is nothing like a good thunderstorm rolling over the Colorado Rockies. Ominous black clouds stretched along the mountain range with powerful winds, flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Terrifying and thrilling, both at the same time. The psalmist identifies the voice of the Lord with a powerful storm, one that breaks in pieces the evergreen conifers of Lebanon and shakes the earth like a baby’s rattle. Mount Hermon, the tallest mountain in northern Israel, is jumping up and down like a wild ox, and the eastern wilderness of Kadesh is rippling like a wave pool. As a shepherd and a warrior, David experienced the raw edge of nature and some powerful storms. When he compares the voice of the Lord to a thunderstorm he makes a comparison that few Christians would think of. Psalm 29 causes us to face the reality of God’s word in a fresh way. Left to ourselves we domesticate the Bible. We ignore certain truths and round off the sharp edges of God’s truth. We substitute our way for the Jesus’ way. For David the voice of the Lord was like a powerful thunderstorm shattering the oaks and stripping the forest bare. May it be so for us. The seven-fold perfection of the voice of the Lord receives a one word response, “Glory!” What can we say? The voice of the Lord thunders and we join the heavenly host in giving glory to God.

John Muir, one of America’s first environmentalist and an early advocate for the preservation of the American wilderness, describes climbing a one hundred foot Douglas Spruce in the middle of “one of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms” he ever experienced in the Sierra. He stopped at the house of a friend, but when the storm began to sound, he “lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it.” Muir writes, “For on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.” From his lofty perch at the top of the Spruce he “flapped and swished in the passionate torrent,” taking in “the exhilaration of motion,” the “delicious fragrance that was streaming past,” and the “extremely beautiful view.”³⁸¹ John Muir wanted to get as close to the storm as he possibly could. May the voice of the Lord in all its thunder be our passion. Instead of running for cover, let’s embrace the power of the word of God.

The Lord’s Peace

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;

³⁸⁰ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 20, 23.

³⁸¹ Muir, *The Mountains of California*, chapter 10, 1984.

*the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.*
Psalm 29:10-11

The psalm begins with a four-fold ascription to Yahweh's glory. The psalm ends with a four-fold description of Yahweh's sovereignty. Only after the heavenly host gives all glory to Yahweh and the voice of Yahweh shatters the landscape are the people of God brought into the picture. The voice that called creation into existence belongs to Yahweh who "sits enthroned over the flood." The psalmist is recalling Noah's flood (Gen 6-8) and the Lord's sovereign control over all nature.³⁸² The mighty storm that just blew through is but an instant of the Lord's universal sovereignty.

Psalm 29 was meant to refresh our worship. We are called to listen and behold. Our laments and praises cease as we witness the heavenly host praising and observe the power of the voice of the Lord. But as the storm abates, the people of God are brought back into the picture. They are blessed by the Lord with strength and peace. Franz Delitzsch writes,

"How expressive is the closing word of this particular Psalm! It spans the Psalm like a rain-bow. The opening of the Psalm shows us the heavens opened and the throne of God in the midst of the angelic songs of praise, and the close of the Psalms show us, on earth, His people victorious and blessed with peace in the midst of Yahweh's voice of anger, which shakes all things. *Gloria in excelsis* is its beginning, and *pax in terris* its conclusion."³⁸³

When John Muir climbed down the tree after the storm he found the forest hushed and tranquil and the slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled the valley with amber light and seemed to say, "My peace I give unto you."³⁸⁴

³⁸² Ross, *Psalms*, vol.1:661.

³⁸³ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 373.

³⁸⁴ Muir, *The Mountains of California*.

The tedious and paradoxical nature of life with its countervailing tensions is the focus of Psalm 30. David is in danger on all sides, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. He sees himself in need of rescue from the abyss, protection from his enemies, healing for his body, and saving for his soul. The tension that runs through this psalm is between human frailty and divine redemption. Psalm 30 reminds us of our utter dependence upon the all-powerful God for help and healing. True worship testifies to the all-sufficiency of the Lord and offers up praise to God. The people of God live on the knife edge of the abyss and the key to their salvation is Yahweh. If the Lord is not our “first-responder” and our “last resort” we have no hope. This psalm strives to put the threats in perspective: “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5); “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (Ps 30:11).

Psalm 30 is introduced as a David psalm with a superscription that identifies it as a praise song to be sung at the dedication of the temple or house. We don’t know whether “house” refers to the House of the Lord or David’s palace. Did David write this song to be sung at the dedication of the temple? Since he did everything he could to prepare for the building of the temple, he may have also written a dedicatory hymn for the eventual dedication the temple. Human frailty and depravity are such that we know we need the Lord – desperately. Everyone finds themselves on the edge of the abyss. Our bodies break, our enemies gloat, our hearts weep, and from time to time our world falls apart. In worship we meet the Lord who removes our sackcloth and clothes us with joy. Psalm 30 is honest about the human dilemma and honest about the necessity of worship.

Out of the Depths

*I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.
Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;
praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

Psalm 30:1-5

The first line out of the worshiper’s mouth is a bold, personal pronouncement of praise. Yahweh has drawn the individual up out of danger. The phrase “you lifted me up” literally means “to

draw up with a bucket.”³⁸⁵ You might picture a rough water rescue by a team of Coast Guard first responders to capture the trauma conveyed by the psalmist. Without the Lord’s help the situation is dire. These desperate images of distress imply the full range of maladies that afflict the human condition, such as drowning, depression, disease, and death. The psalmist extols the Lord for hearing his call for help and drawing him up out of danger, preventing his enemies from gloating over his demise, bringing him back from the realm of the dead, and healing him. Since the psalmist does not describe a physical illness or injury, healing may refer to any form of divine restoration.³⁸⁶ The psalmist leaves the specific danger and deliverance open so as to include all worshipers in this dedicatory psalm of thanksgiving. The first stanza drives home the truth that worship is always predicated on deliverance. We are never not in need of saving and healing. Worship is a cry for help and an occasion for praise and thanksgiving.

The redemptive, healing power of the Lord inspires the psalmist’s call to worship. The people of God are commended as faithful and exhorted to praise the Lord for his faithfulness. The exhortation is positive and uplifting. The people of God are not shamed or bullied into worship. The psalmist’s invitation to worship respects the worshiper and anticipates the solidarity of the people of God praising Yahweh’s holy name. The human response to a personal saving encounter with the living God was intuitively simple, “Sing the praises of the Lord.” It is that simple, “Praise his holy name.”

The fundamental incentive for true corporate worship is the enduring mercy of God in spite of our sinfulness. The reason we are drawn into worship is because Yahweh’s anger is short-lived and his love is long-lasting.³⁸⁷ We all are in need of rescue and Yahweh is our savior, healer, and redeemer. Sin provokes the anger of God, but the psalmist offers no specific reason for his near death experience. The psalmist’s situation is reminiscent of Job who felt the anger of God but did not know why he was subject to such extreme suffering. The personal dilemma facing the psalmist need not have a specific cause or be attributed to something he did wrong. It is misleading to infer from the reference to Yahweh’s anger that the dire situation the psalmist found himself in was due to his sin.³⁸⁸

We live in a world given up to God’s wrath because of evil. Therefore we come to worship God, to praise his holy name for his daily deliverance from all the forces, spiritual and physical, that threaten to undo us. Psalm 6 offers a similar understanding of our vulnerability in a sinful and evil world. Every faithful follower of the Lord Jesus can identify with this urgent prayer for deliverance. If David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14) and God’s anointed king (2 Sam 7:5-16), suffered in this way, so can we! David is walking down a road that we all will travel. There are so many things that can put us over the edge and land us in the pit of despair. But the testimony of the psalmist is that evil does not have the final word. Yahweh does. So, we worship the Lord in the real hope of deliverance. We cry for help and we sing his praises in the midst of heart attacks, car accidents, mental illnesses, bankruptcies, job losses, and hospice care. The people of God praise Yahweh’s holy name when the bottom falls out of their world and

³⁸⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:668.

³⁸⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 426; Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:670.

³⁸⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 428.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 428.

when their enemies hunt them down like prey and when they “speak maliciously against [their] good behavior in Christ” (1 Pet 3:16).

Worship insists on the big picture of God’s deliverance. Hope defeats despair. “We do not lose heart” (2 Cor 4:16). We cannot avoid the harsh realities of a fallen and broken world, but in worship we come to know that God’s favor lasts a lifetime. “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5). When life turns bad, as it did for the psalmist, instead of asking, “Why me?” we ought to ask the opposite question, “Why *not* me?”³⁸⁹ If we want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, we also must know the fellowship of his suffering (Phil 3:10). “Though outwardly we are wasting away,” explains Paul, “yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor 4:17-17).

All Things Fall Apart

*When I felt secure, I said,
“I will never be shaken.”
Lord, when you favored me,
you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.
To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
“What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help.”*

*You turned my wailing into dancing’
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.*

Psalm 30:6-12

Psalm 30 divides evenly in half with both stanzas delivering the same message. Hebrew parallelism extends to the theology of the psalm as well as the poetry of the lines.³⁹⁰ Like a dedicatory symphony, the second stanza is a variation on the preceding theme. We see why this psalm lends itself to the dedication of the house of the Lord. Worship rediscovers the mystery and wonder of God in the mess of the human condition.

³⁸⁹ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 108.

³⁹⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 429. Goldingay writes, “The psalm could have stopped at v. 5, but vv. 6-12 repeat the story.”

Some commentators find in verse 6 “the only clue to what might have caused the problem.”³⁹¹ They attribute the psalmist’s suffering to “his sinful self-confidence.”³⁹² They argue that David became prosperous and complacent. Success dulled his spiritual sensitivities. Calvin concludes that David’s “foolish and rash security” caused him to forget “his mortal and mutable condition as a man,” and set his heart on success.³⁹³ Calvin concedes that the faithful “consider themselves liable to the common troubles of life” and they are “prepared to receive wounds, – to shake off their sluggishness, and exercise themselves in the warfare to which they know that they are appointed, – and with humility and fear put themselves under God’s protection.” Calvin denies that David put himself under the Lord’s protection. He alleges that David was “ensnared by the allurements of his prosperous state” and in his own feelings, he “promised himself unbroken tranquillity.”³⁹⁴

Commentators seem to base this negative interpretation on David’s reference to anger (“For his anger lasts only a moment” 30:5) and to the Lord hiding his face (“but when you hid your face, I was dismayed” (30:7). But surely both of these references might be attributed to an earnest believer – one who is blameless and upright, a person who fears God and shuns evil (see Job 1:8). Even the most faithful believer, when blind-sided by a tragic accident or a grave diagnosis, is bound to feel shaken and dismayed. The psalmist speaks of being dismayed when the Lord hid his face implying that unbroken fellowship with the Lord was very much a part of his life. The concern of the psalmist recalls the words of Job, “Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God’s intimate friendship blessed by house, when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me. . .” (Job 29:4-5). Like Job, David attributed his blessings to the Lord. He recounted, “Lord, when you favored me, you made my royal mountain stand firm. . .”

Throughout the psalm there is no hint of self-sufficiency or self-confidence. The psalmist’s focus is entirely on the Lord. The Lord shows all the mercy, and cloths him with joy. Matthew Henry was right, we must “learn to accommodate ourselves to the various providences of God that concern us.” Learning to be content in every situation is a spiritual discipline that requires plenty of practice (Phil 4:12). But even the most mature believer is often blind-sided by their human frailty. All of us have to learn obedience by the things that we suffer (Heb 5:8). We need to hear the Lord say to us what the Spirit said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). This is what makes Psalm 30 such a splendid dedicatory psalm for the household of faith. In worship we learn that God’s favor lasts a lifetime and rejoicing comes in the morning. It is in worship that the Lord removes our sackcloth and clothes us with joy. Worship trains our hearts to sing, and not be silent.

The passionate single-minded devotion of Psalm 27:4 is echoed here in the psalmist’s reason for living, He wants to go on living to worship the Lord. His purpose is clear: “[I want] to proclaim your faithfulness,” “sing your praises and not to be silent,” and “praise you forever.” Although Christians have a greater hope in everlasting life than did the psalmist, we can identify with his earnest desire to use whatever years we have left on this side of eternity to praise his name. Psalm

³⁹¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:673.

³⁹² Craigie, *Psalms*, 254.

³⁹³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 490.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 492.

30 re-orientes our self-talk. When we are left to ourselves and to our own inner monologue we can easily fall into despair, but true worship pulls us out of the little trinity of me, myself, and I, and brings us into the hope and the deliverance that only God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can give.

Hope Heals tells the moving story of Katherine and Jay Wolf. Seven months after Katherine's near fatal brain stem hemorrhage she found herself on the day before Thanksgiving wondering:

Has God made a mistake? Should I have died? I'm caught between life and death. I can't even walk or eat or play with my child. I've gone from making lasagna in my little kitchen to being fed all my meals through a tube in my stomach. I've gone from going on playdates with girlfriends to attending courses on disability adjustment. I used to power walk the hills of Pepperdine; now I have two physical therapists and a walker while I agonize to walk one step. I've gone from wearing a cute outfit every day to wearing adult diapers and hospital gowns. I want my old life back! . . . [Life] isn't working. It isn't ever going to work. . . . I should be in heaven right now.

Katherine writes that "suddenly, before those thoughts had even fully landed in my head and heart, I felt a deep awakening of the Word of God, which I had known since I was a little girl. I could almost hear this rapid-fire succession of the truths of Scripture, like a dispatch from God himself." In that moment God met her in the midst of the messiness and tragedy of her life. She heard God say, "Katherine you are not a mistake. I don't make mistakes." God reminded her that she was fearfully and wonderfully made in her mother's womb, and that included the AVM formed in her brain. "There is purpose in all of this," the Lord said. "Just wait. You'll see." The Lord affirmed her as a wife and mother. "Trust Me," God said. "I am working out everything for your good. . . . I will complete the good work I began when I gave you new life. I will carry it on to completion. Believe that. My nature is to redeem and restore and strengthen. This terrible season will come to an end. You will suffer for a little while, and then I will carry you out of this. You will see My goodness in the land of the living. Lean into this hope. . . ."³⁹⁵

Psalm 30 is not the confession of a self-confident person who needs to be awakened from his or her spiritual complacency. Psalm 30 is a faithful reminder that the people of God live on the edge between the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition. To know Christ and the power of his resurrection, means we belong to the fellowship of his suffering. Blessing and suffering go hand in hand. Like Katherine and Jay Wolf we share something of the experience of Job and destiny of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We live in a fallen and broken world and we run to the Lord for deliverance. Only the Lord can lift us up out of the depths and snatch us from the realm of the dead. Only the Lord can turn our wailing into dancing. Only the Lord can strip off the sackcloth and cloth us with joy. Psalm 30 is a beautiful call to worship and dedicatory psalm, reminding us of our deep need to worship and exalt the Lord.

³⁹⁵ Wolf, *Hope Heals*, 163-165.

The emotional and poetic range of worship provided in the psalms is greater than we are accustomed to in our personal devotions and in our corporate worship. Shame and entrapment are not typical Sunday morning themes. We avoid words like, “affliction,” “anguish,” “accusation,” and “alarm” in our user-friendly worship services. We tend to confess our sins in language that has lost its bite. We refuse to lament the grief and distress caused by our enemies. Compared to the psalmist our worship may have lost its edge. For the psalmist worship includes the realities of violence, war, cancer, death, abuse, and betrayal. Psalm 31 may jar the sanctimonious piety of polite religious people who have not come to church to be reminded that our struggle is “against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Psalm 31 fits with the apostle James’ spiritual direction:

“Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:7-10).

We seem oblivious to the dangers that threaten our lives and overly familiar with a benign and benevolent deity that we hope will preserve our precious immortality symbols. Annie Dillard asked,

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”³⁹⁶

David composed psalms for worshipers who faced apostasy, illness, contempt, isolation, conspiracy, hostility, discrimination, and persecution. If we struggle to line-up Psalm 31 with our reality it may be because we have compartmentalized religion into a ritual habit of indifference. Instead of placing our lives in the hands of God, we trust in modern medicine, national security, financial securities, technology, social networks, and our careers. When we are young and vigorous and well-insured, we tell ourselves that we live above the fray. But then, without warning the shield comes down, exposing our many vulnerabilities and frailties. It is surprising how a visit to the ER can transport us back to the world of the psalmist.

³⁹⁶ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 40-41.

This dire “situation of need” describes a litany of evils reminiscent of Psalm 22 and reflective of the imagery and language of Psalms 4; 7; 18; 28; and 71.³⁹⁷

Situational Awareness

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
Be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.
I hate those who cling to worthless idols;
as for me, I trust in the Lord.
I will be glad and rejoice in your love,
for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.
You have not given me into the hands of the enemy
but have set my feet in a spacious place.*

Psalm 31:1-8

In worship the soul longs to move from affliction to assurance.³⁹⁸ We turn to Yahweh for refuge and pray a psalm that Jeremiah, Jonah, and Jesus prayed. The psalmist’s affliction encompasses physical illness, emotional trauma, and enemy opposition. The lament is general enough to include our particular affliction. Its spiritual direction is specific enough to inspire our trust. The movement from affliction to assurance is prayed through twice (Ps 31:1-8; 31:9-24) to form a double witness to the necessity of worship and the need for deliverance.

We are accustomed to David’s use of metaphor to illustrate the worshiper’s trust in Yahweh. The Lord is his refuge, his rock of refuge, and his strong fortress. These images of unmovable stability and impenetrable security are juxtaposed with first-responder urgency and emergency rescues. David shouts, “come quickly to rescue me” (Ps 31:2) and “keep me from the trap that is set for me” (Ps 31:4). He is confident that the Lord has turned his ear to him (Ps 31:2), held him in his hands (Ps 31:5), and seen his affliction (Ps 31:7). The psalmist knows that his deliverance is not based on his merit but on the Lord’s righteousness, guidance, and faithfulness (Ps 3:1,3,5).

³⁹⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 437.

³⁹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:684.

His hatred for those who cling to worthless idols and his joy in the Lord's love is evidence of that righteousness (Ps 31:5,6,7).

Psalms 31 and 22 cover related themes of lament and deliverance.³⁹⁹ Jesus quoted from both psalms on the cross and he did so in a way that resonates with the meaning of the whole psalm. Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and ends, "They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!" (Ps 22:1,31). Jesus' fourth and sixth statements from the cross reflect Psalm 22. The seventh and final word from the cross comes from Psalm 31: "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Patrick Reardon takes this verse as "the proper 'voice' of this whole psalm. It is the prayer of 'Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame' (Heb 12:2), speaking to His Father in the context of His sufferings and death. This psalm is part of His prayer of faith."⁴⁰⁰

Luke writes, "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46). Jesus ends his earthly ministry with a shout. His final prayer testifies to his complete control. "I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:17-18). The final word from the cross was a shout not a gasp, a declaration of hope, not a cry of despair. Instead of giving up, Jesus offered up; instead of surrendering to fate, he committed himself in faith. Not a note of resignation, but the expectation of resurrection. Not a sigh of relief, but a prayer of confidence.

