

The Psalms are our invitation to dialogue with God. Whatever our situation or whatever our emotions, we will find it in the Psalms. The Psalms are the Word of God and our words to God, arguably the most incarnational book of the Bible. Athanasius was right when he said that most scriptures speak *to us*; the Psalms speak *for us*. But the beauty of the Psalms is that we have both sides of the conversation: the Word of God in the fullness of God's revelation and our response to God in the fullness of our human experience.

We need the Psalms in our diet just like we need good, healthy, food to sustain our physical bodies. The Psalms grow strong Christians. Journalist Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food* examines the industrially driven Western diet to show how it has ruined our health. All the processed stuff in the center aisles of the grocery store, with their flashy packaging screaming their outlandish health claims, represents the not-so-healthy Western diet. Pollan refuses to dignify the merchandise in the center aisles as "food." He labels it "eatable food-like substitutes." The real food is in the produce section, without the fancy packaging. Pollan says, "The quieter the food, likely the healthier the food." He offers a recommendation: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants. Eat real food." It is not difficult to see the analogy to our spiritual diet. We are encouraged to pray the psalms, to let them shape our sense of the presence of God, and to discover their Spirit-inspired wisdom and power. We are challenged to embrace their passionate intensity for God, to pray the psalms as Jesus prayed the psalms.

The Psalms are fully divine and fully human. They reveal the will of God and lay bare the human soul. They express our glory, laud and honor words, as well as our disturbing, violent, "go-to-hell" words. It is all there in the Psalms: love and hate, praise and pain, doxology and despair, revelation and repentance, heaven and hell. The Psalms challenge our false notions of holiness by showing us what it means to be human. "The Psalms act as good psychologists" causing us to deal with our anger, shame, guilt, and hate.¹ "The 150 psalms present a mosaic of spiritual therapy in process." Philip Yancey continues, "Such stewing of emotions, which I once saw as hopeless disarray, I now see as a sign of health."² Allan Ross writes, "No other book of the Bible takes hold of the heart of the believer like the Book of Psalms."³ Joni Eareckson Tada says it so well:

"The Psalms show the heart not only how to speak but to listen. If emotions are the language of the soul, then the book of Psalms gives us the grammar and syntax, teaching us how to wrestle, inviting us to rage, question, and vent anger in such a way as to move up and out of despair. The Psalms wrap nouns and verbs around our pain better than any other book."⁴

The meaning of the Psalms pivot on a comparison between the "tenuous portrait of a king at

¹ Norris, "Why the Psalms Scare Us," 21

² Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, 122.

³ Ross, "Living and Worshiping with the Psalms," Beeson Chapel Sermon, September 7, 2006.

⁴ Tada, *Anger: Aim in the Right Direction*, 12

risk” and the king enthroned and installed on Mount Zion (Ps 2:6).⁵ 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 psalmist *hears and responds* to the Word of the Lord. Yahweh, the sovereign Lord, designates “my Lord” as the everlasting King who rules and reigns. The Psalms explore 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.

We are invited by the Lord himself to read the Psalms with him in mind (Luke 24:44). The Psalms belong to Jesus, whose earthly history establishes the ultimate revelational and emotional connection to the Psalms. “Through them, believers commune with Jesus Christ as he communes with his heavenly Father. The Psalms enable the devout to have a glimpse of what Jesus thought and felt.”⁶In Christ, the Psalms find, what T. S. Eliot called the *objective correlative*, that is, the true correlation between event and emotion, object and person.⁷ David’s description of extreme abandonment and persecution in Psalm 22 goes well beyond his actual circumstances, but they are most accurate for Jesus, whose God forsaken experience on the cross, because of our sin, exceeds even the most powerful poetic expression. The words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” belong first and last to Jesus (Ps 22:1). These emotionally charged words are linked to the meaning of the atonement. The pivotal turning point in the Psalm comes when David abruptly moves from agony to ecstasy (Ps 22:22-31). Thus, the whole psalm finds its correlation in Christ, from cruciform-death to empty-tomb Resurrection.⁸

Jesus is the Rock of refuge and that great Shepherd of the sheep. Jesus is the one of whom it is said, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (Ps 2:7), and “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 church came to recognize Jesus as the psalmist. The Son of David is the author of the Psalms—the primary person of prayer. What David prayed figuratively, “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst,” found its literal fulfillment in the passion of Christ (Ps 69:21).

In addition to Christ’s *vicarious sacrifice*, receiving in himself the penalty of our sins and giving us his righteousness, the Psalms offer us Christ’s *vicarious spirituality*. We are Christ-dependent, not only for our righteousness, but for our spirituality. In the Psalms, Christ leads us in prayer with a passion and intensity well beyond our experience. The Spirit of Christ prays the Psalms on

⁵ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol 1:651.

⁶ Hess, *The Old Testament*, 451.

⁷ Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus*, 31.

⁸ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 892. Waltke writes, “The specific predictions of some Psalms that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ combined with the use of the Psalter in the New Testament suggest that the entire Psalter pertains to Jesus Christ and his church.”

our behalf. We know the Psalms lie behind these wordless groans when the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for God's people in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:26-27).

What is true in our celebration of the Lord's Supper is also true in praying the Psalms: it is not the passion we bring to worship, but the passion we receive in worship that is most important. There is no emotional prerequisite to praying the Psalms. We are relieved of the burden of working up our feelings. The passion to be focused upon is not ours but Christ's. If we let Christ lead us in prayer, we will learn how to pray.

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 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.

Psalms 42 and 43 are linked so closely in thought, language and structure that they are better read as a single psalm.⁹ Three stanzas of equal length, each ending with a similar refrain, describe the psalmist's yearning for God.¹⁰ "Dry, drowned, and disheartened," capture three "frank confessions," from a person who longs with his whole being for the fellowship of God.¹¹ Kidner calls this "close-knit psalm, one of the most sadly beautiful in the Psalter."¹²

My God

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

Psalm 42:1-5

Elohim is the preferred name for God in Book II. Psalm 42-43 uses *Yahweh* only once compared to nineteen times for Elohim.¹³ El is one of the most familiar designations for God in the ancient world, suggesting power and authority and overwhelming majesty. The plural form of El is Elohim, often called the plural of intensity, and is used over two thousand times in the Old Testament to refer to Israel's God. Elohim implies the superiority and transcendence of Israel's God over the gods. Every time Israel called their God, Elohim, they acknowledged in no

⁹ The Sons of Korah were from the tribe of Levi, descendants of Kohath. David put them in charge of the music "in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there" (1 Chron 6:22, 31, 38). Numbers 16 records the rebellion of Korah against Moses and Aaron and the devastating judgment against Korah and everyone associated with him. Even so, at least one of his sons survived and his descendants became worship leaders in Israel.

¹⁰ In addition to a common refrain, as well as reflecting similar thought and language, Psalm 43 has no title or superscription. See Anderson, *Psalms*, 328.

¹¹ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 155.

¹² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 165.

¹³ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 84 n.4. Robertson writes, "Yahweh occurs 32 times in Book II, while Elohim occurs 198 times. In clearest contrast, Yahweh appears 278 times and Elohim 48 times in Book I."

uncertain terms that their God was the one and only living God.¹⁴ Far from being a generic name for God, Elohim was a theological declaration that Israel's God was "the great King above all gods" (Ps 95:3).

In Psalm 42-43 God is referenced repeatedly. Even though the psalmist feels abandoned and forsaken by God, God remains the focus of every thought and the impulse behind every concern. Clearly, the psalmist knows God personally. He freely speaks of "my God," "my Rock," "my stronghold," and "my Savior." He has made the "living God" or "the face of God" the sole object of his longing and straining. He yearns for the "house of God" and the "altar of God." The psalmist wants nothing more than to be in God's presence in order to quench his spiritual thirst, to save him from the rip currents, and to defend him against his enemies. In spite of his intense distress, God is his only hope and with every fiber of his being he longs to praise God.