Before this final word from the cross was on the lips of Jesus it was prayed by King David and the people of God down through the centuries. The early church prayed Psalm 31:5 as well. The first Christian martyr, Stephen, followed the example of Jesus. "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'" (Acts 7:59). However, this is not a prayer to be prayed only at the end of life, but a prayer to be prayed today. In whose hands will we put our trust? Only the one true and living God, Father, Son, and Spirit is worthy of our trust. Only in his hands are we delivered out of the hands of our enemies (Ps 31:8, 15). He alone is able to guard what we have entrusted to his care (2 Tim 1:12). As Jesus gave himself into the Father's hands, so we give ourselves into the hands of God. Today is the day to pray, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

David closes the first stanza of the psalm with a deep sense of assurance. The Lord has seen his affliction and understood his anxious soul and redeemed him. The psalmist is glad and rejoices in Yahweh's love. Instead of walking a narrow cliff path and falling into the hands of his enemies, the Lord has set his feet in a spacious place.⁴⁰¹ Augustine attributed this image of the spacious room to the freedom found in the hope of the resurrection. He writes, "The resurrection of my

³⁹⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 436.

⁴⁰⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 59.

⁴⁰¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 441.

Lord being known, and mine own being promised me, my love, having been brought out of the straits of fear, walks abroad in continuance, into the expanse of liberty.”⁴⁰²

Terror on Every Side

*Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.
My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
My strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends –
those who see me on the street flee from me.
I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.
For I hear many whispering,
“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in your hands;
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
from those who pursue me.
Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.
Let me not be put to shame, Lord,
for I have cried out to you;
but let the wicked be put to shame
and be silent in realm of the dead.
Let their lying lips be silenced,
for with pride and contempt
they speak arrogantly against the righteous.
How abundant are the good things
that you have stored up for those who fear you,
that you bestow in the sight of all,
on those who take refuge in you.
In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from all human intrigues;
you keep them safe in your dwelling
from accusing tongues.*

⁴⁰² Augustine, *Psalms*, 69.

Jeremiah drew on Psalm 31 to capture his distress. He used the psalmist's phrase, "terror on every side" as his "motto theme," for (Jer 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam 2:22).⁴⁰³ In a phrase it described God's pending judgment against Jerusalem. When Pashhur the official in charge of the temple released Jeremiah from the stocks, the prophet announced, "The Lord's name for you is not Pashhur, but *Terror on Every Side*. For this is what the Lord says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends'" (Jer 20:3-4). Jeremiah used the expression so often that people used it to mock him. He became known as the "Terror on Every Side Prophet" (Jer 20:10). Nevertheless it was the slogan of choice to sum up God's judgment and the desperate human condition. It is easy to see how Jeremiah identified with the whole psalm and not just this phase. David's eyes grew weak with sorrow (Ps 31:9) and Jeremiah's eyes were a fountain of tears (Jer 9:1). The psalmist's life was "consumed by anguish" (Ps 31:10) and the prophet was consumed by trouble and sorrow (Jer 20:18). David's bones grew weak (Ps 31:10; Jeremiah's bones trembled (Jer 23:9). David felt like a broken piece of pottery (Ps 31:12) and Jeremiah broke a piece of pottery to illustrate the judgment of God (Jer 19:10-11). Both the psalmist and the prophet felt vulnerable and outnumbered by their enemies. Even their neighbors showed them contempt and their friends abandoned them.

The psalmist put words to the prophet's anguish and Jeremiah prayed them out. When someone articulates our experience and gives us words to explain our grief and to express our trust, we feel we are not so alone. It is a great gift when someone puts our pain into words. Psalm 31 offers a deep expression of empathy with all those who pay a price for faithfulness. We cannot chalk this up to "misery loves company." The distress is real and empathy is essential. And what the psalms did for Jeremiah they will do for us. We need the psalms just as much as Jeremiah did. When the psalms direct our worship they offer the worshiper the gift of empathy.

Having articulated his anguish, David announces his assurance. "But I – I have trusted in you, O Lord; I have said, 'You are my God.'"⁴⁰⁴ The emotional reversal is decisive and dramatic. The first person singular is emphatic. The psalmist owns the decision to trust in Yahweh. In the first stanza, deliverance is based on the Lord's righteousness (Ps 31:1). In the second stanza, trust is rooted in God's sovereignty, "my times are in your hands," and in God's "unfailing love." In spite of everything, he looks to the Lord alone for his blessing (Num 6:25). The only way he is going to be saved from his enemies is by the Lord. The only way lying lips are going to be silenced is by the Lord. Both David and Jeremiah confronted the power of falsehood and deception with the greater power of the truth of God. Jeremiah declared, "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'" Instead of "trusting in deceptive words that are worthless" (Jer 7:4,8), they placed their trust in the Lord.

This section closes with the psalmist's resounding confidence in the Lord. The litany of evil that besets the present situation will not last forever. There will be a public vindication for all those who fear the Lord. God will bestow on them all the benefits he has reserved for them. They will

⁴⁰³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 131.

⁴⁰⁴ Craigie, *Psalms*, 257.

be kept safe “from all human intrigues” and false accusations (Ps 31:20). David’s confidence is consistent with the apostle Paul’s expectation: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Today, the promise foreshadowed by the psalmist is grasped more fully. In the upper room on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus promised his disciples that they would be with him in glory, that they would see his glory, the glory that the Father had given him because he loved him “before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). Everlasting life means that there will be no more sin, no more sorrow, no more suffering. Scarcity and strife will cease. In Christ, evil will end. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. The healing of the nations will take place around the throne of the triune God. There will be no more night, because the Lord God will be our light. No more loneliness because the fully restoration of face-to-face fellowship with God will take place.

Skeptics may say this is way too good to be true, but this is the goodness we were made for. This is the home we yearn for. C. S. Lewis observed: “We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning heaven. We are afraid of the jeer about ‘pie in the sky,’ and of being told that we are trying to ‘escape’ from the duty of making a happy world here and now into the dreams of a happy world elsewhere. But either there is a ‘pie in the sky’ or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric. If there is, then this truth, like any other, must be faced, whether it is useful . . . or not. Again, we are afraid that heaven is a bribe...”⁴⁰⁵ To enter into the assurance of the psalmist, the expectation of the apostle, and the promise of the Christ is to lose our shyness about heaven and to live in the present in the light and life of our future home. To embrace this destiny is to experience eternal life, knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent.

A Retrospective

*Praise be to the Lord,
for he showed me the wonders of his love
when I was in a city under siege.
In my alarm I said,
“I am cut off from your sight!”
Yet you heard my cry for mercy
when I called to you for help.
Love the Lord, all his faithful people!
The Lord preserves those who are true to him,
but the proud he pays back full.
Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord.*

Psalm 31:21-24

⁴⁰⁵ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 145.

David's testimony explains the intensity of his anguish and the certainty of his hope. He knows what it is like to live in a city under siege. He felt trapped and cut off, hated by his enemies and abandoned by his friends. But now he is able to look back and praise the Lord for showing him "the wonders of his love." He can testify, "Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help" (Ps 31:22). Surely, the prophet Jeremiah was deeply encouraged to pray this psalm, because he knew first-hand the hopelessness of living in a city under siege. I wonder if he thought David wrote the psalm just for him. John Calvin wrote, "Nothing is more difficult, when we see our faith derided by the whole world, than to direct our speech to God only, and to rest satisfied with this testimony which our conscience gives us, *that he is our God*. And certainly it is the undoubted proof of genuine faith, when, however fierce the waves are which beat against us, and however sore the assaults by which we are shaken, we hold fast this as a fixed principle, that we are constantly under the protection of God, and say to him freely, *You are our God*."⁴⁰⁶

The psalm ends with an exhortation delivered as an exclamation. Without hesitancy and with great confidence, David declares, "Love the Lord, all his faithful people!" He has no doubt that the Lord preserves those who are true to him and put their trust in him. He challenges the faithful to be of good courage and to strengthen their heart.⁴⁰⁷ This reason this exhortation is so powerful is because when our Savior quoted this psalm on the cross, "Father! Into your hands I commit my spirit," he was in the very act of giving himself up for our sins in order to redeem us, and to reconcile us to the Father. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Patrick Reardon writes, "In this psalm, then, the voice of Christ becomes our voice: 'In You, O Lord, I put my trust, let me never be put to shame. Deliver me in Your righteousness. . . . You have redeemed me, Lord God of truth. . . . But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord; I say 'You are my God.' . . . Oh, how great is your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You."⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, 511.

⁴⁰⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:699.

⁴⁰⁸ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 59.

Augustine claimed this penitential psalm of thanksgiving was his favorite psalm.⁴⁰⁹ He read it frequently and had its words inscribed on the wall by his sickbed.⁴¹⁰ He was both challenged and comforted by its message: “the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.”⁴¹¹ The freedom to make such a claim rests in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Faith in God’s mercy, and not in our merit, gives us the freedom to acknowledge our sin and trust in God “who justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:4). The apostle Paul used both Abraham and David to prove that we are justified by faith not works. He quoted Psalm 32 to make his case that “God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them’” (Rom 4:6-8).

Psalm 32, writes Patrick Reardon, “is the prayer of those who, standing at the foot of the Cross and forswearing all righteousness of their own, commit their lives and entrust their destinies entirely to God’s forgiving mercy richly and abundantly poured out in the saving, sacrificial blood of His Son, because ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them’ (2 Cor 5:19).”⁴¹²

Beatitude-based Forgiveness

*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.*

*Blessed is the one whose sin [iniquity] the Lord does not count against
them and in whose spirit is no deceit.*

Psalm 32:1-2

Psalm 32 begins positively with a clear picture of what forgiveness means. Instead of transgressing God’s ways and living in lawless rebellion we are forgiven. Instead of failing to measure up and repeatedly falling short of God’s standard, our sins are covered. They are lifted up and taken away, so as to be hidden from both God’s sight and our sight. Instead of living with the memory of these sins, we are given the assurance that the Lord has removed these sins from our account. “When God forgives sin, the sin is removed. God will never bring it up again, nor in this life nor the world to come.”⁴¹³ This psalm resonates with 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Silence

*When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night*

⁴⁰⁹ Penitential psalms include Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 140.

⁴¹⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 268.

⁴¹¹ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 393.

⁴¹² Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 61

⁴¹³ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:709.

*your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.'
And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Psalm 32:3-5

The contrast between silence and speech create a tension in this psalm. The painful inertia of quietude must be overcome before there can be wisdom and understanding. The acknowledgment and confession of sin is required before the songs of deliverance can be sung. Prayer must be voiced and forgiveness granted before ears can be open to the Lord's instruction and eyes can be open to the Lord's guidance. As long as our sins are hidden, the Lord cannot be our hiding place. To remain silent is to be like the stubborn mule and to experience "the many woes of the wicked." But confession makes the heart sing, because the Lord in his mercy forgives our sins, restores our energy, and surrounds us with songs of deliverance.

The tone of Psalm 32, compared to Psalm 51, is more reflective and contemplative. The sin in question seems less extreme – the pathos less raw. Both psalms describe the sinful human condition: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But Psalm 32 fits better the general malaise of moral apathy and spiritual indifference. The more subtle sins of pride and envy lurk quietly below the surface of a pleasant demeanor and a religious exterior. The silence is experienced personally but we have little difficulty imagining the collective impact of this silence on the body of Christ. Congregations can collude in a conspiracy of silence and turn a blind eye to various injustices including favoritism, racism, gender discrimination, and elitism. The church as a whole can experience the kind of fatigue experienced by the psalmist personally.

Nathan the prophet got past David's defenses and invoked in the unsuspecting sinner the deep repentance of Psalm 51. In Psalm 32, God's heavy hand was laid on David quietly, oppressively, and he describes himself suffering in silence. Like David, the ancient patriarch Job felt the heavy hand of the Lord, but unlike David, Job had no particular sin to confess. It was the silence of God that troubled Job as he pleaded to make his case to Yahweh (Job 23:2). Whereas Job gave free rein to his complaint, the psalmist stifled his conscience and refused to admit his sin. The heavy hand of God is a metaphor for spiritual depression, which in David's case was brought on by unconfessed sin. David's spiritual fatigue was self-afflicted. His unacknowledged sin and his cover-up of iniquity sapped all his strength and left him depressed and down.

The psalmist leaves unspecified the nature of the unconfessed sin that has drained his energy. His experience invites us to examine our hearts to see if there is any offensive way in us (Psalm 139:23-24). The apostle Paul described the impact of this unconfessed sin on the church at Corinth. Their failure to discern the body of Christ was both covered up and illustrated by their regular worship practices. Their insistence on keeping their old social class distinctions in the

church robbed the church of their spiritual vitality. Paul insisted that this had physical repercussions. It was for that reason “why many among you are weak and sick and a number of fallen asleep” (1 Cor 11:30).

Detecting sin’s complex disguises and exposing our self-serving bias is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Obedience falls victim to a thousand distractions and qualifications. Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggested that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeball. We have a natural inclination to pacify and placate our conscience. We tend to grade ourselves on a curve, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, who looked down on the tax collector, and thanked the Lord that he was not like “this tax collector” (Luke 18:9-14).

We excuse ourselves by judging others. The British abolitionists William Wilberforce warned that we have a “natural proneness to think too favorably of ourselves.” Selfishness disposes us to “overrate our good qualities, and to overlook or excuse our defects.” We are misled in our self-evaluation by “the favorable opinions of others” and by substituting good intentions for meaningful moral and spiritual change.⁴¹⁴ An early advocate of self-examination was the great preacher John Chrysostom. John especially dreaded the temptation to vainglory, which he believed was intertwined with the quest for pastoral authority. He saw himself as all too vulnerable to the love of praise and the desire for honor. In order to win people’s favor he could see himself despising the poor, catering to the rich, watering-down doctrine, and pretending to be humble.

Puritan leader Richard Baxter in *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) hammered away at spiritual complacency among pastors. Acts 20:28 was his key text: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Pastoral integrity was Baxter’s driving concern. He described pastors who were “loath to misplace a word in their sermons” but made nothing of “misplacing affections, words, and actions, in the course of their lives. . . They that preach precisely, would not live precisely!” “Take heed to yourselves,” he pled, “lest your example contradict your doctrine . . . lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues.”⁴¹⁵

Psalm 32 challenges our silent complicity in the sins that rob ourselves and the church of the Spirit’s vitality, maybe not the big, bold sins of adultery and murder, but the quiet sins of pride, envy, and selfishness that we may have even hidden from ourselves. When did it finally dawn on the psalmist that he was contributing to his own demise? Educator Parker Palmer observes, “No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment.”⁴¹⁶ The transition from silence to confession is not explained by the psalmist. The move from feeling the heavy hand of God to feeling the relief of God’s forgiveness is simply expressed in a statement: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover up my iniquity” (Ps 32:5).

⁴¹⁴ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 114-115.

⁴¹⁵ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 63.

⁴¹⁶ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 171

The three words for evil used in the verses 1-2, “sin,” “iniquity,” and “transgressions,” are repeated in verse 5, forming an inclusio with the opening beatitudes. The psalmist’s sins are acknowledged and confessed. He has nothing to hide and in exchange he has received the joy of forgiveness, the focus of the rest of the psalm.

Joys of Forgiveness

*Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.
Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord’s unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.*

*Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!*

Psalm 32:6-11

Forgiveness is not the end of the matter; it’s the beginning. The imputed righteousness of Christ redefines the identity of the person. The forgiven are described as faithful (godly, devout), righteous, and upright in heart, not because of anything they have done, but because of the love and grace of Yahweh. The psalmist offers a quick sketch of powerful images capturing the joys of forgiveness. Communion with God through prayer is the first picture. All those who are forgiven in Christ are invited into fellowship with the Father. We are able to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. . .” All God’s children can cry “Abba, Father.” Divine protection in the midst of the raging torrent is the second image. Sheltered from trouble in God’s hiding place and surrounded by songs of deliverance is the third image. We are like the wise man in the Sermon on the Mount who built his house on the rock so that when the winds blew and beat against the house it did not fall, “because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:25). The fourth image pictures Yahweh teaching the forgiven: “I will instruct you / I will teach you / I will counsel you.”⁴¹⁷ The psalmist captures God’s counsel through the glance of his loving eyes. God’s forgiveness makes possible the move from a silent, sullen conscience to the quiet guidance of God’s intimate fellowship. Calvin pictured David as the instructor, directing his instruction to

⁴¹⁷ Whether Yahweh is speaking or David is speaking, instruction comes from God ultimately (Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:717).

every person singularly. He observed “that we are reconciled to God upon condition that every one endeavor to make his brothers [and sisters] partakers of the same benefit.”⁴¹⁸ However, most commentators see the Lord as the speaker. It is his loving eye that guides the forgiven. “We are not pardoned that we may henceforth live after our own lusts, but that we may be educated in holiness and trained for maturity.”⁴¹⁹

The contrasting fifth image pictures a stubborn mule that won’t budge. The metaphor seems more comedic than accusatory. The beastly indifference and stubbornness of the past are behind the forgiven sinner. The sixth image is a wide-angled shot of “the woes of the wicked” set in contrast to a seventh image, a self-portrait with “the Lord’s unfailing love surrounding the one who trusts in him” (Ps 32:10). The joys of forgiveness flow from the Lord’s unfailing love and cover the spectrum of our human longing for communion, protection, guidance, and fellowship. Reardon rightly sees this psalm as “a call to gladness. Joy is not just an option for the Christian; it is an imperative.”⁴²⁰ “Wherever faith is lively,” wrote Calvin, “this holy rejoicing will follow.”⁴²¹ The only way we’ll ever be surrounded by songs of deliverance and the glad rejoicing of all those who are upright in heart is if we experience the forgiveness of our sins and the removal of our guilt. The joy of forgiveness is our strength.

⁴¹⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 534-5.

⁴¹⁹ Spurgeon, “Psalm 32,” *Treasury of David*, <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps032.php>

⁴²⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 62.

⁴²¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 536.