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term "inscape" to describe the unique character of an object or subject as it relates to its environment. Landscapes give us the horizon. Inscapes give us the essence. The psalmist develops a theological *inscape* for the longing of the soul for God. He begins with a picture drawn from nature of a white-tailed deer panting for streams of water in a hot, dry climate. Animals and humans alike know what it is to be thirsty, especially in an arid, rocky land where the heat seems to be radiating from the white rocks. The psalm paints a picture that triggers a sensation – thirst.

The psalmist is thirsty for God. When he says to his God, "my soul pants for you" he means that he yearns for God with his whole being. Soul describes who we are in the depth of our being. The soul is the vital, living being of the person, and the center of emotion, desire, intelligence, memory and passions. The soul is the thinking-feeling-loving self – the real you. It is one with the body, yet distinct from the body.¹⁵ We live in a dry and weary land and the human soul naturally thirsts for God. But we may not be conscious that our longings and our desires can only be met by God; that our thirsts can only be quenched by the living water God provides. Jesus worked this analogy between physical and spiritual thirst with the woman at the well. He promised her living water that would quench her thirst, "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:12). We may hardly know the difference between living for self in a me-centered world and living for Christ in a God-centered world. But the psalmist knows the difference. He's acutely aware of his need for God.

Two questions haunt the psalmist. He cries out, "When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps 42:2). Literally, he wants to see the face of God. He longs to be in the very presence of God. His cry is desperate, followed by a painful description: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" This second water metaphor only compounds the pain of the first. Instead of thirst quenching water, he was "on a diet of [salty] tears – tears for breakfast, tears for supper" (Ps 42:3, Message). Internally, he is raw, hurt by his confusion and confinement. Externally, he is harassed, taunted by his cynical foes. "All day long

¹⁴ Kuhn, "Names of God," 762. Kuhn writes, "Yahweh was revealed as an intensely personal name. . . . tied inseparably with Israel's national awareness and was inescapably involved in Israel's unique covenant relation with Deity."

¹⁵ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 12.

people knock at my door, pestering, ‘Where is this God of yours?’” (Ps 42:3 Message). He is caught between a “when” question that he cannot answer and a “where” question that he cannot determine. He is both frustrated by his faith in God and mocked for his faith in God.

Theologian Cyril Okorocho, an Anglican Bishop in Nigeria, writes, “This psalm was written by someone who felt great loneliness and depression. As such, it summons us to identify those in our community who feel this way, and take action on our own and along with our families and churches to help them.”¹⁶ Matthew Henry agrees. If we are caught, as the psalmist was, between “inward distress” and “outward affliction” we may find ourselves praying “the melancholy expressions” of this psalm. But if not, we must, in praying this psalm “sympathize with those whose case they speak too plainly, and thank God it is not our own case; but those passages in it which express and excite holy desires towards God, and dependence on him, we must earnestly endeavor to bring our minds up to.”¹⁷

The psalmist teaches us how to pour out our soul and cry out to God. He deliberately remembers the joy of worship, the holy pilgrimage to the house of God, “the exuberant singing of the people,” the festive throng making their way to Jerusalem.¹⁸ By drawing on his memory the psalmist resists spiritual amnesia even as he refuses to anaesthetize his soul. He neither evades the truth nor escapes his feelings. This is not “a forced nostalgia” but a necessary spiritual discipline that sets up the refrain.¹⁹ This psalm counsels us to confront our yearning for God and to express our frustrations with life honestly. In the painful present we long for God’s redeeming grace. In the presence of God the psalmist’s self-talk moves from monologue to dialogue.

The refrain is repeated three times in slightly different ways (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5) emphasizing the wisdom of self-exhortation before God. In worship, we need to talk to ourselves in a way that is honest, faithful, and expectant. In daily devotions and in public worship there is and ought to be a lot going on inside the worshiper. When real worship splits the atom of our souls the release of life-changing energy is significant.

The two previous “when” and “where” questions are eclipsed by the psalmist’s “why” question. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why do you murmur within me?”²⁰ The previous questions seem to build to this internal self-question. There is an inner debate boiling up in the soul of the psalmist between despair and devotion. Through prayer he rebukes himself for his discouragement and challenges himself to hope in God. His self-talk is not meaningless god-talk, but necessary spiritual direction directed to his soul in the presence of God. He refuses to see himself as the helpless victim of his emotions.²¹ By having this internal conversation in God’s hearing, he is saying to God, “Do you see how I am battling with this experience?”²²

¹⁶ Okorocho, *Psalms*, 647.

¹⁷ Henry, *Psalms*, 179.

¹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:21

¹⁹ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 326.

²⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:12.

²¹ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 157.

²² Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:26.

This internal dialogue is necessary. If the psalmist was turned in on himself he would not be carrying on this dialogue in the presence of God. His mournful wrestling with reality is a matter of integrity and exemplifies his faithful practice of the spiritual disciplines. He not only laments his sorry state to himself but chides himself to put his hope in God. To say that deliverance begins when he stops speaking to himself and turns from his memories and burdens to God fails to comprehend the depth of his sorrow and his passion for God.²³ The psalmist is true to life. “Doubt and faith are in a wrestling match, first one on top and then the other, in shifting supremacies.”²⁴

He issues an imperative to his soul, “Put your hope in God,” in anticipation of divine intervention that results in praise and thanksgiving, “For I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” Literally, the sentence reads, the “salvation from his (God’s) face,” or “the deliverance that comes from his (God’s) face.”²⁵ The promised change from lament to praise echos the blessing of Aaron, “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” (Num 6:24-26).

The Lord’s Loyal Love

*My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar.
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.
I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,*

²³ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 329.

²⁴ Peterson, *Answering God*, 107.

²⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:22; Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:25.

my Savior and my God.
Psalm 42:6-11

The second stanza signals no change in the psalmist's outlook. He is still downcast and depressed. Dr. Robert Smith, Jr. knows the depth of the psalmist's pain. His son Tony was murdered while working at a fast food restaurant. Robert's mother lives less than a half-mile from where Tony was shot to death. Robert writes:

*"Since October 30, 2010, I have driven to my mother's house many times. The most convenient way to get to my mother's house from my home is to go past the restaurant where Tony was killed and to make a left-hand turn on the street where my mother resides. Not one time have I been able to drive past that restaurant. I always take the long way around and make many different out-of-the-way turns to get to my mother's house. The wound is too tender, and the sight too painful for me to look at that restaurant and see the counter through the front glass where our son's murderer stood, firing one shot into his body and extinguishing the flame of Tony's life, and to pass by the parking lot where Tony collapsed soon thereafter. . . . Perhaps someday I will be able to go into the parking lot and stand over the place where Tony passed away from death to life. Holidays and other particular days are difficult now – Christmas, Easter, birthdays, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Independence Day, weddings, and funerals, especially October 30. This experience has become a door through which I have walked into the abounding love of Christ and not a wall that restrained me from discovering wholesome forgiveness."*²⁶

The psalmist experiences deep pain and depression while at the same time putting his hope in God. This painful paradox of depression and devotion runs through this psalm and shapes our understanding of true spirituality. The psalmist illustrates how a troubled soul can honor God. Dr. Robert Smith illustrates both sides of this paradox. He is still so deeply disturbed by the murder of his son that he cannot drive by the murder scene. He has to drive a circuitous route to his mother's house. Nevertheless Dr. Smith reached out to his son's murderer in a penitentiary to say, "Jesus loves and forgives you and so do I."²⁷ And in subsequent correspondence he conveyed to the young man that the reason he wanted to stay in contact with him was because he wanted him "to see that God is able to recycle, reclaim, and restore the brokenness in our lives. . . . God does not waste pain – He redeems pain!"²⁸ Robert cannot bring himself to drive by the murder scene, but he can reach out to his son's murderer. Deep grief and amazing love meet in a person who is shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ – a father who cannot bear the sight of the place where his son died and an ambassador of Christ reaching out to share the love of Christ.

The psalmist parallels his opening picture of the deer panting after streams of water in stanza one with his present situation in the far north of Israel on the border with Syria. He is far removed from the house of God in Jerusalem. This is where the headwaters of the Jordan spring up from underground streams under Mount Hermon. He pictures himself caught in a raging torrent of water crashing over him. Instead of being parched and thirsty, this third water metaphor captures

²⁶ Smith, Jr. *The Oasis of God*, 152-153.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

his near-drowning. Whether the psalmist is literally in the far north of Israel far removed from Jerusalem and in danger of drowning is hard to say. What is clear is that this region offered the psalmist a remote and hostile environment emblematic of his feelings of desperation and abandonment. Yet despite being downcast and disturbed, the psalmist remembers God. He voices his purpose to God with clarity: “Therefore I will remember you.” The remembering is his soulful defense against internal depression and external opposition. He has gone beyond the memories of “pilgrim crowds and festivals” and is determined “to harness his memory toward the resolution of his plight.”²⁹ “The psalmist keeps asserting his faith,” acknowledging that the Lord [Yahweh] is still commanding his loyal love and giving him a song to sing and protecting his life.³⁰ Remembering God does not change his circumstances or silence his foes or alleviate his pain, but it does inspire his prayer: “I say to God my Rock. . .”

Once again the refrain challenges the state of his soul and he declares, as God is his witness, “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Ps 42:11). Literally, the last line reads, “the salvation of my face and my God.” Asians speak of “saving face” and C. S. Lewis wrote a novel entitled “Til We Have Faces.” The metaphor stands for the salvation of our whole being. To be saved is to live in a face-to-face relationship with God. The psalmist “summons his faith in the Lord, a faith that expects to praise him.”³¹

We can imagine Jesus praying Psalm 42-43 when he was in the region of Caesarea Philippi at the base of Mount Hermon (modern day Banias). This region is the northernmost border of Israel and the furthest point of Jesus’ journey from Jerusalem. He and his disciples walked along a deep gorge, “through which there roars a headlong stream.”³² As they ascended the mountain, they encountered pilgrims on their way to worship at shrines to the Syrian god Baal, the Greek god Pan, and the Roman god-head of Caesar.³³ They saw a deep cavern and shrines embedded in the rock on the slopes of Mount Hermon. On the boundary between Israel and the world, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” It is here where Jesus distinguishes between opinion and confession. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” And Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The fact that this conversation took place here on the border between Israel and the world “hints of the world-missionary significance of the confession of Christ.”³⁴

If we picture Jesus praying these psalms we can line up the expectation of the cross with his feelings of being God-forsaken. He who compared our physical thirst for water to our deep thirst for living water identified with this psalm. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38). He who wept over Jerusalem resonated with the psalmist’s endless flow of tears (John 11:35). Echoes of Psalm 42-43 can be found in Jesus’ prediction of his death, when he said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it

²⁹ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 326.

³⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³² Blaiklock, “Caesarea Philippi,” vol. 1:682.

³³ Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2:119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

was for this very reason I came to this hour” (John 12:27). Even the psalmist’s reference to “God my Rock” (Ps 42:9) in the context of the pagan shrines embedded in the rock at Mount Hermon makes us think of this psalm when Jesus declared to Peter, “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18).

Send Me Your Light

*Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.*

*Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.*

You are God my stronghold.

Why have you rejected me?

*Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?*

*Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;*

*let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.*

*Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.*

*I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.*

Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God. [the salvation of my face and my God].

Psalm 43:1-5

The struggle continues, the opposition remains, and the feeling of being abandoned by God persists. But we sense a shift in tone. The landscape is still fraught with danger but the inscape has become more resilient and resolute. The psalmist’s confidence has grown as the expectation of salvation has become more vivid. He acknowledges God’s sovereignty over everything that happens to him, even his persistent feelings of being rejected by God. Yet his devotion has only grown more intense. He clings to God in the most positive way. His “my God” confession underscores Yahweh’s loyal love and his only hope for vindication. In the space of five verses, the psalmist declares his God is his vindicator, advocate, rescuer, and stronghold. He calls for God’s light and truth to lead him into God’s presence, so he can go up to “the altar of God” to express “my joy and my delight.” While the psalmist’s internal confusion is easing his confidence against external opposition is growing stronger. His circumstances have not changed and the psalm’s refrain remains the same, but through prayer he has changed.

Once again it is not difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalms 42 and 43 as he began the journey

south to Jerusalem and to the cross. The paradox of the Father's love and the Father's rejection shaped his understanding of what soon must take place. His prayer for vindication before an "unfaithful nation" recalls the apostle John's description, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). The psalmist's use of the word "nation" does not imply a particular political entity or a foreign nation. The term describes "a conglomeration of people."³⁵ In John 17, Jesus frames the world's unbelief in a similar manner. He gathers up all the rejection and opposition into an impersonal collective – the world. Jesus identified with the psalmist's prayer, "Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked" (Ps 43:1). And to those who mourn he offered his blessing (Matt 5:4).

When the psalmist prays, "Send me your light and your faithful care [truthfulness], let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell" (Ps 43:3), he is not asking for help in the abstract. This is not a rhetorical flourish. He is praying for "someone who explicitly embodies God's own qualities. . . . The emissary thus brings God in person."³⁶ Nevertheless the psalmist never imagined how literally God intended to fulfill his prayer. But Jesus did. How could our Savior not see himself in this psalm? He testified that he was the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life (John 8:12; 14:6). He embodied the message of God (John 1:14). Undoubtedly, Psalm 42-43 confirmed Jesus' self-understanding.

The psalm begins and ends with the psalmist's yearning for God. He longs to "go to the altar of God," not to participate in a sacrificial ritual, but to meet God. "O God, my God" is the exclamation of a person who "strains for God and thirsts for God."³⁷ Jesus prayed this psalm knowing that he was the sacrifice to be placed on the altar of God. The psalmist's running refrain (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5) corresponds to Jesus' Gethsemane experience, where he "was deeply distressed and troubled." He said to his disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34). We would be naive to think that these emotions had no touchstone in the psalms. These are the emotions of the one who came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Hebrews declares, "We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat," because Jesus "suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb 13:10, 12; see George Herbert's *The Altar*).³⁸

³⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:28.

³⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁸ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 139. George Herbert (1593-1633) served as an Anglican priest in rural England. Note the many implicit biblical references in his poem (Ps 51:17; Deut 27:2-6; 2 Cor 3:2-3; Ezek 36:25-27; Zech 7:12; Lk 19:40).

This communal lament follows the personal lament of Psalms 42-43 even as the Church, the Body of Christ, follows in the steps of her Lord. Key words and themes unite these Korah psalms. All three psalms refer to God's "saving acts" or "deliverances" (Ps 44:4; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5) and all three are committed to "confessing" or "praising" his name (Ps 44:8; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5). The experience of being rejected or cast off is a shared theme (Ps 44:9,23; cf. Ps 43:2), along with becoming a reproach (Ps 44:13; cf. Ps 42:10) and being forgotten and ignored by God (Ps 44:24; cf. Ps 42:9). The word "oppression" is a rare word in the Psalms and it is used only here in these three psalms (Ps 44:24; 42:9; 43:2). There is also a shared reference to the unfaithful "nations" that are driven out by God (Ps 44:2; cf. 43:1) and the theme of God's face knits the psalms together (Ps 44:3; cf. Ps 42:5, 11; Ps 43:5 - "the deliverance of my face").

These verbal links point to their shared theological correspondence. If Psalms 42-43 line up with Jesus' expectation of the cross and his feelings of being God-forsaken, then the communal lament of Psalm 44 lines up with the persecuted Church. If Jesus' experience at the base of Mount Hermon echoes Psalms 42-43, then his commendation of Peter, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18), echoes Psalm 44 and forms a bridge leading from Christ to his Church.