Psalm 33 is closely linked to Psalm 32 which may account for the absence of a superscription. The joys of forgiveness, experienced by the upright in heart, launch the true worshiper into the exuberance of Psalm 33. Silence, broken in confession, leads to songs of deliverance. The closing benediction of Psalm 32, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” leads to the opening exhortation of Psalm 33: “Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.”

Psalm 33 does what similar creation/instruction psalms do for worship (see Psalms 8, 19, 24, 25, 29). The troubles and laments of the people of God are reset in the big picture of God’s faithfulness. The focus shifts from our problems to God’s sovereignty, his providential protection, and his unfailing love. Forgiveness gives the worshiper a fresh start and the psalmist capitalizes on this wonderful opportunity for the people of God. At its most basic, worship is telling the truth about God, who he is and what he has done. Psalm 33 roots this new song of praise in the blessing of God’s faithful word – the creative, electing, powerful, and redeeming word of God. We have much to sing about.

Praise the Lord

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the Lord with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.*

Psalm 33:1-3

Worship music that is exceptional, excellent and exuberant is rooted in a redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ.⁴²² The righteous are called to worship. “It is fitting for the upright to praise him.” Bach’s music was inspired by the “Son who is the radiance of God’s glory” (Heb 1:3), not ephemeral feelings arising from his music. This is why Bach wrote in the margin of his copy of Abraham Calov’s Bible commentary on 2 Chronicles 5:13: “Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present.” For Bach spirituality revolved around the personal revelation of God rather than in his feelings or in his creative imagination. Worship was not sentiment nor was transcendence self-generated. Yet moderns who appreciate the music of Bach want to transfer the source of inspiration away from the God who has made himself known to the music itself. Conductor John Eliot Gardiner comments on Bach’s marginal note, “This strikes me as a tenet that many of us as musicians automatically hold and aspire to whenever we meet to play music, regardless of whatever ‘God’ we happen to believe in.”⁴²³

⁴²² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 136. Kidner writes, “Note the call for freshness and skill as well as fervor; three qualities rarely found together in religious music.”

⁴²³ Gardiner, *Bach*, 17.

Music belongs to God the Chief Musician, whose acoustical world resonates with song because God designed not only the voice and ear, but the heart and spirit. Whatever creativity we express comes from God the Creator who not only inspires the praise but gives us the gifts with which to express his praise. The prophet Zephaniah challenged the people of God to sing, “Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart.” The reason they could sing was because God rejoiced over them in song. “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph 3:14-17). The story of the people of God is not only spoken but sung. The prophet Isaiah described God’s love in a love song. “I will sing to the one I love a song about his vineyard” (Isa 5:1). Jesus sang with his disciples, such as the time he sang a hymn with them at the Last Supper (Mt 26:30); and according to the author of Hebrews, he continues to sing, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises” (Heb 2:12). To be filled with the Spirit of God is to sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord (Eph5:19-20).

From the beginning, music has accompanied the work of God. Creation was formed “while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). Surely it is impossible for us to imagine “the heavens declaring the glory of God” in a monotone or “the skies [proclaiming] the work of his hands” in a whisper. “The hills are alive with the sound of music” is biblical truth. When Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they celebrated the Exodus with a song to the Lord, which began, “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.” The Lord had done more than give them something to sing about. The Lord himself was their song. Moses sang, “The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (Ex 15:1,2).

Filled with the Spirit, King David led the people of God in song. From lamentation to celebration, David expressed the full range of the Word of God in song. “Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge” (Ps 119:54). The Psalms call us into worship with vigorous songs of praise, “Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Ps 95:1-2). Worship is exuberant, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs” (100:1-2). It is fresh and vital, “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps 96:1-3). We have a song to be sung to the nations that will turn their hearts to the Lord.

Music tells God’s great salvation history story in song. The dramatic turning points and breakthroughs in God’s revelation are marked by hymns of praise. Prose gives way to poetry and dialogue to doxology. Narrative becomes declarative in anthems of praise. The Exodus is marked by the Song of Moses (Ex 15). The birth of Christ is celebrated in Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Zechariah’s Benedictus (Lk 1:67-79), and in the Song of Simeon (Lk 2:29-32). Angels offer up an exclamation of praise in the Gloria (Lk 2:14). The song of salvation was in the confession and praise of Christ in the early church. His humility and exaltation is celebrated in Paul’s letter to the believers at Philippi in what is thought to be an early worship hymn (2:6-11). Early

Christians confessed in song, “He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1 Tim 3:16).

There is nothing casual or cavalier about real worship. David’s exhortation to “sing joyfully” to the Lord, “play skillfully” and “shout for joy” suggests a range of effort from careful preparation to joyous spontaneity. It takes skill to “make music to [the Lord] on the ten-stringed lyre,” and it takes energy to “shout for joy,” but neither the preparation nor the enthusiasm of worship were ever meant to obscure the reason for worship.⁴²⁴ The psalmist is constantly reminding us of why we are worshipping: “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does” (Ps 33:3-4). Music must be in tune with the will of God. It is never an end in itself. To say as one disgruntled person said to me, “I worship the music!” is to turn an instrument of praise into an idol. “Unlike the artist who serves the art, we serve the God of the art.”⁴²⁵

Expository Worship

*For the word of the Lord is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.
The Lord loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love.
By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the people of the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.*

Psalm 33:6-9

Expository worship is a corollary of expository preaching, the art of letting the Bible make its own point. True Word-centered doxology expresses and evokes meanings which are at once intellectual, emotional, volitional, and spiritual. Expository worship is tethered to the text and seeks to convey through every aspect of the liturgy the lived meaning of the text (Colossians 3:16).⁴²⁶ Music is a gift from God that helps us take in the intelligible revelation of God. The prophet Ezekiel was told, “Eat this book; then go and speak to the house of Israel.” “So I opened my mouth,” Ezekiel writes, “and he gave me the book to eat” (Ezek 3:1-2). Eating the Word of God meant internalizing the truth of God in order to empower the prophet for ministry. In that sense, singing the Word of God “with gratitude in [our] hearts to God” is another picture that

⁴²⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 539. Calvin had a decidedly negative opinion of musical instruments. He argued that the use of instruments belonged to the law and temple worship. “. . . Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law.” In an effort to distance the church from Roman Catholic worship practices, Calvin threw out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

⁴²⁵ Dinwiddie, “The God Who Sings,” 21.

⁴²⁶ Denham, *Reverberating Word*, 6.

helps us grasp what it means to take in the truth of God. To open our mouths and eat the Word has the same meaning as to open our mouths and sing the Word from our hearts. I remember my father's tenor voice singing hymns of the Word more than I recall him speaking about the Word. He never gave a sermon, but he sang from his soul. One of his favorite songs reads, "All that thrills my soul is Jesus he is more than life to me; He, the fairest of ten thousand is my precious Lord to me."

In his letter to the church at Ephesus Paul contrasted alcoholic intoxication with being filled with the Spirit. "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:18-19). The evidence of being filled with the Spirit is an outpouring of praise and gratitude. "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19-20). Internalizing the Word of God not only nourishes the soul but it also makes the heart sing.

Led by gifted musicians and liturgists prayer and praise create a holy momentum in worship that propels the preacher and prepares the congregation for the preached word. True worship is a gift to both the congregation and the pastor. The people are prepared to receive the word of God. The preacher is standing on holy ground. Word and worship energize the congregation. In some ways, the sermon has already been preached in the hymns, in the confession, and in the prayers. Good worship creates a palpable sense of reverence and affection.

*Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World*⁴²⁷

*The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
From heaven the Lord looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth –
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.
No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.*

*But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,*

⁴²⁷ Margaret Clarkson: Hymn title, "Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World," Hope Publishing Company, 1987.

*to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.*

Psalm 33:10-19

Worship focuses on the sovereign Lord who rules over all creation, including galaxies, oceans, peoples, nations, and politicians. Nothing in this vast macro and micro cosmos escapes the sovereign will of God. The psalm's movement from the created order to the political realm recalls God's response to Job. Job is led out of his confined world of suffering into the large world of God's making. There he is challenged to explain the origin of the earth, the expanse of the sea, the light of dawn, the ocean depths, the formation of snow, lightning, and rain, and the order of the stars and seasons. God's questions sound more like exclamations, designed to inspire rather than interrogate. "Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this" (Job 38:18). Job never hinted, let alone claimed to know such knowledge. It was not the Lord's intent to put Job down, but to stress, "Job! Let God be God!"

The Lord raises a similar issue over the moral realm. "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can you voice thunder like his?" (40:8-9). Job is compelled to see that God's control extends not only to nature but to human justice as well. The message comes through loud and clear, "Job! Let God be God!"

The celebration of the Lord's sovereignty in Psalm 33 corresponds with the worship celebration in The Book of Revelation. Cosmic liturgy is inspired by cosmic rule and produces an outpouring of prayer and praise. "The people of God sing. They express exuberance in realizing the majesty of God and the mercy of Christ, the wholeness of reality and their new-found ability to participate in it. . . When persons of faith become aware of who God is and what he does, they sing. The songs are irrepressible."⁴²⁸ The book of Revelation anticipates powerful singing in the presence of God including hymns of adoration (Rev 4:8), songs of redemption (Rev 5:9), and anthems of glory (Rev 5:12).

Psalm 33 celebrates the sovereignty of the Lord over nature and the nations. The plans of the nations will fail, but the plans of the Lord will endure forever. "Throughout the psalm there is a sustained contrast between the reliability of the Lord and the unreliability of everything purely human." The psalm implicitly warns against imposing on the Lord our human limitations. The Lord knows each one of us as intimately as we know our children – only better. "From heaven" does not distance the Lord from knowing, because he formed "the hearts of all." The Lord "sees all mankind . . . all who live on earth" and "considers everything they do" (Ps 33:13-14). Kings and armies represent a "a vain hope for deliverance" (Ps 33:17). The "great strength" of worldly powers is powerless to save. The psalmist contrasts geopolitical power with the Lord's personal devotion toward those who fear him. The "unfailing love" of the Lord is shown to those who reverence him; only the Lord's love is powerful to deliver from death and famine. No amount of horsepower or nuclear power, no matter how great, can deliver. The implied optimism of nationalism is set in contrast to the unfailing love of the Lord and his power to save.

⁴²⁸ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 66-69

Hope in the Lord

*We wait in hope for the Lord;
he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love be with us,
Lord, even as we put our hope in you.*

Psalm 33:20-22

The joys of forgiveness inspire the people of God in worship and lead to a renewed understanding of the Lord's unfailing love and his absolute sovereignty. We are not resigned to wait in hope because we have run out of options and we have little else to do but trust in the Lord and hope for the best. Hope in the Lord rests in the quiet confidence and the deep assurance that the Lord will prevail against the powers of evil. Along with the psalmist we hope in the unfailing love of the Lord, who is our help, our shield, our joy and our confidence. But beyond that we follow the redemptive trajectory. We hope in the Lord, who "loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2).

We live in a crazy world driven mad by dangers that threaten to undo us. “Terror on every side!” describes the danger (Ps 31:13). “All my fears” captures the despair (Ps 34:4). Some believers may be lulled into thinking that this kind of language does not relate to them. Psalm 34 is only irrelevant to those who live in a bubble of their own imagination. The real world has a way of translating “trouble” into everyone’s situation. On any given Sunday someone is going through their deepest darkest valley.

The apostle John captured the terror of the human condition when he described the four horses of the apocalypse. Evil charges into our lives leaving destruction and death. The four horses of the apocalypse symbolize the stampede of evil thundering across the world scene pounding out pain and producing havoc. Conquest, violence, famine and death come charging at us like a team of wild horses. Of all people, Christians ought to understand the devastating power of evil. We should not be surprised by the comprehensive scope and painful intensity of evil, anymore than a doctor is shocked at cancer or a police officer is shocked at crime. Psalm 34 is for those who hear the pounding hooves of the four horses of the apocalypse.⁴²⁹

The human condition is vulnerable to conquest, violence, scarcity, and disease. Christians are vulnerable to awful car accidents, months of chemotherapy, and the loss of a limb when they step on improvised explosive device. We live in a fallen, broken, sin-twisted world and even in Christ we have not been given a free pass when it comes to the painful effects of evil. Western believers may not face state sponsored persecution for their faith, but they do experience social ostracism and the pressure to conform to the immortality symbols and the idols of the age. If believers are intent on following the Lord Jesus and living out New Testament Christianity, troubles will mount and multiple. Their lives will run contrary to the pervasive cultural emphasis on sexual freedom, material consumption, and the sovereign self.

Psalm 34 is linked to a strange incident in the life of David (1 Sam 21:10-15). David and his men were on the run. King Saul had vowed to kill David. He and his army were hunting David down like a wild animal. Out of desperation, David fled to Philistine country, to Achish king of Gath.⁴³⁰ But David’s plan failed on arrival because his reputation preceded him. The dance song that had infuriated Saul blew his cover and exposed him as the Philistines’ public enemy number one: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Sam 21:11). When David realized that he was in danger, he panicked and pretended to go crazy, “pounding his head on the city gate and foaming at the mouth, spit dripping from his beard.” King Achish angrily shouted,

⁴²⁹ The white horse and crowned rider symbolize conquest. The sword wielding rider on the fiery red horse stands for bloodshed and violence. The rider on the black horse carries a measuring scale signifying scarcity, famine, and economic disparity. The pale horse is ridden by death itself representing pestilence, disease, plague and death. It is a frightful quartet of misery that is unleashed upon the world. We live with the threat of the stampede of evil coming at us from all directions.

⁴³⁰ “Abimelech” means “my father is king” and may be a dynastic title that can be traced back to Genesis 20 and 26. See Craigie, *Psalms*, 278; Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:743; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 478. Goldingay writes: “Readers are thus encouraged to imagine how Abraham, Isaac, or David might have conquered fear by learning the lesson of this psalm, and/or how they might do something different with their fear. The psalm puts great emphasis on fear/reverence in relation to Yhwh, and sees this as the key to deliverance in the kind of danger Abraham, Isaac, or David were in.”

“Can’t you see he’s crazy? Why did you let him in here? Don’t you think I have enough crazy people to put up with as it is without adding another? Get him out of here!” (1 Sam 21:13-15 Message). David fled for his life and memorialized his deliverance in Psalm 34.

Thanksgiving

*I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.*

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.
This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.
Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.
The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

Psalm 34:1-10

The literary art of this alphabet psalm with the first word of each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet contradicts the chaotic circumstances that served as the poem’s catalyst.⁴³¹ The first half of the psalm is dedicated to thanksgiving and the second half to instruction.⁴³² Although not one line is directly addressed to the Lord nearly every line in the first half of the psalm is dedicated to the Lord. David extols the Lord, glories in the Lord, seeks the Lord, calls to the Lord, experiences the Lord, and fears the Lord. The chaos of human affairs and the machinations of human depravity are eclipsed by the centripetal force of the Lord’s glory. The Lord is worthy of all praise, because he answers the psalmist’s cry and delivers him from all his fears. The Lord makes all the difference in the world.

There is no hint of disappointment with the Lord. Troubles and hardships abound. The righteous are sorely afflicted. They are brokenhearted and crushed, but the Lord is not to blame; the Lord is praised. “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.” The psalmist

⁴³¹ Other acrostic psalms include Psalm 9-10 and 25. The alphabetical order is not followed perfectly. Craigie, *Psalms*, 277. Craigie lists key words that are used more than three times: “hear” - 34:2, 6, 11, 17; “deliver” - 34:4, 17, 19; “fear” - 34:7, 9a, 9b, 11; “good” - 34:8, 10, 12, 14; “evil” - 34:13, 14, 16, 19, 21; “righteous” - 34:15, 19, 21.

⁴³² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 477.

holds no grudge against the Lord for what he is suffering. He does not put God on trial; he cries out to the Lord for mercy and deliverance in the midst of his trial. Mary's Song of praise recalls Psalm 34:1-2: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble states of his servant" (Luke 1:46-47). The psalmist's identity is secure in the Lord. His thanksgiving is exuberant: "My soul magnifies the Lord." His boast resonates with God's word through the prophet Jeremiah: "'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23-24). The foundation to self-worth does not reside in ourselves and is not subject to our fears and shame, but it rests in the Lord who hears our cries and saves us out of all our troubles.⁴³³ The psalmist's boast in the Lord is in line with the apostle Paul's exuberance over being justified through faith in Jesus Christ. "And we boast in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:1-2).

The power of the lonely ordeal is broken in the company of those who look to the Lord. David's praise is deeply personal as indicated by his personal action: "I will extol. . . I will glory. . . I sought. . . This poor man called. . ." But it is also a deeply shared experience: "*Let us* exalt his name *together*. . . Those who look to him are radiant. . . The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them."⁴³⁴ The psalmist invites us all to, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." The author of Hebrews describes those "who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age. . ." (Heb 6:4-5). The apostle Peter calls all believers to "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet 2:2-3). The shared in-depth experience of the word of God and the Spirit of God is how the New Testament writers heard the encouragement to "taste and see that the Lord is good." David declares that the secret to happiness belongs to those who take refuge in the Lord. Young lions symbolize self-sufficiency while the people of God stand in complete dependency on the Lord's grace and mercy. Ironically, it is "the self-sufficient predators of this world" who "grow weak and hungry" (Ps 34:10), while the people of God have all their needs met.⁴³⁵

When the people of God extol the Lord at all times they experience the joy of thanksgiving and the solidarity of true Christian fellowship. They understand the fear of the Lord to be a deep and abiding reverence for the Lord that drives out all other fears. However, the presence of so much anxiety, disillusionment, and frustration in the lives of Christians is a likely indication of an inadequate reverence for the Lord and a shallow understanding of what it means to put our trust in the Lord. We stand in need of instruction and spiritual direction. Gratitude inspires worship and worship inspires an ethic. To extol the Lord at all times is to live all of life in the Lord's presence. If our "boast" is in the Lord our identity is anchored in humility and redemption.

⁴³³ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 64.

⁴³⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:751. Ross writes, "The 'angel of the Lord,' or 'messenger of the Lord' is probably a title for the Lord himself here as it is in other passages (see Gen 16:7; Josh 5:14; Judg 6:11-33, etc.)."

⁴³⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 280.

Teaching

*Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.
The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;
he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.
Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

Psalm 34:11-22

The apostle Peter turned to Psalm 34 to teach the radical new lifestyle of the followers of Jesus Christ. Heartfelt worship and deep gratitude were not incompatible with being broken hearted and crushed in spirit. Far from it, hard times invoked praise, not despair. Peter wrote to believers who were homeless in their home culture because of their new found faith in Jesus Christ. They were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. In the midst of an antagonistic and abusive honor– shame culture Peter emphasized “Jesus’ non-retaliatory stance.”⁴³⁶ The “get-even” strategies that fight fire with fire were eliminated. To curse or retaliate were not options for believers who were called to bless and evangelize. The worldly weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, were gone and the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness were deployed.