The apostle Paul affirmed this correspondence when he quoted from Psalm 44 in Romans 8. He was drawing on the full meaning of the psalm when he referenced the line, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Ps 44:22; Rom 8:36). It was not a case of proof-texting, but of promise-fulfillment. The apostle referenced Psalm 44 as he made his case that nothing shall separate Christ's followers "from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). For Paul to say, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us," answers decisively the anguished longing of Psalm 44.

The Story Heard

*We have heard it with our ears, O God;
our ancestors have told us
what you did in their days,
in days long ago.
With your hand you drove out the nations
and planted our ancestors;
you crushed the peoples
and made our ancestors flourish.
It was not by their sword that they won the land,
nor did their arm bring them victory;
it was your right hand, your arm,
and the light of your face, for you loved them.
You are my King and my God,
who decrees victories for Jacob.*

*Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes
I will put no trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory;
but you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever.*

Psalm 44:1-8

The psalmist celebrates Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt and the victorious conquest of Canaan as an act of God for which the people can take no credit. God alone drove out the nations and planted the people of God in the land. This true story of God's strength and power and love has been passed down from generation to generation. It has been impressed on the mind of the people from the time they were children (Deut 6:7). The story has been recounted in worship and in the course of daily life. The message is deeply ingrained in the life of Israel (Deut 7:6-9).

It is because of this salvation story that the psalmist is able to address God directly and personally. The confession, "You are my King and my God," declares a covenant relationship unique to the people of Israel. "Israel's prayer consists in the utterance of 'you,' addressed to a named, known, addressable, reachable You."³⁹ When the psalmist shifts to the first person singular and writes, "I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory," he appears to be speaking either as the king or for the king. He bows before the one whom he addresses as "my King and my God." His disavowal of any reliance on his own military power prefigures the "saving acts" that have nothing to do with the weapons of war and everything to do with the saving grace of God. This powerful praise section sets in bold relief the depths of corporate lament inexplicably experienced by the people of God. We cannot use the first eight verses of Psalm 44 without the rest of the psalm.

But Now!

*But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.
You have made us a reproach to our neighbors,
the scorn and derision of those around us.
You have made us a byword among the nations;
the peoples shake their heads at us.
I live in disgrace all day long,*

³⁹ Brueggemann, "The Psalms as Prayer," 37.

*and my face is covered with shame
at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me,
because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.*

Psalm 44:9-16

Unexpectedly the tone shifts radically from high praise to devastating lament. Instead of a recital of blessings, the psalmist offers a painful litany of despair. The people of God have experienced a catastrophic reversal. The blessed are now cursed. The once victorious are vanquished. Those who conquered are now conquered. The joy of human flourishing is replaced by rejection, humiliation, and disgrace. They have been plundered, devoured, scattered, and reviled. Their enemies make their lives miserable. Their foes are out for revenge. As in the first section, the lament turns personal. The king, speaking on behalf of the people of God, says, "I live in disgrace all day long, and my face is covered with shame. . ." (Ps 44:15).

The psalmist credits God with both the blessing and the curse. It is the Lord who gives and takes away, but the psalmist does not seem as ready as Job to praise the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). "With harsh and pointed language, the psalmist leaves no doubt that the cause of Israel's suffering and disgrace is God himself. The emphatic litany of 'You!' (44:9-14) . . . is all directed to God."⁴⁰ The psalmist's tone borders on the accusatory. Make no mistake, there is anger and pain that lies behind this "because of you" lament.⁴¹ This is not a cool accounting of the facts as much as a bewildered, heart-rending plea for understanding in the face of experiences that are both inexplicable and irreconcilable. "God has rejected and humbled his people. He has caused them to retreat and be plundered. God gave them up and scattered them. He sold them for no personal profit and made them a reproach and a byword among the nations."⁴²

We cannot help but identify these feelings and this lament with the experience of the persecuted church today. As difficult as this psalm may be it needs to be prayed on behalf of believers around the world who suffer for the sake of the gospel. Psalm 44 puts words to the reproach and disgrace suffered under state sponsored persecution.

Deep Darkness

*All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.
But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;
you covered us with deep darkness.
If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
would not God have discovered it,*

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:686.

⁴¹ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 160.

⁴² Wilson, *Psalms*, vol.1:686.

*since he knows the secrets of the heart?
Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sleep to be slaughtered.*

Psalm 44:17-22

The Lord sets before the people a blessing and a curse (Deut 11:26f). God's blessing belonged to those who obeyed "the commands of the Lord your God" and his curse came down on those who disobeyed God's commands and turned away from him. This longstanding conviction and binary logic is being challenged by the psalmist's plea for God's deliverance. Speaking on behalf of the people of God, the psalmist claims that they had not forgotten God, nor had they born false witness to the covenant. Wilson concludes, "This is no pretension of absolute sinlessness but honest affirmation of their commitment to covenant relationship with God and their ongoing intention to remain faithful."⁴³ They were inwardly and outwardly committed to the Lord God, but it was as if their lives were under God's curse.

Psalm 44 represents a shift in understanding of how the people of God exist in the world. Instead of being land-holding conquerors, they are gospel-living missionaries marked by the cross. The description of suffering (Ps 44:9-22) is a type, prefiguring the Christian life. Imbedded in the experience of Israel is the future experience of the cruciform Church. The Christ for culture strategy changes from establishing a called out people set apart from the world to sending a called out people into the world with the gospel of grace. In an effort to preserve the identity of the people of God, the Israelites were instructed to form their own culture. Through diet, clothing, language, ritual, and the law, God separated out a people for himself. The purpose of this apparent "Christ against culture" position was to preserve the identify of Yahweh's people so that they might fulfill their God-given purpose. 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 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).

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. 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" (Matthew 28:19-20). Joshua'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.

⁴³ Ibid., vol. 1:688. See Ps 7:3-9; 18:20-24; 26:1-12 for examples of personal pleas of innocence.

The apostle Paul underscores this shift in strategy and draws on Psalm 44 in Romans 8 to explain “our present sufferings” and what it means to be “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom 8:18, 37). Paul quotes his pivotal line from Psalm 44:22, “Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” The psalmist had no idea when he wrote this psalm that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he was affirming a radical new form of “blessing” that would mark the people of God. His courageous faith was pledging fidelity to God in spite of deep feelings of abandonment and reproach. “The ‘yet’ that begins this statement gives the whole a similar flavor to Job’s reply to his friends: ‘Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face’ (Job 13:15).”⁴⁴

What is truly remarkable is that Jesus’ Prayer Book describes the state of the Church in a hostile world long before the people of God understood the strategy of the cross. The psalmist’s lament foreshadows the apostolic strategy for how the Church is to relate to the world. Peter writes, “For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering. . . . To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . . But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Pet 2:19,21; 4:13,14).

Awake, Lord!

*Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love (hesed).*

Psalm 44:23-26

We ought to credit the psalmist with the courage of his convictions. Since God is sovereign over all, the psalmist has no one else to go to but God. He skips the wear and tear of second guessing and secondary causes. He refuses to blame a host of potential forces. He does not conger up false guilt and blame himself or others, nor does he distract himself with false idols and false hope. Calvin observed, “that when the faithful represent God as the author of their calamities, it is not in the way of murmuring against him, but that they may with greater confidence seek relief, as it were, from the same hand that smote and wounded them. . . . If we expect a remedy from God for our miseries, we must believe that they befall us not by fortune or mere chance, but that they are inflicted upon us properly by his hand.”⁴⁵ In the previous section, the psalmist challenged God for “doing things one would not have thought God did (sleep, reject, hide the face, ignore).” But now he challenges God to “do things that one would not have thought God needed to do (get up,

⁴⁴ Ibid., vol. 1:693.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, 159.

wake up, rise up).⁴⁶

Faith in Yahweh lies behind this pointed challenge. The psalmist demonstrates a faith sufficient for failure. In this regard he finds a kindred spirit in Job. Like Job, the force of his lament comes from the depths of his soul and his undying trust in God. Like a hammer, his challenge shatters excuses, explanations, and overtures of pity. He shares Job's resolve, "Oh, that I might have my request, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! Then I would still have this consolation—my joy in unrelenting pain—that I had not denied the words of the Holy One" (Job 6:8-10). When the psalmist prayed, "*Yet for your sake* we face death all day long," we know beyond a shadow of doubt that he's firmly in Yahweh's camp no matter what. Derek Kidner writes, "The psalm does not develop it [Ps 44:22], but it implies the revolutionary thought that suffering may be a battle-scar rather than a punishment; the price of loyalty in a world which is at war with God."⁴⁷ The apparent hiddenness of God is not the final word. The last word of the psalm frames the entire psalm. Everything depends on "the steadfast love" of the Lord and always will. The apostle agrees, "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

⁴⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:47.