The apostle Peter used Psalm 34 to envision this transformed lifestyle. In the course of his letter, he quoted or alluded to Psalm 34 seven times.⁴³⁷ Peter prayed this psalm with Resurrection hope

⁴³⁶ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 607.

⁴³⁷ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 221-223. Jobes’ insights are helpful: 1. “Both start with blessing God.” (1:3 - Ps 34:1); 2. “The result of seeking the Lord was deliverance from all David’s sojournings.” (1:17 - Ps 34:4); 3. “The absence of shame, highly valued in ancient society, is found in both Psalm 34 and 1 Peter.” (2:6 - Ps 34:5); 4. “The benefits to those who fear the Lord are found in both the psalm and the epistle.” (1:17 - Ps 34:7); 5. “The responsiveness of God to the suffering of the righteous:” (2:17

(1 Pet 1:3) in anticipation of everlasting life and in appreciation for God’s blessings in daily life: “Whoever would love life and see good days...” The person who prays this psalm has been given new birth into a living hope and is therefore inspired and empowered not to retaliate against one’s abusers and slanders with hateful and deceitful speech. Psalm 34 gave Peter a description of practical Christian living in the light of the blessing we will inherit. This eschatological perspective is immediately practical. Not only must believers refrain from doing evil, “they must seek peace and pursue it” (Ps 34:14).

The benefit of living by the grace of Christ is *personal*. “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Ps 34:15). The righteous cry out and the Lord hears and “delivers them from all their troubles.” Psalm 34 “dispels the naiveté of that faith which does not contain within it the strength to stand against the onslaught of evil.”⁴³⁸ Peter Craigie writes, “The fear of the Lord is indeed the foundation of life, the key to joy in life and long and happy days. But it is not a guarantee that life will be always easy, devoid of the difficulties that may seem to mar so much of human existence. . . .It may mend the broken heart, but it does not prevent the heart from being broken. . . .”⁴³⁹ The apostle Paul alluded to this verse in his description of the persecutions he endured, “Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them” (2 Tim 3:11).

This psalm has a special place in my family, because it was my father’s chosen psalm in the last months of his life. He prayed this psalm daily, especially Psalm 34:17-20. My father was forty-seven and dying from stomach cancer. He prayed Psalm 34 as much for his family as he did for himself. For him the hardest thing about dying was trusting in the Lord for the future of his wife and two boys. He knew better than anyone that the psalm was not a guarantee for a trouble free existence; in fact just the opposite. The righteous are in trouble and they cry out. They’re brokenhearted. Their spirits are crushed. Life is hard. But in the end there is redemption. At a certain point you stop praying for physical healing and you begin to pray for Resurrection.

The psalmist depicts God’s total personal engagement in the believer’s situation. The Lord’s eyes are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but his angry face disapproves of those who do evil. “The plight of the wicked is put in an equally personal form, in terms of the unwelcoming face of God (Ps 34:16).”⁴⁴⁰ If we so choose, “we can be left utterly and absolutely outside – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored.”⁴⁴¹ Christ’s followers may think that the Lord is distant and unaware, but Peter reminds them that the Lord is fully present, blessing his righteous servants and punishing those who do evil.

The Lord knows the suffering of the righteous and promises deliverance from all her troubles. Not a bone of her body will be broken. The metaphor of no broken bones conveys the assurance that the righteous will be rescued unharmed. Christians read the final sentence, “The Lord will

- Ps 34:9, 11); 6. “The ‘many afflictions’ from which the righteous are delivered are mentioned in both:” (3:12 - Ps 34:17); 7. “The redemption of the servants of the Lord:” (1:6 - Ps 34:19; 1:18; 2:16 - Ps 34:22).

⁴³⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 282.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴⁴⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 141.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

rescue his servants,” and understand “the unimaginable cost” of the cross of Christ.⁴⁴² We cannot grasp the price paid for our redemption. The apostle John took the figure of no-broken-bones and applied it literally to Jesus. The Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two men who were crucified with Jesus. “But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.” John adds, “These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken’” (John 19:33, 36). John sees in this act a final note of fulfillment pointing to the perfect Passover Lamb (“It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones” (Ex. 12:46). “The promise to the righteous person found an unexpectedly literal realization in the passion of the perfectly Righteous One.”⁴⁴³ The “unbounded scope” of David’s final line, “No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned” (Ps 34:22b), corresponds to the apostle Paul’s bold statement, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

The beauty of Psalm 34 is not diminished by its narrative link to David’s ingenious performance as a madman to escape the clutches of the Philistines. Augustine drew a straight line from David’s Oscar winning portrayal of insanity to the humiliation of Christ on the cross.⁴⁴⁴ David’s clawing on the doors of the gate and foaming at the mouth made Augustine think of the awful humiliation suffered by the Son of God who died in his passion (not in a performance) that we might escape the judgment we deserve for our sins. Calvin questioned whether David was led by the Holy Spirit when he pretended to go mad. Although God blessed David with deliverance, Calvin believed that God did not excuse “the intermediate sin” of feigning insanity. God graciously did not lay charge to David’s sin, but that did not change the fact that David showed a lack of faith by not “committing his life entirely to God.” Furthermore, “he exposed himself and the grace of the Spirit, by whom he was governed, to the derision of the ungodly.”⁴⁴⁵

Luther had a different take. He believed that David wrote this psalm about Christ. “Therefore David (that is, Christ) changed his countenance in the time of suffering.” Luther compared David’s dramatic performance before King Achish to Christ’s “lowly suffering” before the Sanhedrin and the Romans. David’s portrayal of a madman prefigures the prophet Isaiah’s description of the Suffering Servant: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa 53:2c-3). David’s humiliation, concealing his strength and power, allowing himself to be despised and rejected, prefigures Christ’s humiliation – “and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:8). The whole scene makes sense of the apostle Paul’s declaration, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Augustine, *Psalms*, 73.

⁴⁴⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, 556-557.

The extremity of Psalm 35 matches the exuberance of Psalm 34. These two companion psalms share not only verbal affinities but a desperate need for deliverance. Only these two psalms refer to “the angel of the Lord” (Ps 34:7; 35:5,6) and both psalms refer to the poor who are in need of rescue (Ps 34:6; 35:10). Both psalms speak of “bones” as a metaphor for the whole person: “He protects all his bones” (Ps 34:20), and “All my bones shall say, ‘O Lord, who is like you’” (Ps 35:10 ESV). Lions are also referenced in both psalms. Young lions grow weak and hungry in Psalm 34 and pose a grave danger to the godly in Psalm 35 (Ps 34:10; 35:17). Exuberant joy and extreme angst run together in the cosmic battle of sin and death as we await the final judgment and the consummation of “so great a salvation” (Heb 2:3).

Christ is our interpretative key for understanding this psalm. “The meaning of Psalm 35 is not difficult to discern,” writes Patrick Reardon, “because it is one of those psalms for which the New Testament explicitly provides the proper ‘voice’ and setting. The voice speaking in Psalm 35 is the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and the psalm’s theological context is the drama of His Passion and death.”⁴⁴⁶ Dale Bruner says it unequivocally, “Every Old and New Testament text must be brought to kneel before the Messiah, Scripture’s Center and Power, before it can be preached as Word of God.”⁴⁴⁷

When Jesus quoted a line from Psalm 35 in his conversation with his disciples, he prefaced the quote by saying, “But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason’” (John 15:25). Jesus said this as they walked the streets of Jerusalem. He and his disciples were about to cross the Kidron Valley on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. The conversation that flowed from Psalm 35 began, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Although Jesus only quoted a line from Psalm 35:19, the larger conversation about hate and rejection corresponds closely to the entire psalm.

Besieged

*Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.
Take up shield and armor;
arise and come to my aid.
Brandish spear and javelin
against those who pursue me.
Say to me,
“I am your salvation.”
May those who seek my life
be disgraced and put to shame;*

⁴⁴⁶ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 67.

⁴⁴⁷ Bruner, *John*, 341.

*may those who plot my ruin
 be turned back in dismay.
 May they be like chaff before the wind,
 with the angel of the Lord driving them away;
 may their path be dark and slippery,
 with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.
 Since they hid their net for me without cause
 and without cause dug a pit for me,
 may ruin overtake them by surprise –
 may the net they hid entangle them,
 may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.
 Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord
 and delight in his salvation.
 My whole being will exclaim,
 “Who is like you, Lord?
 You rescue the poor from those too strong for them,
 the poor and needy from those who rob them.”*

Psalm 35:1-10

The psalmist is embattled. War is being waged against him by an enemy who knows him well and hates him for it. The psalm may very well describe the time when David was on the run from King Saul and his army. The military language is consistent with the threat and David’s plea for the Lord to “fight against those who fight against me” recalls David’s willed passivity against the Lord’s Anointed (1 Sam 24:5-6). David is a picture of the Christian who refuses to fight “the world, the flesh, and the devil” (1 John 5:5) with the weapons of the world (2 Cor 10:4). David’s pacifist dependency on the Lord to contend for him sets a precedent for the believer’s dependency on the Lord. The get-even strategies that fight fire with fire are eliminated. Instead of the weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, believers pick up the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness.

Christians are called to bless, not curse. They are called to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Tens of thousands of Korean believers have been killed and imprisoned by the notorious dictator Kim Jong-un, and yet many throughout North Korea are praying for his salvation. The self-control required to bless one’s accusers and slanderers is evidence of “a supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23).” Karen Jobes continues, “For it is exactly when we are insulted and treated with malicious intent that we are most tempted to respond in kind by gossip, exaggerating the extent of the fault, or with outright slander. Those who are able not simply to clench their teeth and remain silent but to maintain an inner attitude that allows one to pray sincerely for the well-being of one’s adversaries, are truly a witness to the life-changing power of a new identity in Christ.”⁴⁴⁸

David does not bless his enemies. He curses them. He calls down judgment upon them. He prays that the disgrace and shame and ruin that his enemies plotted against him would boomerang back

⁴⁴⁸ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 218.

on themselves. He wants them to fall into the trap that they have set for him and when they are ruined his “soul will rejoice in the Lord” (Ps 35:9). This “unholy fire of personal passion” may seem incompatible with “the holy fire of his love to God,” until we realize that David’s “imprecatory words” come from “the pure spring of unself-seeking zeal for the honor of God.”⁴⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Delitzsch goes on to argue that this “holy fire” is inconsistent with New Testament faith that “shrinks back from invoking upon any one a destruction that lasts.”⁴⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis contended that imprecatory prayers were wrong for Christians to condone, let alone pray. “At the outset I felt sure, and I feel sure still, that we must not either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious. We must face both facts squarely. The hatred is there – festering, gloating, undisguised – and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.”⁴⁵¹

Although Delitzsch had trouble reconciling “the holy zeal of the New Testament” with “the holy fervor of the Old Testament,” a strong case can be made for Christ’s followers praying Psalm 35.⁴⁵² The most important reason is that Jesus himself prayed this psalm in the face of extreme opposition. On the walk from the upper room to Gethsemane Jesus addressed the subject of hate by drawing on Psalm 35. Goldingay writes, “Strangely, Jesus was apparently not embarrassed by the psalm and gives no hint of seeing himself as having superseded it, suggesting that once again this is a problem about us as interpreters of the psalm.”⁴⁵³

The straightforward contradiction between the imprecatory psalms and Jesus’ teaching on loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44) does not solve the dilemma. Daniel Nehrbass argues that the imprecatory psalms are consistent with the covenant-keeping God who promises blessings and curses.⁴⁵⁴ They are consistent with the sovereign Lord’s holy and loving character as well as with New Testament imprecations. We need to hold in positive tension “the severity of Christ’s judgment and the limitless nature of his love.”⁴⁵⁵

Jesus gave three reasons why the world hates his disciples and each reason relates to believers everywhere (John 15:18-16:4). First, the world hates believers because they don’t belong to the world. Jesus has chosen them out of the world. Second, believers are hated because of the exclusive truth claim of Christ. The world is not willing to accept that Jesus was sent by the Father and is one with God. Third, the world hates believers because of the convicting power of the gospel of grace. Ironically, the goodness of the gospel provokes rejection and rebellion. These three reasons can be seen reflected in Psalm 35. Those who hate the psalmist are described as chaff that the wind blows away. His enemies walk in step with the wicked. They stand in the way of sinners and they sit in the company of mockers (Ps 1:1,4). Like his Lord, the psalmist has

⁴⁴⁹ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 417.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁴⁵¹ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 22.

⁴⁵² Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 419.

⁴⁵³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 503.

⁴⁵⁴ Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 88-100

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 91. Nehrbass identifies the following New Testament imprecations, 138-139: Matthew 11:21-24; 12:34; 13:32; 23:33-35; 26:24; Acts 23:3; 1 Cor 16:22; Galatians 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim 4:14; James 5:1-6; Jude 11-13; Rev 6:10.

comforted the grieving and showed compassion to the suffering, but the only thanks he got was malicious mocking and hate. And like his Lord, he has been hated without reason.

Jesus was determined to prepare his disciples for the world's reaction: "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me" (John 15:20-21). Jesus is the precedent setting reason for the world's hate. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." He is our Master and we are his disciples. "A servant is not greater than his master." We share in his path to the cross. His narrative becomes our narrative. We lean into his cruciform strategy of submission and sacrifice.

A second significant reason for Christians today praying Psalm 35 is that we learn from David's example to vent our fear and hate through prayer. David acknowledge his need for salvation. He owned his weakness. He refused to take matters into his own hands and fight the evil confronting him with the weapons of the world. "Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil," writes Eugene Peterson.⁴⁵⁶ The enemy is real. Hate must be acknowledged and dealt with in prayer, rather than denied or suppressed. David's willed passivity is prayed out in complete dependence upon the Lord in whom he has placed his honor and salvation. It is right and true for Christians to pray for the salvation of North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-un, but it is also right and true for Christians to pray for his judgment.

A third reason for Christians to pray Psalm 35 is that it is consistent with God's ultimate and final judgment against the wicked. The apostle Paul's poignant refrain running through Romans one that God gives people up to their "sinful desires" and "shameful lusts" and "depraved mind" underscores the psalmist's plea that his enemies to fall into the pit they dug for him. The wicked ways of the wicked are inherently self-incriminating and self-destructive. The Bible has so much more to say on this subject than is often admitted. Jesus spoke of hell often. He repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). Any generation that rejects the gospel is guilty of the blood of all the prophets (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus lashed out, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

To be ashamed of Jesus and his gospel is to identify with an "adulterous and sinful generation" and to invite a reciprocal response: "the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:36-38; Luke 9:23-26). Jesus warned, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Jesus described judgment in graphic and violent language. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

⁴⁵⁶ Peterson, *Answering God*, 98.

David concludes confidently with the firm expectation that he will be delivered and vindicated. Once again exuberant praise is anticipated for the salvation that only the Lord who defends the weak and rescues the poor can accomplish. David expects to worship the Lord with his whole being, with his soul and every bone in his body laughing, singing, “Who is like you, Lord?” (see Ps 35:10 Message).

Betrayed

*Ruthless witnesses come forward;
they question me on things I know nothing about.
They repay me evil for good
and leave me like one bereaved.
Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.
When my prayers returned to me unanswered,
I went about mourning as though for a friend or brother.
I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother.
But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee;
assailants gathered against me without my knowledge.
They slandered me without ceasing.
Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked;
they gnashed their teeth at me.
How long, Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my precious life from these lions,
I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among the throngs I will praise you.*

Psalm 35:11-18

We might have expected David to feel endangered by Israel’s archenemies the Philistines, but instead, his most wearisome and depressing enemies were his fellow Israelites. In exchange for his compassionate care and sacrificial empathy, he was repaid with hostility and slander. He showed his people humility and mercy, but they turned on him in contempt and mockery. I imagine there are many in the church who, like David, feel they are repaid evil for good and that their acts of mercy stir up malicious mocking. When they stumble, well-intentioned dragons pounce. Sadly, the psalmist’s experience is shared by many who have sought to serve the Lord.

David is a type or figure pointing forward to the Son of David. His experience helps us to better understand the Lord’s experience: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). David’s lament is a cry for help, “How long, Lord, will you look on?” Ironically, “the shortness of the question corresponds inversely to the length of the oppression.”⁴⁵⁷ The apostle John describes the faithful saints who were slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They call out in a loud voice, “How long,

⁴⁵⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 498.

Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10). The people of God on earth and in heaven are still asking that question, even as they join with David in declaring, “I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among the throngs I will praise you” (Ps 35:18).

Belittled

*Do not let those gloat over me
who are my enemies without cause;
do not let those who hate me without reason
maliciously wink the eye.
They do not speak peaceably,
but devise false accusations
against those who live quietly in the land.
They sneer at me and say, “Aha! Aha!
With our own eyes we have seen it.”
Lord, you have seen this; do not be silent.
Do not be far from me, Lord.
Awake, and rise to my defense!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.
Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God;
do not let them gloat over me.
Do not let them think, “Aha, just what we wanted!”
or say, “We have swallowed him up.”
May all who gloat over my distress
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who exalt themselves over me
be clothed with shame and disgrace.
May those who delight in my vindication
shout for joy and gladness;
may they always say, “The Lord be exalted,
who delights in the well-being of his servant.”
My tongue will proclaim your righteousness,
your praises all day long.*

Psalm 35:19-28

The experience of being besieged by enemies without cause and betrayed by people who hate without reason is bound to take an emotional toll. In this third section, David conveys the personal trauma of being belittled by his enemies whose wink is malicious. He describes what it feels like to be falsely accused by those who ridicule him with a dismissive sneer. Their duplicity thinly veils their false testimony. Everything they do seems calculated to manipulate and deceive. Thankfully, the psalm does not write off the cynical sneer and the beguiling wink as something petty to be overlooked. While their off-handed comments appear to be casual, they are carefully designed to unnerve the innocent and overcome the righteous. We have all been in situations where the haters and the mockers have sought to obscure their deception and duplicity by

claiming they meant nothing by the wink and the gesture. Yet the faithful know manipulation and mockery when they see it.

Jesus identified with the psalmist's shock and pathos. Throughout his entire public ministry Jesus experienced the derisive looks and angry stares of the religious leaders. He suffered their bemused ridicule and gloating cynicism. Psalm 35 was a prayer guide for his daily experience of ridicule and mockery. It is scandalous to realize that the one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should be intensely hated by the religious leaders of his people and despised by the political authorities. The one who was sentenced to die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion bore "our suffering" and was "pierced for our transgression" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa 53:4-5). David had no idea how God himself would suffer to reverse the shame and depravity systemic to our human natures.