⁴⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 170.

Psalm 45 pivots from heartache and hardship to the joyful celebration of a royal wedding. The juxtaposition of soul-churning lament and a soul-inspiring love song captures the extremes of life. The psalms move from the depths of persecution to the heights of the throne of God. True worshipers live in the reality of the one and in the hope and expectation of the other. We need artists and musicians to draw out the meaning of life. Love is too important to be neglected by the poet's passion and the writer's skill. Love calls for a song. The sons of Korah were musicians who believed in the sacramental cast of life. Their aesthetic sensibilities were "stirred by a noble theme." The royal wedding described in Psalm 45 is a memorable, once-in-a-lifetime event. The psalmist seeks to capture the full sensory experience of a royal wedding, but he does so with a second meaning in mind: the marriage of God and his people.

The occasion of a royal wedding between Israel's king and his bride becomes the scene for playing out the drama of redemption on a grand scale. God's illustrations are always the best, and when describing God's love for us the Lord chooses an analogy that is bound to get our attention. Our hearts can better grasp the meaning of God's love through the power of metaphor. A picture is worth a thousand words, and one of the most effective pictures illustrating the love of God is that of love between a husband and a wife.⁴⁸

Psalm 45 celebrates two loves, marital love and divine love, romantic love and redemptive love. The lesser love, the love between a husband and wife, is meant to help us grasp more completely the personal intimacy and earnestness of God's love for us. The greater love, God's sacrificial, saving love, is meant to be the source, strength and standard for human love. The power and intensity of the oneness experienced between a man and a woman points to the greater mystery of our oneness with God in Christ.⁴⁹

Your Majesty

*My heart is stirred by a noble theme
as I recite my verses for the king;
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.
You are the most excellent of men
and your lips have been anointed with grace,
since God has blessed you forever.
Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;
clothe yourself with splendor and majesty
In your majesty ride forth victoriously
in the cause of truth, humility and justice;
let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.
Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies;
Let the nations fall beneath your feet.*

⁴⁸ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

*Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
 a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
 You love righteousness and hate wickedness;
 therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
 by anointing you with the oil of joy.
 All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;
 from palaces adorned with ivory the music of strings makes you glad.
 Daughters of kings are among your honored women;
 at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.*

Psalm 45:1-9

All eyes are on the king. Three initial attributes are identified: his appearance, his speech, and the blessing of God. His “striking appearance” sets him apart from other men.⁵⁰ The poet sees his outward appearance in the light of his “personal and official significance.”⁵¹ The reason the king is the “handsomest of men” is because character shapes perception. The second line parallels the first and refers to his lips “anointed with grace.” The psalmist sees his physical appearance in the wisdom of his speech. Sight and sound converge and testify to the blessing of God. No matter how extravagant and elaborate a wedding may be, it all comes down to the bride and groom, their gifts, their character, their love for each other, and the blessing of God. Everything else is secondary.

The historical setting for Psalm 45 remains obscure. The specific king and queen who inspired the psalm are not identified. This may be a pastoral benefit intended by the psalmist to extend the metaphor to countless brides and grooms who on their wedding day feel like kings and queens blessed by God forever. There are messianic implications as well. The poet uses superlative language to describe the transcendent courage and valor of the king. He is the mighty one clothed in splendor and majesty. He rides forth victoriously, taking up the cause of truth, humility and justice. His is a transcendent figure, achieving awesome deeds, conquering his enemies, and causing the nations to fall beneath his feet. The language goes well beyond the description of a human king.⁵² Even King David in all his glory did not come anywhere close to this king. The hyperbole leaves the distinct impression that the psalmist had a redemptive trajectory in mind and intended his song to be a messianic psalm. The king’s rule and reign in righteousness forever recalls the messianic promises and prophecies of 2 Samuel 7.

The climax of the description comes when the psalmist says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom” (Ps 45:6). The author of Hebrews quotes this verse in his chain of seven quotations to show the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He understands Psalm 45 “as a direct verbal prophecy concerning the perpetual nature of the Son’s reign” and “the reference to ‘God, your God’ . . . reinforces the distinction. . . between the Son and the Father, thus communicating an implicit Trinitarian perspective of the Son as God

⁵⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:67.

⁵¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:56-57.

⁵² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:71. Ross writes, “Any application to a historical figure would be idealistic, for no king ever championed only righteousness, let alone lived up to the titles and epithets given to him, try as he might. But again, these words will find their true and literal meaning in the righteous reign of the Messiah.”

but makes a distinction between him and the Father.”⁵³ Hebrews declares the exalted enthronement of the Son because of his eternal, holy, and unchanging nature.⁵⁴ His just rule will make everything right. Moreover the militancy of the king is in keeping with the king’s victorious pursuit of “truth, humility and justice” (Ps 45:4). Divergent lines of prophecy converge in the one who is nailed to a cross and crowned with many crowns – the Lamb upon the throne. Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the exalted rider called “Faithful and True,” who will rule and reign one day with an iron scepter (Rev 19:11-16).

The poet’s picture of the royal wedding awakens all the senses. The king is set apart by God and anointed with the oil of joy in the majestic setting of a palace adorned with ivory. His robes carry the fragrant scent of myrrh, aloes, and cassia (cinnamon) and the sound of strings fills the air. His royal bride is by his side wearing a golden crown. The Bible’s consistent use of human love as a metaphor for divine love helps to dispel the notion that they are rival loves. Far from being in competition with God’s love, marital love was given as a gracious expression of God’s love. These two loves enhance one another in beautiful harmony.⁵⁵

The Royal Bride

*Listen, daughter and pay careful attention:
Forget your people and your father’s house.
Let the king be enthralled by your beauty;
honor him, for he is your lord.
The city of Tyre will come with a gift,
people of wealth will seek your favor.
All glorious is the princess within her chamber;
her gown is interwoven with gold.
In embroidered garments she is led to the king;
her virgin companions follow her – those brought to be with her.
Led in with joy and gladness,
they enter the palace of the king.*

Psalm 45:10-16

The image of the bride bends the metaphor to Christ and his Church. The solemn instruction given to the bride is more analogous to the Spirit’s guidance to the Bride of Christ than it is to marital counsel. The biblical emphasis on mutual submission between a husband and wife in marriage is not on par with the Church’s relationship to her Lord. If a husband carries a “king of the castle” mentality into marriage and acts as if his wife exists to meet his needs, the marriage is bound to fail. It will fail not only as a loving marriage, but as a testimony to Christ and his Church. The union of two image-bearers of God calls for a man to leave his father and mother and to be united to his wife in a one-flesh relationship (Gen 2:24).

Mutual submission “out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21) applies the principle of the cross to

⁵³ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 938.

⁵⁴ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 65.

⁵⁵ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 90.

the marriage relationship in countless ways. A wife's life is not subject to the whim of her husband but is defined in Christ, even as a husband's love is patterned after Christ's love for the church. "The husband is the head of the wife just in so far as he is to her what Christ is to the Church," writes C. S. Lewis. "He is to love her as Christ loved the Church—read on—'and gave his life for her.'⁵⁶ Lewis rightly observes that what the Bible commends is not a husband's superiority but rather his Christlike sacrifice.⁵⁷

The instruction given to the royal bride is best heard today by the church, not the wife. The directive to "forget your people and your father's house" is rendered well by the counsel of the apostle, "Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires. . .and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). The household of faith echoes the life-changing commitment made by Ruth to Naomi and Naomi's God: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). The imperative, "Let the king be enthralled by your beauty," is a call to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (Ps 96:9). And to honor the Lord is to know that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, that we are not our own, that we were bought with a price, and therefore we honor God with our bodies (1 Cor 6:19-20).

The psalmist captures the joy and gladness of a bridal procession graced with dignitaries and gifts. "Her wedding dress is dazzling, lined with gold by the weavers; all her dresses and robes are woven with gold. She is led to the king, followed by her virgin companions. A procession of joy and laughter! A grand entrance to the king's palace!" (Ps 45:13-15, Message).

Did Jesus have Psalm 45 in mind when he was invited to the wedding in Cana of Galilee? Like the King of kings and Lord of lords he turned water into wine. He "revealed his glory" and "his disciples put their faith in him" (John 2:11). The unsuspecting bride and groom never dreamed that their invitation to Jesus would change everything. Jesus delivered his Sermon on the End World from the Mount of Olives two days before his final Passover. Once again he may have had Psalm 45 in mind when he likened the coming kingdom of heaven to a wedding ceremony with ten bridesmaids. The role of these girls in the ceremony may have been to escort the bridegroom in a torchlight procession.⁵⁸ In Jesus' parable, five of the bridesmaids are foolish and five are wise. The thoughtful bridesmaids picture life-long faithfulness. Their lamps remain lit, because they have the oil of disciplined devotion to Christ. The thoughtless bridesmaids on the other hand, are flighty and unprepared for the surprise midnight entrance of the bridegroom. The foolish bridesmaids represent the shallow believer who is distracted and unprepared. The Lord refuses to invite them into the ceremony, saying, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." Jesus' bottom line: "So keep alert because you just don't know the day or the hour." Readiness cannot be achieved by "last minute adjustments," but depends on "long-term provision."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 105.

⁵⁷ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 147-150.

⁵⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 947.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 947.

The Blessing

*Your sons will take the place of your fathers;
you will make them princes throughout the land.
I will perpetuate your memory [commemorate your name]
through all generations;
therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.*
Psalm 45:16-17

The marriage union is signified publicly in several ways: the wedding ceremony, the pledge of vows, the exchange of rings, and the giving and changing of a name. The bridegroom offers a name; the bride receives a name. The two are united under a new name. But there is another name more powerful and more enduring; the name that defines them and saves them. May they be known by that name. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

The psalm concludes with a blessing pronounced over the royal couple. Their marriage will be a blessing to the generations and to the nations. The psalmist pledges to do his part in making the royal Name known for all generations. This is the Name that is like no other, for “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). This is the Name that is written on the robe and thigh of the rider who is called Faithful and True. He is the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:11-16). This is the Name that is above every name, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

Psalm 46 is a psalm of confidence that bridges the “downcast” soul (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5) and the “deep darkness” (Ps 44:19) with a royal wedding psalm (Ps 45) and a celebration of God’s sovereign rule over the nations (Ps 47). This is a psalm of hope, prayed by the people of God even though “the earth gives way” and the “mountains fall into the sea.” The three-part psalm is punctuated with a refrain: “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps 46:7, 11). “The voice of this psalm is the voice of the Church, the holy city, which is the dwelling place of God. Hence the importance of the first person plural all through the psalm: ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘our.’” Patrick Reardon continues, “God is ‘our’ refuge and strength, ‘we’ shall not fear, The Lord of hosts is with ‘us,’ and so forth. This is the voice of God’s people, the same voice that prays, ‘Our Father.’”⁶⁰

On the Sunday following Tuesday, September 11, 2001, churches were crowded with people trying to cope with the worst terrorist attack in US history. The sheer magnitude of the disaster was overwhelming. The entire nation mourned the dreadful loss that terrorists had inflicted in a single hour. Churches were filled with people seeking solace for weeks following 9/11. The nation rallied and a never-ending war was declared against terrorism. But the spiritual hunger and the longing for comfort quickly subsided and the churches returned to “normal.” A sense of pending doom has remained ever since, but the forces of distraction are strong. Doug Groothuis writes, “Although America is threatened by deadly terrorism,” wrote Doug Groothuis, “it refuses to get deadly serious about God, the soul, and matters of eternity. Many just want life to return to normal when ‘normal’ — designer religion, materialism, crass sensuality, and relentless entertainment — is precisely what God wants us to repent of.”⁶¹

Terror struck again on December 26th, 2004, when a 9.0 earthquake in the Indian Ocean, buckled the ocean floor and produced a devastating tsunami. This time instead of three thousand deaths, more than two hundred and thirty thousand people died in fourteen countries. But there were no terrorists to blame. Without warning, beautiful tropical beaches suddenly became scenes of horror and catastrophic devastation. The forces of nature governed by laws absolutely objective in application unleashed unimaginable destruction. News of the disaster spread around the world faster than it did to some who were in the path of the tsunami. Mountainous waves obliterated whole villages killing poor fishermen and wealthy tourists, kids playing on the beach and the elderly looking on. Instead of man’s inhumanity to man, a natural disaster of apocalyptic proportions was unleashed on unsuspecting humanity.

God is our Refuge

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the sea,*

⁶⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 89.

⁶¹ Groothuis, “The Church in Danger,” 36.

*though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*
Psalm 46:1-3

This is where we begin in a crisis. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” God with us is the single most important truth for confronting our fears. When we are shaken to the core, we return to this bedrock truth. When we are painfully aware of our depravity and vulnerability, we begin here: God is our refuge and strength whether we are up against terrorists or natural disasters or are own depravity. Our souls are anchored in the enduring truth that God is our sure defense, our inner strength, and our means of salvation.

Immanuel, God with us, changes everything, especially now that God has come in the person of Jesus Christ (Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10). “God is our refuge” takes on an even greater meaning in the light of Christ. Psalm 46 is prayed today in the light of the far reaching impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we sing *Joy to the World!* we can hardly imagine the great reversal described in the third stanza: “*No more let sin and sorrow grow / Nor thorns infest the ground. / He comes to make his blessings flow / Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found.*” To speak of Jesus Christ as “an ever present help in trouble” causes us to grasp the unique and specific ways that God helps us. We are helped through his Passion (his life, death, and resurrection), his Parousia (his second coming), his Paraclete (the gift of the Holy Spirit), and his abiding Presence (the gift of union with him in the Body of Christ). The help we need in this world and the next is salvation through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 46 and Psalm 2 should be prayed together. The nations rage and plot in vain, but “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath...” (Ps 2:1-5). We do not “see everything subject to him” (Heb 2:8), but we look forward to the day when, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

The magnitude of the devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami is hard for our minds to grasp. Throughout the history of the church extreme catastrophes have been perceived as a reminder of the ultimate spiritual struggle between God and his creation. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:20-21). Christians through the ages have seen terrorism and tsunamis as a *wake-up call*, calling people to turn to God and receive his grace and mercy.

The psalmist does not dwell on evil. He deftly describes the cataclysmic and apocalyptic extent of evil, but he refuses to be overwhelmed by it. French philosopher, Francois Voltaire used the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755 to refute the existence of a good and just God. According to Voltaire all is not well with the world and he defied biblical revelation to make sense of it. His poem was a *tour de force* against the biblical world-view. It reads in part:

Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"
And contemplate this ruin of a world.

Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts—
A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
In racking torment end their stricken lives.