With Psalms 35 fixed in his praying imagination, Jesus knew the price that would be paid. This radical paradox crossed his mind as he walked with his disciples through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to Gethsemane. By quoting a line from the psalm, "They hated me without reason," Jesus leads the disciples in a prayerful response to hate. The place to go in the heat of opposition is to the Lord in prayer. When the world's rejection is especially painful and the reason for the hate passes all understanding the Christian prays. A prayed out lament is different from a vindictive venting! Psalms 35 and 69 instruct us in how to bring the world's painful rejection to the Lord. Through prayer we are reminded of God's great love and his sure salvation. We cry out, "Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters" (Ps 69:13-14). Psalm 35 ends on high note of praise to Yahweh for his faithfulness. David calls the people of God to shout for joy and gladness. He knows he is not in this ordeal alone. There are many who rejoice in the vindication of the Lord's Anointed One. The faithful long to see the Lord exalted and his Servant honored. David points forward to the Son of David, Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, who will endure much more than Psalm 35 describes in order to say, "I am your salvation" (Ps 35:3).

Psalm 36 starts out as a wisdom psalm like Psalm 1 with a four verse description of the wicked person. In the preceding psalm the wicked are described as vicious enemies of David. They bear false witness against him, repay evil for good, hate him without reason, maliciously mock him, and gloat over him in his distress. This description of evil calls for a theological response that clarifies the roots of human faithlessness. Psalm 36 answers that call efficiently and effectively.

David is intent on removing any doubt or ambiguity surrounding the evil he is up against. The revelation he received from God sweeps aside any mystery that might hide the truth about evil. A prime candidate for David's diagnostic description of evil is his archenemy King Saul. Ironically, the subject of David's concern is not a pagan Canaanite nor a rebellious Philistine, but the leader of Israel, King Saul. It was Saul who embodied the profile and exemplified the evil that masqueraded under the cover of privilege and tradition. The very fact that the wicked person in view is religious and not pagan complicates our understanding of life. We cannot make an easy division between believer and unbeliever. This is not an old western where the good guys are wearing white hats and the bad guys are wearing black hats. It's not that simple. David is describing not only his arch nemesis King Saul, but the guy next door and even himself.

A Christian reading of Psalm 36 starts with the apostle Paul's quote from the psalm in Romans 3. There Paul is making the case that Jews and Gentiles alike "are all under the power of sin." He draws from five psalms in rapid succession to drive home the truth that "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10; Ps 14:1-3; see Ps 5:9; 140:3; 10:7 (LXX); Ps 36:1). He ends with Psalm 36:1: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom 3:18). The Christian mind "assumes that the powers of evil will exploit every possible occasion" and in the name of morality seek to blur concepts and twist values.⁴⁵⁸ The Christian mind is also sensitive to the extent to which evil pervades our own judgments. The tragedy of this world is not primarily social nor political, but personal. Evil begins with me. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" and Isaiah likened our righteous acts to "filthy rags" (Jer 17:9; Isa 64:6). British author G. K. Chesterton was asked to write a magazine article on the subject "What's Wrong with the Universe?" He responded to the editor's request with two words, "I am."

No Fear Faithlessness

*I have a message from God in my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before their eyes.
In their own eyes they flatter themselves
too much to detect or hate their sin.
The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful;
they fail to act wisely or to do good.*

⁴⁵⁸ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 102.

*Even on their beds they plot evil;
they commit themselves to a sinful course
and do not reject what is wrong.*

Psalm 36:1-4

Human depravity is described seven ways:

1) “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” The word for “fear” is not the usual word. It is not the same word that is used in “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). The word for “fear” means to live in dread, to be terrified, to be frightened. It is the fear that stops people in their tracks.⁴⁵⁹ Far from living in reverence and awe of God, the wicked are indifferent and complacent. They’re “practical atheists” saying to themselves, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” (Ps 73:11). They are dismissive of God’s will and cynical of God’s action. This does not mean that such a person lives without fear, far from it. King Saul was a case in point. He, along with his troops, quaked with fear (1 Sam 13:7). His paranoia resulted in a foolish loyalty oath (1 Sam 14:24) and he came to hate David out of jealousy and fear (1 Sam 18). In “great distress” he sought advice from the a medium at Endor (1 Sam 28) and in the end he committed suicide after falling critically wounded in battle (1 Sam 31).

2) “In their own eyes they flatter themselves to much to detect or hate their sin.” Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggested that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeball. We have a natural inclination to pacify and placate our conscience. We tend to grade ourselves on a curve, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, who looked down on the tax collector, and thanked the Lord that he was not like “this tax collector” (Luke 18:9-14). We excuse ourselves by judging others. The British abolitionist William Wilberforce in his treatise on Christian character and conduct warned that we have a “natural proneness to think too favorably of ourselves.” Selfishness disposes us to “overrate our good qualities, and to overlook or excuse our defects.” We are misled in our self-evaluation by “the favorable opinions of others” and by substituting good intentions for meaningful moral and spiritual change.⁴⁶⁰

3) “The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful.” The wicked have their own devious strategy of communication. The importance of the tongue can hardly be overstated. “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov 18:21). Proverbs has plenty to say on the subject. “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit” (Prov 15:4). Technology’s amazing reach and the ability to preserve everything has only accentuated the need for truth and the danger of deception. “The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools” (Prov 15:7). Proverbs believes in the power of communication for good and evil. “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape” (Prov 11:9).

4) “They fail to act wisely or do good.” Deception paves the way for disobedience. By willfully ignoring the truth, sinful habits such as anger and apathy go unchallenged. It takes real effort to

⁴⁵⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:785.

⁴⁶⁰ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 114-115.

separate what God has united. Faith and practice belong together, but the wicked manage to hold to one and despise the other. Obedience falls victim to a thousand distractions and qualifications. Wilberforce identified the false comfort found in ambiguity. The wicked hide behind vague moral generalities which leave specific sins unchecked. “Instead of tracing and laying open all the secret motions of inward corruption, and instructing their hearers how best to conduct themselves in every distinct phase of the Christian warfare, they generalize about it. . . They will confess in general terms to be ‘miserable sinners.’ But it is an expression really of secret self-complacency.”⁴⁶¹

5) “Even on their beds they plot evil.” Under the cover of theoretical niceness and a selective morality the wicked exploit self-rule to its maximum potential. They do whatever their hearts desire. They give themselves to their passions to keep at bay the painful thought that all is meaningless (Eccl 2:4-8). The wicked believe that they can generate meaning and significance for themselves. They reverse the apostle John’s admonition (1 John 1:15-17).

6) “They commit themselves to a sinful course.” The overt sin of Philistine paganism is not the temptation identified in this psalm. The sin in question is more seductive and covert than overt and blatant. It is the kind of evil that is outwardly commendable and culturally attractive. It is the beautiful side of evil as opposed to the raunchy side of evil. King Saul chose sins befitting his office and power, sins that were consistent with his royal tradition and privilege. The psalmist describes a wicked person who is repulsed by the ugly side of evil, but seduced by the beautiful side of evil.

7) “[They] do not reject what is wrong.” If we were take these seven features of human depravity and apply them to post-biblical Christianity, we might be shocked to see how pertinent they are to our contemporary situation. Are we guilty of obscuring the “very real and irreducible element of sheer contrariness” involved in setting apart Christ as Lord? Popular Christianity reflects the spirit of the times, not the Spirit of Christ. Worldly Christianity is compatible with popular culture. Past perversions are celebrated as freedoms and tolerance trumps truth. Self-expression is the new sacred. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

The portrait of human wickedness that David profiles in Psalm 36 is the evil that is close at hand and resides in the neighborhood. It is the evil that gloats in our hearts and parades down the street. It is not so much the evil that lurks in dark alleys nor hides from the police; it is the evil that has gained public respectability and cultural acceptance. David’s seven attributes of evil show us how easy it is to be caught up in its ways.

Loving Faithfulness

*Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,
your justice like the great deep.
You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.*

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 125.

*How precious is your unfailing love, O God!
People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.*

Psalm 36:5-9

David abruptly ends his description of evil and breaks into doxology. In Psalm 1 the wicked are compared to the righteous, but here they are contrasted with the immensity of God's covenant love. Evil's gloating look, deceitful voice, indifferent shrug, and bedtime plotting, are transcended in a moment by the unsearchable, impregnable, inexhaustible, and hospitable steadfast love of the Lord.⁴⁶² Over and against the small-minded pettiness of evil is the spaciousness of God's "commitment, truthfulness, faithfulness, authority, and deliverance."⁴⁶³ Eugene Peterson captures the contrast in his translation:

*God's love is meteoric,
his loyalty astronomic,
His purpose titanic,
his verdicts oceanic.
Yet in his largeness
nothing gets lost;
Not a man, not a mouse,
slips through the cracks.*

Psalm 36:5-6 Message

There is no verbal link between David's doxology in Psalm 36 and the apostle Paul's doxology in Romans 11:33-36, but there is an echo of psalmist's inspiration in the apostle's hymn. Both doxologies celebrate the heights and depths of God's wisdom and love; both praise God for his unsearchable judgments and untraceable ways. And both doxologies answer the description of evil with the immensities of God's love and wisdom.⁴⁶⁴ The psalmist attributes the ecology of the universe to the Lord's unfailing love. People and animals alike are preserved by the Lord. We find our refuge under the shadow of his wings. Jesus used the image of a hen gathering chicks under her wings and he referenced "your house" (Ps 36:8) in Matthew 23:37-39. He used these images immediately following his caustic and prophetic rebuke of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Jesus' description of their wickedness parallels the description of evil found in Psalm 36:1-4. The religious leaders refusal to enter into the kingdom of heaven was a refusal to embrace God's covenant love.

David's description of feasting in the house of God and drinking from the fountain of the life paints a picture that points forward to the Garden City of God in Revelation 21. His line, "In your

⁴⁶² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 147.

⁴⁶³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 509.

⁴⁶⁴ Seifred, "Romans," 678. Seifred writes: "To ascribe the depth of riches, wisdom, and knowledge to God is a reversal of human rebellion, the surrender of the claim that we ourselves are wise (Rom 1:21-23)."

light we see light” is echoed in the prologue of the Gospel of John. The Word that was made flesh was the light of the world. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not over come it. . . .The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:4-5, 9).

A Prayer for Mercy

*Continue your love to those who know you,
your righteousness to the upright in heart.
May the foot of the proud not come against me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.
See how the evildoers lie fallen –
thrown down, not able to rise!*

Psalm 36:10-12

When we pray this psalm in the light of the gospel of grace and with the discernment of the Holy Spirit we realize that it is not about human morality in general but about our own depravity and need for salvation. It is about “the metaphysics of mercy” and we know that the “sole cure for this rebellion in our hearts is the divine gift of mercy.”⁴⁶⁵ We look to Christ and pray with the psalmist for the continuation of the Lord’s loving mercy and for his imputed righteousness to cover our sin. David is ready to fight the evil he described at the beginning of the psalm because of the grace he describes in the middle.⁴⁶⁶ But he can only enter the fray with the Lord’s protection. He prays to be kept from being kicked around by the proud and pushed around by the wicked. “It is only a matter of time before those who are wicked will be destroyed.”⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 70.

⁴⁶⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 148.

⁴⁶⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:795.

Embedded in the psalms is the wisdom that shapes how we pray and how we live. Not all the psalms are formally prayers, but all the psalms can be prayed and all the psalms teach us how to pray. Psalm 37 is an acrostic psalm, every other verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The ordered structure assisted worshipers in memorizing the psalm and the repetition of themes accentuated the message. To list these truths in an alphabetical order was neither artificial nor arbitrary. The poetic medium reinforces the theological message. It is a reminder that the sovereign Lord is in control and can be trusted to administer justice and bring about salvation for the righteous.

David approaches the problem of evil by offering a spiraling meditation on the apparent human flourishing of the wicked, the response of the righteous, and the dependability of God to bring about justice. The psalm is more like a counseling session than a lecture. The psalmist answers anticipated questions, provides a realistic appraisal of depravity, and insists on the believer's resilient faithfulness. Psalm 36 offers a personal description of human wickedness in the neighborhood. Psalm 37 takes in the big picture of evil and the long range view of justice. David begins with negative admonitions, do not fret, do not envy, but before he is through he has built a persuasive case for dependence, obedience, and hope. The danger of envy is overcome in the earnest expectation of the Lord's power to vindicate and save.

Prohibitions and Promises

*Do not fret because of the those who do evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
For like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret – it leads only to evil.
For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*

Psalm 37:1-9

Round one offers a series of positive and negative staccato imperatives. Wisdom is simple and straight-forward; it is the act of living into this wisdom that is complicated. The psalmist expects worshipers of Yahweh to know what to do when he admonishes, “Trust in the Lord and do good” or “Commit your way to the Lord.” He does not need to elaborate a lengthy exposition to teach the obvious. He is convinced they know what he means when he says, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” Fundamental to the psalmist’s spiritual direction is the conviction that the people of God are defined by a covenant relationship with the Lord in whom they have placed their trust. The Lord is their delight and their desire. Their future is bright because they have committed their way to the Lord. They have experienced the wisdom of being still before the Lord and waiting patiently for him. Psalm 37 “is a meditative lesson on not being deceived by appearances and a summons to wait patiently for God’s deliverance.”⁴⁶⁸ We find echoes of Psalm 37 in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴⁶⁹

The concern over fretting and envying may mean that the righteous still worry about missing out on the good life. The phrase, “do not fret,” is weak, for the command is to ‘not let your anger burn’ over the wicked who are transient.”⁴⁷⁰ The nineteenth century preacher Charles Spurgeon said it well, “When one is poor, despised, and in deep trial, our old Adam naturally becomes envious of the rich and great; and when we are conscious that we have been more righteous than they, the devil is sure to be at hand with blasphemous reasoning.”⁴⁷¹ We want what others have. We see people who have no time or place for God excelling in prestige and prosperity. We wonder if we should change course and pursue wealth and power. The temptation to take charge and control our destiny is strong. We are easily seduced by images of success and status. Frustration sets in when Christians feel their “best life now” is slipping away from them. We are torn between living the Jesus way and pursuing the American Dream. Philosopher Charles Taylor explains that all cultures define their vision of the “good life.”

“Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can’t help asking these and related questions in our lives. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by. . . .”⁴⁷²

The psalmist’s vision of the “good life” is centered in God: God’s covenant loyal-love, God’s moral order, God’s sovereignty over time and history, and God’s eschatological judgment of the wicked and God’s salvation of the righteous. In practical terms, this means that Christ’s followers are called on “to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing” as we

⁴⁶⁸ Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 72.

⁴⁶⁹ Psalm 37 corresponds well to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus delivers a series of negative prohibitions: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . .Do not serve two masters. . . .Do not worry about your life. . . .Do not judge others. . . .Do not give to dogs what is sacred” (Matt 6:19-7:6). These prohibitions correspond to David’s “do not fret,” “do not envy,” “do not get angry,” “do not fret” (Ps 37:1, 8). This form of God-centered, grace-based self-discipline is key to liberation and devotion.

⁴⁷⁰ Tanner, *The Book of Psalms, NIV Commentary on the Old Testament*, 352.

⁴⁷¹ Spurgeon, “Psalm 37,” *Treasury of David*.

⁴⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

might conceive them for ourselves.⁴⁷³ Taylor stresses that it is not a simple matter of renunciation, as in the case of Stoicism. “For God wills ordinary human flourishing,” as is illustrated in the Gospels when Christ healed and restored people. “The call to renounce,” that is the call to self-denial and taking up our cross and following Jesus, “doesn’t negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to center everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing for others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and ‘repairing the world.’”⁴⁷⁴ The cost of discipleship may be great. It may mean giving up ordinary human flourishing, which is to say the “unsubstitutable good” that God truly wills for all, in order to fulfill God’s costly will for the flourishing (the redemption) of others. There is no greater example of this sacrifice than the cross of Jesus Christ.

Charles Taylor’s perspectives run commentary on Psalm 37. The world’s understanding of the good life is centered on the autonomous individual self whose hopes, dreams, aspirations and efforts are focused on pleasing the self. Rod Dreher warns, “American Christians are going to have to come to terms with the brute fact that we live in a culture, one in which our beliefs make increasingly little sense. We speak a language that the world more and more either cannot hear or finds offensive to its ears.”⁴⁷⁵

The psalmist’s straight forward direction removes any ambiguity. Staccato commands spell it out plain and simple: “Do not fret. . . Do not envy. . . Trust in the Lord. . . Do good. . . Take delight in the Lord . . . Commit your way to the Lord.” The verb to “commit” means to “roll away,” “that is, cast the feelings of resentment, fear, jealousy onto the Lord.”⁴⁷⁶ “Roll the whole burden of life upon the Lord,” advised Charles Spurgeon. “Leave with Jehovah not thy present fretfulness merely, but all thy cares; in fact, submit the whole tenor of thy way to him. Cast away anxiety, resign thy will, submit thy judgment, leave all with the God of all. What a medicine is this for expelling envy!”⁴⁷⁷ The apostle Peter echoed Psalm 37 in his pastoral exhortation, when he wrote, “Humble yourselves. . . under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6-7).

The Meek Will Inherit the Land

*A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash (grind) their teeth at them;
but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.*

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 12.

⁴⁷⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:807.

⁴⁷⁷ Spurgeon, “Psalm 37,” *Treasury of David*

*The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
But the wicked will perish:
Though the Lord's enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.*

Psalm 37:10-20

Round two highlights the will to power. The wicked do everything in their power to remove the righteous. They plot and rage against the blameless. They use every weapon in their arsenal to bring down the upright and to destroy the righteous poor and God-dependent needy. Worldly power is based on the law of the jungle. It is captured in Darwin's slogan, "the survival of the fittest," and in Machiavelli's assertion that the end justifies the means. Nietzsche contended that the essence of humanity without God is the will to power.