Voltaire questioned the moral order of the universe, "Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice / Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?" He challenged the idea that there was a sovereign God in control of the universe. Voltaire reasoned that if, "A God came down to lift our stricken race," he left it in the same mess that he found it. "He visited the earth, and changed it not!" Voltaire was right, we do not live in *the best of all possible worlds*, but he was wrong to think that the Bible claimed we did. His moral indignation against evil was right, and a sign that he himself was made in God's image, but he was wrong to reject God's "ever-present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1).

In 1755 John Wesley also wrote about the Lisbon earthquake. Unlike Voltaire, he saw the devastating tragedy as an event that ought to drive men and women to God, because it proved that we have no defenses sufficient to withstand the forces of evil or the judgment of God. Wesley saw all humanity inherently fallen and subject to the judgment of God. "The earth threatens to swallow you up. Where is your protection now?" Money offers no defense and you cannot fly away. Wisdom and titles offer no protection. And if an earthquake doesn't threaten you, maybe a comet will!"

Wesley cut through the philosophy of blame and the psychology of despair and concluded that if "our own wisdom and strength be not sufficient to defend us, let us not be ashamed to seek farther help. Let us even dare to own that we believe there is a God" an all-knowing, all-powerful God. "Let us secure him on our side; let us make this wise, this powerful, this gracious God our friend. Then need we not fear, *though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea*; no, not even if the heavens being on fire are dissolved, and the very elements melt with fervent heat. It is enough that the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of love is our everlasting refuge."

Wesley used the Lisbon earthquake to demonstrate that we cannot protect ourselves. Suppose you are not crushed in an earthquake, he reasoned, or swept away in a flood, or struck by a comet, the sad truth is that we all must face death. The consequence of sin is death and there is no avoiding it, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:23). For Wesley the question was this: "How shall we secure the favor of this great God?"

“If you love God, then you are happy in God; if you love God, riches, honors, and the pleasures of sense are no more to you than bubbles on the water. . . .If you love God, God is in all your thoughts, and your whole life is a sacrifice to him. And if you love humankind, it is your one design, desire, and endeavor, to spread virtue and happiness all around you, to lessen the present sorrows, and increase the joys, of every child of humanity; and if possible to bring them with you to the rivers of pleasure that are at God’s right hand for evermore.”

Voltaire’s poem on the Lisbon earthquake ends in resignation and despair. Wesley’s conclusion is a benediction. *“May the Father of your spirit, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, make you such a Christian! May He work in your soul a divine conviction of things not discerned by eyes of flesh and blood! May He give you to see Him that is invisible, and to taste of the powers of the world to come! May He fill you with all peace and joy in believing, that you may be happy in life, in death, in eternity!”*⁶²

The City of God

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*
Psalm 46:4-8

The stability and security of the City of God are set in contrast to the earth giving way and the mountains falling into the heart of the sea. Psalm 46 insists that no matter what happens on earth, the Lord is Sovereign. In a violent and chaotic world, “the city of God is set down as a simple matter of fact.”⁶³ Violence in all its forms: in nature (46:2-3), in politics (46:6), and in war (46:9) is no match for indwelling presence of God, the promise of God’s help, and proclamation of God’s voice.

The river running through the City of God is symbolic of God’s sustaining help. Instead of chaotic seas that menace and threaten, there is a life-giving river that runs as clear as crystal “down the middle of the great street of the city.”⁶⁴ This river flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb with the fruit-bearing tree of life on either side of the river and always in season (Rev 22:1-2). We sing the hymn: *“Like a river glorious is God’s perfect peace, over all victorious in its bright increase: perfect, yet it floweth fuller everyday, perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way. Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest, finding as he promised, perfect peace and rest.”*

⁶² Wesley, “Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon,” vol. 11:1-13.

⁶³ Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 73.

⁶⁴ See Ezekiel 47:1-9; Zechariah 14:8; Joel 3:18.

Nations are in an uproar and kingdoms fall. The earth gives way and mountains fall into the sea, but the City of God is secure, stable, and immovable. Its safety and permanency comes from God's holiness. His holy presence establishes her. God's help is constant day to day and from beginning to end. The world is filled with disorder and confusion but in God's presence we find peace and righteousness. The praying poet used the word *earth* to link the bedrock reality of God to our lives: "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the *earth* melts."

"Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the *earth*."

"He makes wars cease to the ends of the *earth*..."

"I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the *earth*." Psalm 46:6, 8, 10

The psalmist insists on a vantage point that can only be experienced in the presence of God. The psalmist does not dwell on evil. He deftly describes the cataclysmic and apocalyptic extent of evil, but he refuses to be overwhelmed by it. The earth can give way and the nations can rage, but God is stronger than the evil. The psalmist calls for real world, real time confidence and trust in Yahweh. "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps 46:7). John Wesley speaks of the "unspeakable advantage" a believer has over an unbeliever: "a continual serenity of mind, a constant evenness and composure of temper, 'a peace which passes all understanding,' contentment with life, a continual attitude of gratitude to the living God, and tender compassion toward all people."⁶⁵

"Cease and Desist"

*Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

Psalm 46:8-11

Four imperatives bring Psalm 46 to a powerful conclusion: "Come and See," and "Stop, and Know that I am God." In worship the people of God are projected into the future to see the desolations wrought by God upon the earth. These "desolations" are good news because they bring evil to a decisive and definitive end.⁶⁶ The global mission of the gospel could not be more political, but it is political in way entirely different from the politics of the world. The psalmist offers to the world the first word of the gospel, "Come and see." The announcement of the kingdom of God is open to all. The gospel is inviting, not intimidating. But the day will come when the war to end all wars will be waged by the Lamb of God, the Heavenly Warrior who is

⁶⁵ Wesley, "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon," vol. 11:1-13.

⁶⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:71.

Faithful and True (Rev 19:11-21). No literal military battle will be fought, because as Luther said in his famous hymn, “one little word shall fell him.” The metaphoric broken bow and shattered spear stand for the end of evil. Every sin, every crime, every disease, every form of deviancy and perversion, will come to an end. The apostle John joins the psalmist in announcing 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.⁶⁷

The second imperative couplet, Stop and Know, is addressed to the nations. It “is not in the first place comfort for the harassed but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world: ‘Quiet!’ – in fact, ‘Leave off!’” Derek Kidner adds, “It resembles the command to another sea: ‘Peace! Be still!’ (Mark 4:39).⁶⁸ The Sovereign Lord announces, “Cease and Desist,” to the world’s superpowers and rebel factions. The nations are exhorted to “be still” and know that the Lord is God. The verb, “be still” conveys the idea of “stand down” or “relax.” God is commanding the nations: “Stop fighting,” “Cease your resistance.” “The imperative is a warning for the turbulent world to stop what they are trying to do.”⁶⁹

“Be still and know that I am God” is a familiar challenge to the restless believer who needs to learn to trust the Lord and rest in his sovereign care. The Lord’s rebuke to the nations is taken personally and transposed as a sought after discipline of Christian spirituality. Although the psalmist did not have this specific meaning in mind, Goldingay offers the following insight: “Spirit-inspired interpretation often works by making the words of Scripture mean something quite different from what they actually meant, because new situations make it necessary for God to say new things.”⁷⁰

The psalm ends by repeating the refrain and emphasizing the abiding truth of the Lord’s presence. Those who resonate with the fearless hope of Psalm 46 share John Wesley’s last words, “The best of all is, God is with us.” Psalm 46 inspired Martin Luther’s famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” The hymn like the psalm testifies to the sovereign strength of God: “our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.” Luther boldly proclaimed “God is our refuge” because “the right man” was on our side, “the man of God’s own choosing . . . Christ Jesus it is he.” Luther wrote the hymn in 1527 after learning that Leonhard Kaiser, a close friend, had been burned at the stake in the Netherlands for refusing to recant. A resilient Luther wrote the fourth stanza in tears of faith:

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth:
let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever.*

⁶⁷ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 222-223.