Rod Dreher warns that Christians will lose their jobs "if they refuse to recognize the new secular orthodoxies." They may not be persecuted for their faith per se, "they are already being targeted when they stand for what their faith entails, especially in matters of sexuality. As the LGBT agenda advances, broad interpretations of antidiscrimination laws are going to push traditional Christians out of the marketplace, and the corporate world will become hostile toward Christian bigots, considering them a danger to the working environment."⁴⁷⁸

Jesus' third beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount appears to come directly from Psalm 37 and the psalm's commentary on meekness. Instead of picturing a shy, timid, and fearful person, David pictures the meek as unperturbed by evil people, self-controlled, confident in the Lord, and resolute in their faith and trust in God's sovereign care and justice. David's imperatives on meekness are sharp and concise and highlight true strength of character and inner discipline (Ps 37:1-8). Meekness is an internal discipline and an intentional reliance upon God to accomplish his will and his work *in his way*. Meekness is a "conscious suppression of willfulness and a purposeful cultivation of willingness."⁴⁷⁹ The only thing that matters is pleasing God.

⁴⁷⁸ Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 175, 179,

⁴⁷⁹ Peterson, "Growth: An Act of the Will," *Leadership*, 40.

Meekness is the openness to see God in the big picture of life and to recognize “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Meekness leads us to say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” and mean it not as a boast but as a confidence. Think of meekness as bold humility or aggressive patience. It is the spiritual discipline that overcomes the world. To be meek in the biblical sense is to be neither mousy nor militant. It strikes the mean between being passive and pushy, cowardly and reckless, lenient and harsh. Meekness is a one word summary of greatness, but not as the world defines greatness.

The strength to be meek lies in the promises of God. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” The reason we can afford to be meek is because of the grace of God in the present and because of the promise of God for the future. It is worth noting that Jesus enlarged the promise expressed in Psalm 37:11 and expanded its meaning.⁴⁸⁰ The psalmist envisioned the Promised Land, but Jesus promised the whole earth. The reason we can be meek is because “we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom 8:37). We fight not for victory but from victory and the “the weapons we fight with are the not weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4). Jesus said it clearly, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The world has nothing to fear from Christians other than the demonstration of God’s goodness. We will not fight the world with the weapons of the world.

Neither Jesus nor the psalmist envisioned the meek as beleaguered victims, filled with anger and resentment. Instead of dwelling on the badness of culture, the psalmist affirms the goodness of the promises of God. Those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land, enjoy peace and prosperity, experience the Lord’s vindication, and enjoy plenty even in the midst of famine. Psalm 37 envisions a salvation that dwells on the goodness of God in spite of the world’s will to power. In Christ we have a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”⁴⁸¹ Living into this new reality, makes anger and resentment, no matter how bad the culture incompatible with a resilient faith.

Only the meek can say with the apostle, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The meek find in the message of the cross the power and wisdom of God. Instead of a spirit of timidity and weakness or a spirit of pride and coercion, they have been given the Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline (2 Tim 1:7). Whenever we defend or promote the gospel of Christ by means of worldly power we discredit our crucified Lord. The only way to commend the gospel is the Jesus way. The psalmist lays it out, “You may choose to trust in God and inherit the land or forsake God, trust yourself, and disappear!”⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 68. McKnight counters the translation that puts “earth” instead of “land” in the mouth of Jesus. “It is an explicit quotation of Psalm 37:11, where the Hebrew word means ‘land’ and not ‘earth’ in its cosmic sense. Not only did Jews like Jesus not give a fig about the land as the cosmic earth, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, in which the term he would have used was ‘land.’” If McKnight would allow Jesus to break from the mold of people who didn’t give a fig about the whole earth, then he might find in Jesus’ word choice supporting evidence of McKnight’s own conviction that the Kingdom is one with the people of the global Church.

⁴⁸¹ White, “Salvation,” 968.

⁴⁸² Tanner, *The Book of Psalms, NIV Commentary of the Old Testament*, 353

The Righteous Will Inherit the Land

*The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
those the Lord blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
The Lord makes firm steps
of the one who delights in him;
though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.
I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.
Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.
For the Lord loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.
The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.
The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.
The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
intent on putting them to death;
but the Lord will not leave them in the power of the wicked
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.*

Psalm 37:21-33

Round three in David's spiraling conversation on human flourishing compares the greed of the wicked with the generosity of the righteous; contrasts the destruction of wrongdoers with the sure-footed security of the just; juxtaposes the fleeting success of the wicked with the enduring inheritance of the righteous; and examines the difference between the self-destructive ways of the wicked and the heart righteousness of his faithful ones. The psalmist is focused on the long view of God's judgment and salvation; he's after the big picture comparison between God-centered living and self-centered living. Those who seek God are blessed and those who live for themselves perish. The righteous are persecuted. They may be hated, bullied, attacked, deprived of their rights, and murdered, but the Lord does not abandon them. When compared to everlasting life in the presence of God, all suffering no matter how constant in this life, is temporary. The psalmist boldly challenges us to live out our earthly existence in the light of eternity. The motive for doing so is the unfailing faithfulness of the Lord.

Living Hope

*Hope in the Lord
and keep his way.
He will exalt you to inherit the land;
when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.
I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.
Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.
But all sinners will be destroyed;
there will be no future for the wicked.
The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
The Lord helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.*

Psalm 37:34-40

Round four in David's seminar on life focuses on destiny. The psalmist acknowledges the attractive appearance of the wicked. They flourish "like a luxuriant native tree" (Ps 37:35), but their flourishing is short lived and their flower quickly fades. The destiny of the wicked is destruction. They are here today and gone tomorrow. They vanish from the scene. The psalmist warns that sinners have no future. But "a future awaits those who seek peace." David's final admonition carries a remarkable promise, "Hope in the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land" (Ps 37:34).

Dwelling in the land *forever* is a refrain running through the psalm. The Lord rewards the believer's trust, hope, meekness, generosity, righteousness, and obedience with the promise of a lasting inheritance (Ps 37:3, 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). In the Book of Revelation "the inhabitants of the earth" are those who turn away from God and worship the material world. "Earth-dwellers" live only for themselves and defy their God.⁴⁸³ The apostle John describes two kinds of people, mournful earth-dwellers who are destined for judgment and God-glorifying worshipers who are destined for salvation in a new heaven and a new earth. Psalm 37 uses the "land" as a type or figure pointing forward to the destiny of God's people. The New Testament takes this promise of land as a figure for the lasting inheritance the people of God will receive in Christ. The apostle Peter drew on this image in his letter to resident aliens when he referred to "an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade. . . kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power, and until the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:4-5).

Jesus is the obedient one whose sacrificial death secures salvation for all those born again into a living hope. Peter's emphasis is on the inheritance to come, the believer's eschatological hope,

⁴⁸³ Revelation 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8.

and the culmination of our salvation when Christ comes again. On this side of eternity he envisions a sacrificial life of holy obedience, rather than the fulfillment of the American dream, personal success, and the material good life.

There is a realistic “already-not-yet” tension that runs through Psalm 37. The benefits of trusting in the Lord and “rolling” over our concerns on the Lord are real. We have experienced the peace that comes from being still before the Lord and waiting patiently for him. We can vouch for the “better life of the righteous.” We have enjoyed the gracious generosity and its self-effacing blamelessness of the people of God. We have embraced the wisdom, heart-righteousness, and peace-making ways of the righteous. Nevertheless, the wicked, who could not care less about God and his justice, often seem to prevail against the righteous and amass great wealth at the expense of others’ welfare. They serve their selfish interests and glory in their will to power. David is honest about the luxuriant flourishing of the beautiful side of evil, but the success of the wicked is no excuse to fret, much less to envy. Our hope is realized in the eschaton. Alvaro Salomon, a pastor in Uruguay, writes, “For Christians, the person of Jesus is the guarantee that our future and the world is in the hands of God. . . .Christianity prolongs this hope in the projection of eternity. . . .[in the] final completion when the Reign of God is fully installed.”⁴⁸⁴

Martin Luther, in his characteristically bold style, challenged believers who were tempted to lose heart and comply with the ways of the wicked: “Oh, such shameful disloyalty, mistrust, and damnable unbelief! We refuse to believe these rich, powerful, and comforting promises of God. When we hear a few threatening words from the wicked, we begin to tremble at the slightest threat. May God helps us to obtain the true faith which we see the Scriptures demanding everywhere!”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ Alvaro Salomon, “Reflexiones Pastorales Sobre algunos Salmos,” *Cuadernos de Teologia* 20 (2001) 259-74, as quoted and translated by Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 54,61.

⁴⁸⁵ Quoted in Goldingay, *Psalms*, 535.

Suffering is not always linked to our personal sin, but sometimes it is. Psalm 38 is about those times when we provoke the anger of God and bring down upon ourselves the consequences of our own sinful actions. This sequence of psalms has been building to this point of personal culpability. Psalm 34 celebrates the Lord's deliverance from all our fears and troubles. Psalm 35 calls upon the Lord to defend the righteous from the vicious attack of the wicked. Psalm 36 describes those who pretend to be for God, but who in fact seek to destroy those who fear God. Psalm 37 unmasks the flourishing of the wicked and calls for the righteous to trust in the Lord even when the wicked appear to have the upper hand. With the psalmist's confession of sin Psalm 38 brings the subject of evil full circle. The theme of the psalm is echoed in the apostle John's warning, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

Psalm 38's twenty-two verses are the right length for an acrostic but the psalmist chose a contrasting style to Psalm 37's acrostic artistry. Even so, Psalm 38 is a "carefully expressed and structured poetic piece."⁴⁸⁶ The movement of the psalm is circular which fits with the chronic nature of sin's burden and the tension between futility and faith. Psalm 37 is commentary for Jesus' third beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Psalm 38 corresponds with the second beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4-5).

The Lord's Heavy Hand

*Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Your arrows have pierced me,
and your hand has come down on me.
Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.
My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear.
My wounds fester and are loathsome
because of my sinful folly.
I am bowed down and brought low;
all day long I go about mourning.
My back is filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my body.
I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I groan in anguish of heart.
All my longings lie open before you Lord;
my sighing is not hidden from you.*

⁴⁸⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 538.

*My heart pounds, my strength fails me;
even the light has gone from my eyes.*
Psalm 38:1-10

David opens the psalm with a plea: “Yahweh, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (Ps 38:1). He closes the psalm with a similar plea: “Yahweh, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God” (Ps 38:21). Unless the Lord relents and draws near in his mercy, he has no hope. Physical and emotional pain are linked in this psalm to personal sin and iniquity. Psalm 38 gives us the words to pray when we provoked God’s wrath because of our sin and iniquity. Augustine’s meditation reflects on how miserable we would be if we did not mourn for our sin; if worship and prayer did not compel us to repent and plead for forgiveness.

David’s description of his sin-induced suffering is impressive. He transposes his guilt into vivid images of physical pain. He is like a wounded animal hunted by an archer, God’s arrows have pierced him. He is feeble and frail. Every brittle bone in his body aches. His oozing wounds are filled with puss and they smell putrid. The heavy hand of God oppresses him and he is overwhelmed with guilt. His soul is crushed. Nerve pain shoots up and down his spine. The state of his body mirrors the state of his soul. He cries out, “I groan in anguish of heart.”

This psalm is for the person who loves the Lord but remains in the throes of prescription pain-killers or internet pornography or substance abuse or same-sex attraction. This psalm is a necessary “tool” for believers who struggle with depression or anger or resentment or compulsive eating or road rage or racism or self-indulgence or any number of sins that continue to afflict the sincere believer. Each and every believer needs this psalm, because we need to own the grief that springs from our sin-induced guilt. It is not the nastiness of the world with all its evil and injustice that troubles us so. It is our own sinful actions. The primary concern in this psalm (and in the second beatitude) is not how the world has wronged us, but how we have wronged the world. “Blessed is the person who is moved to bitter sorrow at the realization of his [or her] own sin.”⁴⁸⁷ The word that Jesus used for mourning in the second beatitude was meant to convey a depth of sorrow, not a sentimental self-pity, but a true brokenheartedness.

Psalm 38 corresponds to the Christian’s struggle with sin. The psalmist’s longings lie open before the Lord. His sighing and confession are heard by the Lord. He waits for the Lord’s answer to his groans and prayers. It is not difficult to see how the language of Psalm 38 relates to the believer’s struggle. He who has the firstfruits of the Spirit, groans inwardly, awaiting the redemption of the body and the consummation of salvation. The struggle with sin persists.

The apostle Paul distinguished between “godly sorrow” and “worldly sorrow.” He said, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” He elaborated on the benefits of godly sorrow: “See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done” (2 Cor 7:10-11). After we believe we continue to wrestle with our old sin nature and the consequences of our actions, but sin no longer

⁴⁸⁷ Barclay, *Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer for Everyman*, 33.

has the hold on us the way it once did. We are free from the obligation to the sinful nature because of what Christ has done for us. “He condemned sin in human flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:3-4). Christ’s followers were never meant to struggle with sin *as if this transformation had never taken place*. But a painful tension persists between our old sin nature and our new nature in Christ. Psalm 38 and Romans 7 and 8 grapple with that in tension. J. I. Packer describes the tension this way: “Paul balances what the law has told Christians about themselves (“failed! weak! guilty!”) with what the gospel tells them about themselves (“loved! saved! safe!”), and his purpose is to ensure that the gospel rather than the law has the last word in his readers’ consciences and determines their final attitudes toward God, toward themselves, and toward life.”⁴⁸⁸

When we were controlled by the sinful nature we were unable to please God, but now in the Spirit we have the power to put to death “the misdeeds of the body” (Rom 8:13). Paul says all of this not to make wayward Christians feel guilty but to celebrate the power of Christ’s Spirit to break sin’s bondage and liberate us to really live. We are under a new obligation to live according to the Spirit. The negative tension (“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing”) was not meant to dominant the person in Christ (Rom 7:19). The apostle Paul is not suggesting that sin is no longer a problem, but he is saying that the follower of Christ is not defeated by sin (Rom 6:12-13; 13:12-14; Gal 5:17).

Far from dismissing the relevance of Psalm 38 for the Christian, the theology of Romans inspires its practical and pastoral value. In Christ, we have been liberated from the bondage of sin, nevertheless we continue to struggle with the complex consequences of having been given over to sin in the past and the impact of sin in the present. Addictions and attachments to false gods and sinful desires will not be eradicated from the believer’s life immediately. It may take years of “people helping us in complicated and professional ways to undo the power of sin in our lives.”⁴⁸⁹ Alcohol addiction is a case in point. Richard Mouw explains that this addiction functions on three levels: (1) physically or chemically - the body thirsts for it; (2) psychologically - the mind and will compulsively long for it; (3) spiritually - the person makes it into an idol. What began as an individual decision has become a “multilevel and complicated disease because we’re multilevel and complicated persons.”⁴⁹⁰

The psalmist’s understanding of Yahweh’s covenant love corresponds to the apostle’s description of the followers of Jesus as the beloved children of God whose lasting inheritance is secure. This frees us up “to cultivate the humility of knowing that I’m still a broken person living in a country of the broken and that God’s sanctifying ways in my life are often seriously drawn out.”⁴⁹¹ Paul describes the believer’s new self-understanding in relational terms. “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’” A whole new life issues out of this new family

⁴⁸⁸ Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit*, 129

⁴⁸⁹ Mouw, “The Life of Bondage in the Light of Grace,” 41.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

relationship. God is no longer the austere lawgiver but our loving heavenly father. We are no longer trying in vain to keep a set of rules. We are abiding in a relationship. Obedience is empowered by love, not fear. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:14-17).

Abandoned by Friends, Hunted by Enemies, Saved by the Lord

*My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds;
my neighbors stay far away.
Those who want to kill me set their traps,
those who would harm me talk of my ruin;
all day long they scheme and lie.
I am like the deaf, who cannot hear,
like the mute, who cannot speak;
I have become like one who does not hear,
whose mouth can offer no reply.
Lord, I wait for you;
you will answer, Lord my God.
For I said, “Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves
over me when my feet slip.”
For I am about to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.
I confess my iniquity;
I am troubled by my sin.
Many have become my enemies without cause;
those who hate me without reason are numerous.
Those who repay my good with evil
lodge accusations against me,
though I seek only to do what is good.

Lord, do not forsake me;
do not be far from me, my God.
Come quickly to help me,
my Lord and my Savior.*

Psalm 38:11-22

As if the self-destructive consequences of sin and the heavy burden of guilt were not enough, the psalmist laments the absence of his friends. Everyone is avoiding him. His nearby neighbors are standing far off and his companions want nothing to do with him. The human tendency is to run from problems, especially our self-inflicted problems. The sufferer in this psalm admits to bringing down a ton of trouble on his own head. But isn’t that precisely when we need the support of our friends and neighbors more than ever? Job didn’t deserve to suffer, but he reasoned that even if he had sinned, he should have the support of his friends. He argued, “A

despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (Job 6:14). Unfortunately, when we see a child of God suffer because of his sinful choices, we tend to think it is our place to show disapproval by withdrawing friendship and support. We want the sinner to feel our subtle judgment and unspoken condemnation. We justify our actions on grounds that we cannot act as if nothing has happened. This may be the natural response of our sin nature, but it is not the response called for by the gospel and the wisdom of Job. Meanwhile those who hate the sufferer seize the moment to destroy him. This is the opportunity they have been waiting for. They can smell his sickly vulnerability. They don’t care if he has done anything wrong, because they hate the sufferer without either cause or reason. They set their traps, talk of his ruin, and plot his downfall. Their lying accusations against him are based on his good works and have nothing to do his sin. Enemies pile on, it’s in their DNA, when they see him down, they only want to push him lower.

The response of the psalmist to both friend and foe alike is silence. Even if every fiber of his being wants to lash out at his friends and condemn his enemies, he insists on remaining non-defensive. He laments the pain caused by those around him, but he does so only before the Lord. He disciplines himself to wait for God’s answer on the resolution of his sin, on his reconciliation with the Lord, and on the restoration of his life. Goldingay writes, “The Psalms expect people who have been wronged to say and do nothing to the people who have wronged them, and to that end they encourage them to speak forcefully to God about these people. The protest and lament of the Psalms give people opportunity to express their anger, but to do so to God rather than to the people who deserve it.”⁴⁹²

David draws the psalm to a close by clarifying where the worshiper stands in relationship to his perilous state, his sin, his enemies, his quest for good, and most importantly his relationship with Yahweh. As far as the worshiper is concerned he is on the edge of the abyss, barely surviving and overwhelmed by his never ending pain. But his confession is unwavering. He expresses it in a simple declarative sentence: “I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin” (Ps 38:18). He utters no excuses nor qualifications, but he insists that his enemies are out to get him, not because of his past sins, but because his only desire is to do what is good. The worshiper’s final plea gathers up the whole psalm as a prayer that prefigures the “Maranatha” prayer of the early church, which translated from the Aramaic means, “Come, Lord!” (1 Cor 16:22). The apostle John echoed this prayer in the Lord’s climatic promise, “Look! I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7,12,20). The worshiper calls out to God, as Yahweh, my God, my Lord, and my Savior. “Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior” (Ps 38:22).

Augustine could not help but see the suffering of his Savior in this penitential psalm. He sees the sinner’s vivid description of his afflictions corresponding to Christ’s experience on the cross. He who had no sin, became sin for us, and experienced in his own body and soul the pain and trauma expressed by the psalmist. His pain became the Lord’s pain. In fact, Augustine said, “It is exceedingly harsh and inconsistent that this psalm should not relate to Christ, where we have his Passion as clearly laid open as if it were being read to us out of the Gospel.”⁴⁹³

⁴⁹² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 547.

⁴⁹³ Augustine, *Psalms*, 104.

It is by no means far fetched to picture the Lord Jesus praying Psalm 38 as he contemplated the burden of our sin. The descriptive language of the psalm relates closely to Isaiah 53: “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:4-5).

Augustine related the psalmist’s lament over the abandonment of his friends and the attack of his enemies to Jesus’ Good Friday experience. Those who should have been “near” to help and support, “stood afar off.” “He came unto his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:11-13). Augustine emphasized the greatest and most gracious irony of all: the very one who was without sin became utterly God-forsaken for our sakes and cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Ps 22:1). Jesus Christ became God-forsaken so that he could say to us, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb 13:5; Deut 31:6).

The sequence of psalms from Psalm 34 to Psalm 41 may be called *The Good Friday Psalms* because they help Christ's followers understanding the meaning, purpose, and experience of Jesus' death on the cross.⁴⁹⁴ These David psalms portray the faithful worshiper's struggle against evil even as they foreshadow Jesus' climactic struggle with evil in its most extreme and ultimate form. He faced crucifixion for the sake of our salvation to deliver us from the domain of sin and darkness. The original voice of the psalm, represented by David, prefigures the depths of suffering and the enduring hope of the Son of David.

In Psalm 39, David desperately wants to do the right thing, but it is impossible. He strives to keep his tongue from sin as he comes to grips with the brevity of his transitory life. His only hope in a world of uncertainty is the Lord: "My hope is in you" (Ps 39:7). His anguish only deepens as he holds his lament inside. He tries to wrap his mind around the emptiness and futility of life. He struggles with "all his transgressions" and suffers under the scourge of the heavy hand of God upon him. His weakness, despair, and sinfulness make it impossible to save himself.

But where David is weak the Son of David is strong. His silence is perfect: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). His response to the transitoriness of life is certain: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3). His grip on his emotions is confident: "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 'Father, glorify your name!'" (John 12:27-28). His righteousness is perfect: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). The Son of David takes our place. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you

⁴⁹⁴ A review of the sequence of Psalms 34-41: The Lord's deliverance is assured in Psalm 34: "he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken" (Ps 34:20; John 19:36). In the hours leading up to Gethsemane, Jesus quoted from Psalm 35. He described his enemies as gloating and hating him without reason (Ps 35:19; John 15:25). In Psalm 36, David laments the evil of nice people who "flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin" (Ps 36:2), but he revels in the pricelessness of God's unfailing love (Ps 36:7). The apostle Paul echoes the psalmist's words when he reminds believers, "you were bought at a price" (1 Cor 6:20, 7:23). The strategy of the cross is embedded in Psalm 37's promise that "the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity" (Ps 37:11). Only the meek find in the message of the cross the power and wisdom of God and join the apostle in saying, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). We saw earlier how the descriptive language of Psalm 38 corresponds to Isaiah 53: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:4-5). Augustine saw in David's lament over the abandonment of his friends and the irrational hatred of his enemies a prefiguration of Jesus' Good Friday experience.

have been healed.’ For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:23-25).

The parallels between Psalm 38 and 39 suggest that the psalms form a continuous narrative. The repentant believer who cries out for forgiveness and protection from his enemies and prays for the Lord to come quickly *continues to struggle*. The worshiper feels like an alien, yet he longs to be faithful in spite of the ever-present wicked (Ps 39:1) and all his transgressions (Ps 39:8). He wrestles with the futility and emptiness of life, even as he declares to the Lord, “My hope is in you” (Ps 39:7).

Painful Restraint

*I said, “I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
while in the presence of the wicked.”
So I remained utterly silent,
not even saying anything good.
But my anguish increased;
my heart grew hot within me.
While I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:*

Psalm 39:1-3

At the end of Psalm 39, David describes himself as a foreigner. Like his nomadic and enslaved ancestors he is a stranger. This sense of alienation impacts the meaning of the psalm from the beginning. The author of Hebrews echoes the conclusion of Psalm 39: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show how they are looking for a country of their own” (Heb 11:13-14). The psalmist doesn’t feel like he belongs. He is no longer free to speak his mind, because it might give the wicked the wrong idea about his faith and trust in God. He is not at home in this world and the more he thinks about it, the more agitated and anguished he becomes.

Believers today who face this quiet alienation can identify with the psalmist. Those who worship God in spirit and in truth no longer feel at home in the world. Naturally, they ask, “What’s the point?” In Psalm 38, the psalmist refused to fight back against his enemies. His non-defensive strategy meant pretending to be oblivious to their efforts to ruin him. It was as if he was deaf and mute. Instead of lashing out and retaliating in speech, the psalmist remained silent. But in Psalm 39, his intentional silence has more to do with putting a check on his growing resentment and despair. He fears that his words will be twisted by the wicked and used against the Lord. But like the prophet Jeremiah he was weary with holding it in (Jer 6:11). He agreed with Job. His one consolation was that he “had not denied the words of the Holy One” (Job 6:10).

Our Savior weathered these same struggles and struck the right balance between silence and speech. On Good Friday he defended his speech before his accusers. “I said nothing in secret,” Jesus said to the high priest. Under the most acute and hostile interrogation he reacted without hostility or defensiveness. He declared his speech open and transparent for all to hear and verify. “If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong,” he said. His speech reflected the veracity of his life and ministry (John 18:20-23). He clarified his non-threatening stance before Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). He used silence to provoke and draw out the true nature of his authority, followed by decisive speech, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). The Savior was strong where the psalmist was weak and wise where the psalmist was lost.

Brevity and Futility

*Show me, Lord, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.
Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom;
in vain they rush about, heaping wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.*

Psalm 39:4-6

Samuel Beckett's twenty-five second play entitled *Breath* opens with a momentary birth cry, followed by the sound of a person slowly inhaling and exhaling accompanied by an increase and decrease in the intensity of lighting faintly illuminating a stage littered with an odd assortment of items. Then, a second recorded cry, identical to the first, a death cry, ends the play. No person is seen, only two brief cries and the sound of breathing. The psalmist may have empathized with the playwright's existential despair but the purpose of his lament is radically different. Given the fleeting nature of life: “Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure” (Ps 39:5), the psalmist wants to order his days accordingly. He deliberately wants to see these “unwelcome facts as God's facts.”⁴⁹⁵ He is not suffering from the despair of the earthbound materialist. He is rather pleading for wisdom to live for the Lord in the face of the brevity and futility of human life. He is asking “for the willingness to live with the facts, for the grace to acknowledge and accept the nature of human life.”⁴⁹⁶

Psalm 39 is not about the success enthusiasts who “rush about heaping up wealth,” at least not in the way Psalm 73 comes down on this issue. Jeduthun, one of the chief musicians along with Asaph and Heman (1 Chron 16:41-42; 2 Chron 5:12), must have set this psalm melodically with a different tone than Asaph did with Psalm 73. The issue is not the prosperity of the wicked but

⁴⁹⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 156.

⁴⁹⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 557.

how to live for Yahweh when the measure of our lives is “a mere handbreadth.” What are the two inches of my four fingers – the measure of my life – compared to the span of time? Nothing. So, then, how do I live? A similar concern is expressed in Psalm 90: “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12). David’s anguish over the brevity of life can be compared to the Son of David’s consciousness of his “hour.” Jesus framed the timing of his life in reference to the “hour” of his Passion.

My Hope

*But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you.
Save me from all my transgressions;
do not make me the scorn of fools.
I was silent; I would not open my mouth,
for you are the one who has done this.
Remove your scourge from me;
I am overcome by the blow of your hand.
When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin,
you consume their wealth like a moth –
surely everyone is but a breath.
“Hear my prayer, Lord,
listen to my cry for help;
do not be deaf to my weeping.
I dwell with you as a foreigner,
a stranger, as all my ancestors were.
Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again
before I depart and am no more.”*

Psalm 39:7-13

Does our interpretation of this final section depend on the worshiper’s confession, “My hope is in you,” or in his concluding plea of resignation, “Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more”?⁴⁹⁷ In the mind of the psalmist, the tension between hope and resignation remains. The struggle persists, but the more important fact is that his faith in Yahweh prevails. The meaning of hope is evident in his plea for forgiveness for past sins. His “transgressions” or “rebellions” appear to be “relatively isolated failures in a life characterized by faithfulness and insight.”⁴⁹⁸ Instead of complaining to faithless fools, he begs the Lord to end the chastening before it consumes him the way it has consumed his possessions. His hope is earnest. He turns to the Lord in three ways: “Hear *my prayer*, Lord, listen to *my cry* for help; do not be deaf to *my weeping*” (Ps 39:12). He implores the Lord to hear his silent prayer, to respond to his

⁴⁹⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 88. Calvin faults the psalmist for his conclusion: “We might, indeed, regard the prayer as allowable. . . .But we may easily infer, from the language which he employs, that his mind was so affected with the bitterness of his grief that he could not present a prayer pure and well seasoned with the sweetness of faith; for he says, ‘before I depart, and be no more’: a form of speech which indicates the feeling almost of despair” (88). Calvin’s perspective may have led Tim Keller to conclude, “The psalm ends without a note of hope, and that is instructive. It is remarkable that God not only allows his creatures to complain to him of their ills but actually records those wails in his Word” (The Songs of Jesus, 81). But as we have seen Psalm 39 offers a strong case for hope.

⁴⁹⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 560.

loud cries, and to be moved by his weeping. Hope is also evident in his self-designation as an alien. In humility, he throws himself on the mercy of God claiming no other rights and privileges than a passing guest, a sojourner in transient. His resident alien status recalls the Lord's promise to love the "foreigner residing among you" (Deut 10:18; Lev 25:23).

The apostle Peter used this same language in his letter to the churches: "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). He embraced the identity of the alien for the sake of the gospel so as to encourage resilient saints to remain faithful. Peter admonished, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). These "strangers on earth" were "looking for a country of their own. . . . They were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. There God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb 11:14-16). Psalm 39 corresponds well with the struggle believers face in being a faithful presence in a world given over to other gods.

"The brevity of human life does not lead to determination to enjoy it while we can; it leads the suppliant 'to God and nothing but God.'"⁴⁹⁹ In spite of all his transgressions and his silent suffering under the heavy hand of God, the psalmist's only hope is in the Lord. Instead of choosing to rush around "heaping up wealth," he has chosen *someone*, not *something*. His posture before the Lord is one of repentance and gratitude. "The first grace of God's gift," wrote Augustine, is "to bring us to the confession of our infirmity" and the realization that "whatever good we can do, whatever ability we have," depends upon the Lord. For Christ's sake we delight in weaknesses, in difficulties, in hardships, and in persecutions, because when we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor 12:10).⁵⁰⁰

This world is not my home. "I am a sojourner . . . in a place from which I will be removed," wrote Augustine. "The place where I am to abide for ever, should be called my home."⁵⁰¹ We will no longer be sojourners when we arrive at the eternal home the Lord has prepared for us. "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Cor 5:1). One final Good Friday reminder is Jesus' upper room promise: "*My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*" (John 14:2-3). The psalmist's final plea, "Look away from me," recalls Job's lament when he said, ""What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention, that you examine them every morning and test them every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone for an instant?" (Job 7:17-18). Believers can identify with this feeling. It sounds bad to the ears, but good to the heart. The psalmist's steadfast gaze is upon the sovereign Lord in whom he has entrusted himself completely. He is not rebellious, but dependent. His life is in the Lord's hands.

⁴⁹⁹ Quoted in Goldingay, *Psalms*, 559.

⁵⁰⁰ Augustine, *Psalms*, 117.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

The sequence of Good Friday Psalms continues. Each psalm (Psalms 34-41) demonstrates in a particular way our inability to save ourselves, followed by a prefiguration of God's redemptive provision in Christ. Our only hope is in the Lord, who alone can deliver us from "sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life."⁵⁰² We cannot save ourselves.

The Joy of Deliverance

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
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.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.
Blessed is the one
who trusts in the Lord,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.*

Psalm 40:1-5

The psalm begins not with "finger-tapping impatience or yawning boredom" but with the eager expectation that the Lord will provide.⁵⁰³ Calvin translated the first verse, "In waiting I waited," to convey the meaning of the Hebraism signifying earnest desire and patience.⁵⁰⁴ In other words, "I waited and waited and waited for God" (Ps 40:1, Message). This is not the tedium of waiting room waiting, but an inner longing of the soul that finds total satisfaction and peace of mind resting in God's hands. "At last he looked; finally he listened. He lifted me out of the ditch, pulled me out of the deep mud. He stood me up on a solid rock to make sure I wouldn't slip" (Ps 40:2 Message). David's first person experience is personal, but we find ourselves included in his

⁵⁰² White, "Salvation," 968.

⁵⁰³ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 142.

⁵⁰⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 89.

testimony. We share his helplessness and experience “stage by stage, the mighty deliverance of God who first heard his cry, then stooped down and drew him out of the mud, then set his feet securely upon rock, and finally put a fresh song of praise in his mouth, leading many to believe” (Ps 40:1-3).⁵⁰⁵

The meaning of Psalm 40 lies in Christ. “We pray it properly when we pray it as His own words to the Father. The ‘will’ of God to which He is obedient was that ‘will’ to which He referred when in the Garden he prayed: ‘Not my will, but Yours be done.’”⁵⁰⁶ “The shape and dynamic of the Psalms can most usefully be understood according to the theological framework of crucifixion and resurrection,” writes Walter Brueggemann. The flow of the psalms “are for Christians most clearly played out in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. . . .and especially the passion narrative.”⁵⁰⁷ Even so, Brueggemann adds, “I do not want to turn the Psalms into a ‘Christian book,’ for I have repeatedly stressed the profoundly Jewish character of the material.”⁵⁰⁸ Thankfully, Brueggemann is not responsible for turning the Psalms into a Christian book, Jesus Christ and the apostles did that in the first century and they did it by stressing the profoundly Jewish character of the psalms. The exposition of the Psalms does not depend upon dealing with an “original meaning and application” that is independent of the coming of Christ.⁵⁰⁹

We cannot know the meaning of the psalms apart from Christ anymore than we can understand Abraham’s offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah or interpret the significance of the bronze serpent in the wilderness apart from Christ. Meaning is not served by pretending not to know the very truths the psalms were inspired to reveal. The text cannot mean what it never meant, but the biblical meaning of the text has no meaning apart from Christ. There is no revelational vacuum in which the Old Testament exists independent of Christ. Just as we cannot understand who we were as a child independent of who we have become as an adult, we cannot understand the Old Testament apart from Christ. The whole Bible undivided is the Christian book and it is equally Christian at every point.

David’s graphic description of the joy of deliverance contradicts the easy way some Christians speak of disappointment with God. To cry out from the depths, was for Augustine the first sign of hope, because many “proud despisers” were unaware that they were even in the mud and mire. “There are some deeper in the deep, who do not even perceive themselves to be in the depth,” so “the very act of crying is already lifting them up.”⁵¹⁰ All disciples have a history of deliverance that outweighs whatever the burden or the crisis of the moment may be. Augustine rightly understood the “horrible pit” to be “the depth of iniquity.” The psalmist had in mind a deliverance worthy of salvation from sin and death. Disappointment sets in when we become indifferent to what God has done for us. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “We must pay more careful attention, therefore to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” because “how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:1-3).

⁵⁰⁵ Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 50.

⁵⁰⁶ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 78.

⁵⁰⁷ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 10-11.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:856.

⁵¹⁰ Augustine, *Psalms*, 120.

Past deliverance lifts the soul and blesses the redeemed with three things: a place to stand, a song to sing and a testimony to keep. These three strong images reinforce God's deliverance. The old gospel hymn captures the first: "On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand." Peter's pivotal confession in the Gospel of Matthew is followed by the promise of Jesus, "upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of death and hell will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18). We not only have a secure place to stand but a new song of praise to sing. We hardly feel like groaning and moaning, grumbling and complaining, when our heart is singing. The picture of strength and song has its public impact: "Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord." Thanksgiving has the upper hand on disappointment when believers remember their salvation in Christ.

Mary Newton played a vital role in the conversion of her husband John Newton who later became a pastor and hymn writer. They were so close that he had a constant yearning for her presence. After having been married for twenty-two years he wrote of her, "Every room where you are not present, looks unfurnished." When Mary died of breast cancer, their friends worried how he might react to her death. Newton had preached that even though a Christian might suffer "he cannot be properly unhappy" and trials were an opportunity to show "the power of divine grace." He had hoped that he would die first, dreading what life would be like without his Mary, but he discovered the strength of God's amazing grace when he needed it most. "The day of her death, he preached. The next day he visited parishioners, and when it came to her funeral, he delivered the sermon. 'The Bank of England is too poor to compensate for such a loss as mine,' he later wrote. 'But the Lord, the all-sufficient God, speaks, and it is done. Let those who know him, and trust him, be of good courage. He can give them strength according to their day.'"⁵¹¹

Humility and exuberance characterize the true joy of deliverance. Blessing belongs to the one who trusts in the Lord, "who does not look to the proud" or "turn aside to false gods." The worshiper is thrilled with the many wonders that the Lord has done and will do. She is overflowing with enthusiasm for the works of the Lord. The melancholic frustration that often accompanies our fixation on the self is dispelled by the impulse to praise the Lord and to tell of all his deeds.

In writing to a young pastor, Eugene Peterson, comments on what it means to look to the proud (Psalm 40:4).

"The 'proud' for me in this context are those pastors who look like they 'know what they're doing' – who are competent and recognized as such, who have an honored position in society and among their colleagues. And going 'astray after false gods' amounts to living in response to something manageable, turning my vocation into a depersonalized job that I can get good at. I'm probably reading more into this text than it warrants, but it has given me a couple of images ('proud' and 'astray') that set off little alarm signals when I have sensed that I was betraying or avoiding the uniqueness of pastor."⁵¹²

⁵¹¹ Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 105.

⁵¹² Peterson, *The Pastor*, 316.

The effectiveness of Psalm 40 in de-constructing disappointment with God can be measured in how it transforms a low grade fever of disappointment into robust thanksgiving. To really put the psalm to the test may require a congregation of the walking wounded, made up of self-absorbed, pity-seeking, blame-casting believers who feel that God has let them down. Such a congregation of disappointed believers may prove more formidable than Goliath on the battlefield. But David's Psalm 40 has five smooth stones that are sufficient for the challenge.

(1) The first stone is gratitude for the Lord's past deliverances (Ps 40:1-3). Failure to remember the Lord's blessings is a major contributor to disappointment with God.

(2) The second stone involves lifting our eyes to the horizon to see the big picture of God's wonderful acts and providential plan (Ps 40:4-5). God's plan is far better than we could have ever designed for ourselves. Thanksgiving means that we don't have sufficient time or energy to recite all that God has done for us. That's a far cry from saying to God, "What have you done for me lately?"

(3) The third stone used to knock down disappointment with God is heart-felt devotion and a passion for obedience. Ritual practices are one thing, but sacrificial surrender to the will of God is altogether different (Ps 40:6-10).

(4) The fourth smooth stone is an honest assessment of the enemy within and the enemy without (Ps 40:11-15). The psalmist confesses his besetting sins and acknowledges he has enemies who seek his ruin. He does not blame God, rather he pleads with God to save him.

(5) The fifth stone to sling against the Goliath of disappointment calls all who seek the Lord to worship him with a shout, "The Lord is great!" and to openly confess, "I am poor and needy" (Ps 40:16-17).

The Sacrifice of Deliverance

*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire –
but my ears you have opened –
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, "Here I am, I have come –
it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart."
I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know.
I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;
I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.
I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness
from the great assembly.
Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me.*

Psalm 40:6-11

The only response worthy of this joyous deliverance is the sacrifice of all we are and will be to the Lord. Ritual practices and verbal exclamations are inadequate. External religious observances can not compare to the obedience and devotion that flows from heart righteousness. David's

response recalls the words of the prophet Samuel, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). Similar concern is expressed by Isaiah (1:10-17), Jeremiah (7:21-26), Amos (5:21-24), Hosea (6:6), and Micah (6:6-8). David returns to this theme in his personal confession, when he prayed, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps.51:15-17).

Religion by the book is no substitute for hearing and responding to the voice of God. David credits the Lord for enabling him to comprehend and obey his will. The metaphor is graphic: “Ears you have dug for me.” Peterson explains: “There must be something more involved than following directions for unblemished animals, a stone altar, and a sacrificial fire. There is: God is speaking and must be listened to. But what good is a speaking God without listening human ears? So God gets a pick and shovel and digs through the cranial granite, opening a passage that will give access to the interior depths, into the mind and heart. . . . The dominical command is Listen: ‘he who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”⁵¹³ Only after David is all ears to the voice of God does he evoke a seven-fold first person response: “Here I am: I have come . . . I desire to do your will . . . I proclaim righteousness . . . I do not seal my lips . . . I do not hide your righteousness . . . I speak of your faithfulness . . . I do not conceal your love” (Ps 40:7-10).

David describes the personal impact of the Lord’s deliverance; the author of Hebrews describes the person who makes this deliverance possible – Jesus Christ. His lengthy quote in Hebrews 8:1-10:18 from Jeremiah 31 and Psalm 40, along with references to Exodus 24 and 25, bear witness to Christ the mediator of a new covenant. The tension between type and antitype creates a momentum that carries the logic and the pathos of his message forward. In the context of Hebrews, Psalm 40 draws the expository spiral to a conclusion. He explains the enduring efficaciousness of Christ’s sacrifice by finding “a prophetic utterance which he recognizes as appropriate to the Son of God at the time of his incarnation.”⁵¹⁴

He paraphrases the line “my ears you have dug for me” to fit the incarnation, “a body you prepared for me,” and to underscore the offering of Christ himself.⁵¹⁵ The external obligation to offer animal sacrifices is compared to the perfect sacrifice made possible by the Incarnate One: “Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God” (Heb 10:7). “His incarnation itself is viewed as an act of submission to God’s will and, as such, an anticipation of his supreme submission to that will in death.”⁵¹⁶ “Hebrews goes beyond Psalm 40; the perpetual sacrifices of the past have become obsolete in terms of the permanent sacrifice of Christ.”⁵¹⁷ But in another sense Hebrews captures the original essence of the psalm calling for the

⁵¹³ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 70-73.

⁵¹⁴ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 239.

⁵¹⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, 103. Calvin writes, “The Apostle, in Hebrews 10:5, seems to wrest this place, when he restricts what is spoken of all the elect to Christ alone, and expressly contends that the sacrifices of the Law, which David says are not agreeable to God in comparison to the obedience of the heart, are abrogated; and when quoting rather the words of the Septuagint that those of the prophet, he infers from them more than David intended to teach.”

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵¹⁷ Craigie, *Psalms*, 317.

king's "obedience and profound spirituality" because "sacrifices in and of themselves achieved nothing."⁵¹⁸ Only this time, Jesus Christ is the King-Priest who is perfect in his obedience and perfect in his sacrifice.⁵¹⁹ In him Psalm 40 realizes its true *objective correlative*.

When we combine the *impact* of deliverance (Psalm 40) and the *source* of deliverance (Hebrews 10) we are given a vivid sketch of the Christian life. The "I" is transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We offer ourselves up to God with a deep desire to do his will with a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (Matthew 5:20). We proclaim Christ's "saving acts in the great assembly" (Ps 40:9). We do not seal our lips, nor conceal the good news (Ps 40:9-10). The psalmist description corresponds to the apostle's mission, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). Paul provides the perfect summation of this sketch in the psalms of the Christian life when he writes, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:1-2).

The Plea for Deliverance

*Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me.
For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me.
Be pleased to save me, Lord;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.
May all who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.
May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!"
be appalled at their own shame.
But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who long for your saving help always say,
"The Lord is great!"*

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ross, Psalms, vol. 1:865. Ross refers to Perowne who explains "that the change in words from 'ears' to 'body' which is found in Hebrews 10:5,7 does not materially affect the argument of the Psalm or the passage in Hebrews. The point in Hebrews was not only that the Lord's sacrifice was the sacrifice of the human body, which was already implied in his coming into the world, the incarnation, but that it was the suffering of his obedient will. The writer found these words which once expressed the devotion of a true Israelite to be far more strikingly expressive, indeed, in the highest sense, only truly expressive of the perfect obedience of the Son of God."

*But as for me, 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 40:11-17

On this side of eternity we need daily deliverance from our many sins and from those who seek our ruin. The psalmist cries out for help because of the enemy within and the enemy without. The deliverance out of the slimy pit must be accompanied by a life of deliverance. Having faced the enemy within, the psalmist turns to confront the fierce opposition from without. This enemy too, is formidable and threatens to ruin his life. “Be pleased, O Lord, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.” He has no grounds for self-reliance. He is thrown back on the mercy of God, which is where he belongs, *which is where we belong*. His only hope is for the Lord’s deliverance. Our only hope is for the Lord’s deliverance.

David’s concluding note of exaltation holds no hint of disappointment with God. How could there be? “But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, ‘The Lord is exalted!’” The bottom line is praise in spite of personal sin and social evil. Disappointment with God contradicts the confession that Jesus is Lord. One can hardly praise the Lord and exclaim, “The Lord is exalted!” and then turn around and blame the Lord. The conclusion of the psalm fits with the admonition of the apostle, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

David’s final note is personal. If the king must be delivered from the pit, struggle with sin and face mean-spirited opposition, what should the people of God expect for themselves? David fostered no illusion of grandeur. “Yet I am poor and needy,” is a worthy refrain from a thankful king, who sees himself as fully dependent upon the Lord. His self-assessment reminds us of the first line of the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The poor acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation. The psalmist concludes in the spirit of the first beatitude, “You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay.”

Augustine concluded his exposition of Psalm 40 with a riff on David’s phrase, “I am poor and needy.” “There is nothing in me that may be praised as mine own,” he wrote. “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). “For I am poor and needy.” And again, “Now I am not rich, because I am not proud. . . ‘Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!’ (Luke 18:13), adding, but “as for me, I am poor and needy.” For Augustine the bottom line remained, “I am poor and needy.” He wrote, “The members of Christ – the Body of Christ extended everywhere – are asking of God, as one single person, one single poor man, and beggar! For He too was poor, who ‘though He was rich, yet became poor, that you through his poverty might be made rich’ (2 Cor 8:9). It is He that makes rich those who are the true poor; and makes poor those who are falsely rich.”⁵²⁰

⁵²⁰ Augustine, *Psalms*, 127-128.

We knew from the beginning that the principle subject of the Psalms is the Anointed One. If the Son of David had not come we would naturally limit our study to the historical-grammatical and literary nature of the psalms. We would treat the psalms as a window into the liturgy and worship of ancient Israel. We would study their forms and attempt to reconstruct their ceremonial significance and their religious value. But Jesus has come and his prayer book has become our prayer book. We pray all the psalms with the voice of Christ singing the psalms to us. He is the Son of Man, whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and he is the Son of God to whom the Father said, “You are my Son; today I have become your father” (Ps 1:2; 2:7).

The meaning of the psalms pivot on a comparison between the “tenuous portrait of a king at risk” and the king enthroned and installed on Mount Zion (Ps 2:6).⁵²¹ David is the type. Jesus is the archetype. David embodies the fallen human condition and Jesus is God’s redemptive provision. Through David we see ourselves and our need for salvation. In Jesus Christ we see the Savior. The Incarnate One embodies the meaning of faithfulness and fruitfulness: “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:12).

The interpretative key for the psalter is summed up in David’s revealing line: “The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Ps 110:1). The psalmists *hear* and *respond* to the Word of the Lord. Yahweh, the sovereign Lord, designates “my Lord” as the everlasting King who rules and reigns. The inspired narrative of the psalms explores the anguish and the ecstasy of the human story but always with a view to the meaning of “my Lord.” The soul-revealing transparency of “the man after God’s own heart” reveals our deep need for a Savior. Every lament cries out for deliverance and every praise calls out in hope. The psalmists knew that everyone has a story but only one story redeems our story.

Beatitude-Based Belief

*Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;
the Lord delivers them in times of trouble.
The Lord protects and preserves them –
they are counted among the blessed in the land –
he does not give them over to the desire of their foes.
The Lord sustains them on their sickbed
and restores them from their bed of illness.
I said, “Have mercy on me, Lord;
heal me, for I have sinned against you.”*
Psalm 41:1-4

The first word of the psalm, “blessed,” recalls the first word of the Psalms as well as the first word and opening theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed” implies a state of grace, not a means of grace. The first line of the psalm develops the closing theme of Psalm 40. David says,

⁵²¹ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol 1:651.

“But as for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me” (Ps 40:17). Psalm 41 begins, “Blessed are those who have regard for the weak.” The link between the two psalms underscores the truth that to receive mercy is to extend mercy. Those who show mercy to others are people who have been transformed by God’s mercy. They acknowledge their utter dependence upon God. They know that they are saved by God’s grace alone, and that the evidence for being genuinely poor in spirit (the first beatitude) is to show mercy (the fifth beatitude). The reason they are merciful is because they live in awe of the God who has shown them mercy.⁵²² “...The merciful are those who reflect God’s acceptance of the unworthy, the guilty, and the ones in the wrong, because they have received mercy themselves. They are conscious of their own unworthiness, guilt, and wrong and have experienced God’s forgiving and restoring acceptance through the message of Jesus Christ. There is often a unique feeling of understanding, a healing rapport, between those sharing a common trauma. This common bond can serve as a basis for conduct.”⁵²³

The beauty of the biblical meaning of mercy is that it covers the full range of human need. It expresses compassion for the lost, as well as compassion for the hungry. The mercy of God addresses both our spiritual and physical needs in such a way as to respond to the fact that we are made in God’s image. Those who are deeply moved by the mercy of God have a deep affinity for those in need of God’s mercy. This is why the apostle Paul challenged us on the basis of God’s mercy, “to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1).

The day before Good Friday Jesus left the temple and went to the Mount of Olives to preach his final sermon. Jesus concluded his Sermon on the End of the World (Matthew 24-25) with a description of the Last Judgment. He described the difference between the saved and the lost with a simple picture.⁵²⁴ The division between the saved and the lost, will be as simple as a shepherd dividing sheep and goats. And the telling characteristic of the saved is that they *see* invisible people, the poor, weak, and needy people. Jesus expects us to see those in need.

Two groups stand before the Son of Man when he comes in all his glory. He is the King and he will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are *blessed by my Father*; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” Those on the King’s right are “blessed by my Father” and recipients of the inheritance prepared since the creation of the world. Those on the right are *not* commended for performing great signs and wonders. They are commended for feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothes to the needy, care for the sick, and friendship to the imprisoned. Moreover they do this naturally, automatically, routinely. Need-meeting in the name of Jesus is who they are. The gospel of Jesus Christ plays itself out in 10,000 ways in the daily routine of ordinary self-less concern for the other.

There is something beautiful about the *ignorance* of those on the right: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a

⁵²² Webster, *Soundtrack of the Soul*, 60-65.

⁵²³ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 105.

⁵²⁴ Webster, *Text Messaging*, 121-124.

stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go and visit you?” (Matthew 25:37-39). This is an ignorance that runs contrary to the presumption of works righteousness. It fits with “so-that-no-one-can-boast” salvation by grace through faith. Because of Jesus Christ the righteous care for the needy and they do so without showy piety or inflated spirituality. Jesus says to us, *“Get a life. Mix it up. Put yourself in the company of the needy. Keep your eyes peeled for poor widows. Don’t divert your eyes from the lame. Pay attention to them. Let’s not make ministry into a mystery. Get in the game. Just do it!”*

On this side of eternity we remain poor and needy. The psalmist leaves no impression of an easy life and Jesus didn’t sacrifice to make us successful. We are susceptible to disease and depression. We are subject to physical distress and mental breakdowns. Sickness and sin hound the human experience. The psalmist describes a range of trial from grave illness to wilful sins. We suffer because of our fallen human condition and because we sin against God. Nevertheless, because of the grace of God, the Lord’s blessing supercedes the suffering. The psalmist uses seven verbs to describe the merciful action of the Lord. He looks to the Lord to deliver, protect, preserve, bless, sustain, restore and heal. All of this is made possible because “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Enemy-Induced Lament

*My enemies say of me in malice,
“When will he die and his name perish?”
When one of them comes to see me,
he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander;
then he goes out and spreads it around.
All my enemies whisper together against me;
they imagine the worst for me, saying,
“A vile disease has afflicted him;
he will never get up from the place where he lies.”
Even my close friend,
someone I trusted,
one who shared my bread,
has turned against me.*

Psalm 41:5-9

Augustine dwelt on the Good Friday wish of Jesus’ enemies, “When will he die and his name perish?” Their demonic design orchestrated Jesus’ death to rid the world of his name. If they could only kill him they would be done with him. The world would forget his name in a matter of weeks, if not days. However this did not happen. Augustine quoted Jesus to explain, “Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over” (John 12:24 Message). Through the centuries the malicious enemies of the gospel have sought to wipe out the name of Jesus. Every new persecution asks, “When will he die and his name perish?” “Even to the present day,” Augustine wrote. Pagans plot and plan and look forward to a time when

Christians will be no more because they still say, “When he shall die, then shall his Name perish.” But the Body of Christ only grows greater. “Christ died, His Name has not perished: the Martyrs died, multiplying more the Church so that the Name of Christ is known in all the nations.”⁵²⁵

In the upper room hours before Judas betrayed him, Jesus quoted from Psalm 41, singling Judas out as the friend who turned against him. “*But this is to fulfill the passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me’*” (John 13:18). Jesus processed the painful betrayal by one of the Twelve by praying Psalm 41.⁵²⁶ The psalm offers prophetic insight and providential guidance in an otherwise unpredictable and perverse turn of events. Earlier, the psalm juxtaposed sickness and sin, now it juxtaposes the evil intent of known enemies and intimate friends. To break bread together is a metaphor for intimate fellowship. To lift up the heel against someone is a Middle-Eastern metaphor for contempt and deep animosity. When Jesus lifted Judas’ heel to wash and dry his feet, we need not wonder what was going through his mind. This line from Psalm 41 filled Jesus’ praying imagination: “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” Patrick Reardon sees a descriptive correspondence between the psalmist’s enemies and Jesus’ Passion (See Mark 3:6; John 11:53). He concludes, “This psalm, then, narrates the prayer of Jesus in the setting of that unfolding drama of deceit and betrayal.”⁵²⁷

Resurrection-Inspired Hope

*But may you have mercy on me, Lord;
raise me up, that I may repay them.
I know that you are pleased with me,
for my enemy does not triumph over me.
Because of my integrity you uphold me
and set me in your presence forever.*

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.*

Psalm 41:10-13

David concludes the psalm with a prayer for healing, a call for justice, and a desire to be in the Lord’s presence forever. It is fair to say that there is more going on in this psalm than David getting up off his sickbed and getting even with his enemies. We can readily imagine Jesus praying this psalm in the light of his Passion and transposing “raise me up” into the higher key of resurrection hope. There are aspects of this prayer that fit the Son of David better than David himself. To say, “I know you are pleased with me” and “because of my integrity you uphold me,”

⁵²⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 128.

⁵²⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1:884. Ross writes, “Jesus does not apply the whole psalm to his situation, only the betrayal. The verse is not a prophecy of Judas; rather, the words find their fullest meaning and significance in his betrayal of David’s greater son, Jesus Christ.” It is difficult to argue persuasively that Jesus limited the application of this psalm to a single reference when the whole psalm applies to his life and ministry.

⁵²⁷ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 80.

seems to express “a rather unexpected and audacious confidence.”⁵²⁸ But for the Son of David to make a bold claim on the day before Good Friday makes perfect sense. Jesus knowing “that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3), said to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:4-5). In accord with his judicial powers David asks for the strength to repay his enemies, but when the Son of David exercises his judicial powers he will bring about the final judgment. He will break the enemy with a rod of iron and “dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9).

Psalm 41 ends on a note of Christ’s paschal triumph. Those who wished Jesus dead so that his Name would perish, must have been either gravely disappointed or else wonderfully converted. Augustine exclaimed, “Christ rose again, Christ was glorified.” To paraphrase Augustine: Now see all those who are converted in His Name. Now let them insult and shake the end. Or, let them shake their head in wonder and admiration.⁵²⁹

Book I concludes with a doxology, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.”

⁵²⁸ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:655.

⁵²⁹ Augustine, *Psalms*, 131.

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