⁶⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 176.

⁶⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:98.

⁷⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:73. Goldingay comments, “At the same time, we have to be wary of missing what the text actually did say. Here it issues an important challenge to the superpower to stand still and recognize that God is God and that the superpower is not.”

Psalm 47 is the Lord's gospel invitation to all people to approach his throne with uninhibited joy. It is a call to the nations to embrace this life-giving reality in one accord. The psalmist centers reality around the throne of God and teaches us how to worship *today* in view of the future consummation of God's rule and reign. Psalm 47 is a fitting response to the victory of God described in Psalm 46.⁷¹ The Lord Almighty makes wars to cease, breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and as a result the Lord is exalted among the nations. All the nations are invited to "come and see what the Lord has done" (Ps 46:8). All the peoples of the earth are commanded to "stop" their opposition and submit to the Lord who is "exalted in the earth" (Ps 46:10).

This praise song is an ascension psalm divided in two parallel stanzas with a single unified message. The historical setting for Psalm 47 may have been when David brought up the ark of God into Jerusalem. David took off his royal robes and wearing only a linen sleeveless tunic (an ephod) he danced before the Lord with all his might. All Israel joined him "with shouts and the sound of trumpets" (2 Sam 6:15). The ascendancy of the ark of the covenant into the City of Zion may serve "as a figure and type of the Lord's entry into the heavenly Jerusalem."⁷² Psalm 47 points forward to when the God who "raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph 1:20-23).

The Whole World Rejoices

*Clap your hands, all you nations [peoples];
shout to God with cries of joy.
For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.
He subdued nations [tribes] under us,
peoples under our feet.
He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.
God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.*

Psalm 47:1-5

Our first impression is that the psalmist is calling for enthusiastic applause and loud praise.⁷³ But another view holds that the Hebrew idiom means "to strike hands." If this is the case, the psalm is calling for the nations to come together and "shake hands" in agreement that the Lord Most

⁷¹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 881. The Songs of Zion are praise psalms that celebrate God's election of Zion (Psalms 46, 47, 48, 76, 84, 87, 121, 122).

⁷² Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 91

⁷³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:77; Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:108.

High is “the great King over all the earth.”⁷⁴ This acknowledgment is based on the fact that Israel’s God, Yahweh, is the universal, sovereign ruler of all peoples. He alone has elected Israel through whom to bless and subdue the nations. This international agreement and acclamation is not made grudgingly, but enthusiastically. The ascendancy of God is celebrated with cries of joy and the sounding of trumpets.

Psalms 47 fulfills the destiny of the nations (Genesis 10), celebrates the great reversal of the scattering of the nations at the infamous Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), and builds upon the blessing of Abraham through whom “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). This psalm celebrates the redemptive inheritance that is promised throughout salvation history. The exclusivity of God’s election of Israel has always meant the inclusiveness of God’s blessing to the nations.⁷⁵ From the beginning, God’s design has been for the “pride of Jacob” and Israel’s place on the world stage, to be “a light for the Gentiles,” that his “salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). The prophet Isaiah captured the meaning of the psalmist when he wrote, “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you” (Isaiah 49:7).

All the redemptive promises celebrated in Psalm 47, the universal rule of God, the inheritance pledged to Israel, and the pride of Jacob, find their fulfillment in Israel’s representative, Jesus Christ. The apostles echo the themes of this psalm in revelatory ways that clarify the means God chose to bring about his salvation. If it was scandalous for God to choose a little beleaguered nation through whom to bless the nations, how much more to choose one man, Jesus, the Son of Man, the Incarnate One. It is through him that we have been given new birth into a “living hope,” into “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade . . . ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:4-5). The ascended Lord Jesus, enthroned in heaven, awaits that coming day when “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). The author of Hebrews wrote, “In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:8-9).

The apostle John’s vision of the heavenly throne corresponds to the psalmist’s vision of God seated on his holy throne. Every tribe, language, people, and nation are invited into the presence of God. Everyone is called out of the closed universe of their own making and into the large world of God’s creation and redemption. The worship scene in Revelation is as exuberant as it is exalted (Rev 4:1-11). “The scene is marked by a tremendous dynamism, an energy that flows first of all centripetally” toward the throne of God and then centrifugally away from the throne and into the world.⁷⁶ The apostle John’s horizon is as broad and as wide-angled as the psalmist. The scope of the heavenly vision is simultaneously personal and cosmic. His Spirit-inspired

⁷⁴ Wright, *Psalms*, vol.1:726.

⁷⁵ Kider, *Psalms 1-72*, 177. Kidner writes: “The phrase, ‘Jacob whom he loves,’ may provoke the question, ‘Why?’ – which is equally unanswerable whether the object of the love is ‘Jacob’ or ‘me’ or ‘the church’ or ‘the world’ (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:25; John 3:16).”

⁷⁶ Mangina, *Revelation*, 75.

praying imagination is stretched to the limit. There is nothing narrow and individualistic about this description. Like the psalmist John is caught up into something grander and more real than himself. We may be surprised to learn how deeply the heavenly throne of God affirms creation and culture. We too easily forget that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). The encircling rainbow, the global church (twenty-four elders), the release of energy – “flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder” – the sea of glass, the four living creatures, and the first two praise anthems, emphasize the totality of God’s holiness and the worthiness of his sovereignty over all creation.⁷⁷

The Inclusive Gospel

*Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.
God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations [peoples] assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.*

Psalm 47:6-9

Living as we do in the “global village” and in the age of choice it is popular to believe that there are many ways to God. When Prince Charles was questioned about religion, he said that when he becomes king, he would rather inherit the title, ‘Defender of Faith,’ instead of ‘Defender of the Faith’ and so represent all his subjects.⁷⁸ One of the heroes of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi, offered his conclusion to the matter in an essay entitled *All Religions Are True*. He concluded that The Eternal One is perceived differently in different cultures, because whatever we mean by “God” exceeds the scope of human thought, language and experience.

The apostles clearly understood the absolute claim of Jesus as Lord. They declared, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The early church was convinced that Jesus was the revelation of God, the culmination of a long history of revelation, the very self-disclosure of God. The exclusive truth of the gospel fits with the purpose of God's promise from the beginning. God chose one, small, weak, insignificant nation through which to make himself known and bless the world. The exclusiveness of the gospel is consistent with the character of revelation and the nature of God's own self-disclosure.

There are not many gods to know, as the Canaanites or the Greeks or Hindus believed, but only one God. All the rest are idols. Neither is god a vague abstraction; a nameless, undefined, indistinguishable being or force or feeling or projection. God's self-disclosure is more definite,

⁷⁷ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 121.

⁷⁸ Reported in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 1, 1994.

definable, specific and singular than we can fully grasp – more than we can completely comprehend, not less! If we consider any distinctiveness or uniqueness to our personhood, should God, the very Author of Life, the Maker of the Universe receive less. If our sense of self recoils at the notion of being just one of the masses, we can be assured that the Lord God is no less the Person that we are. There is in fact only one you! And there is in truth only one God! The Word of God declares, “I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not make for yourself an idol...”(Ex.20:3-4). “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut.6:4-5).

The apostles believed that the promise of God given to Abraham, "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you," is fulfilled in Jesus. And each subsequent stage of salvation history, from Moses to the Prophets, from Jeremiah to David, anticipated the Savior; not an ethnic Savior, not a cultural religion, not a tribal deity, but the Savior of the world (Jn.3:16). As the author of Hebrews wrote, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

The exclusive truth claim of the gospel is consistent with the universal scope of the gospel. Religious and cultural pluralism is certainly not a new phenomenon. In the first century Roman milieu, the early church experienced radical diversity and tolerance in much the same way we do, except the early church was bold in announcing that the gospel was meant for all people everywhere. They took the command of Jesus seriously: “Therefore 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” (Mt.28:19-20). The early Christians were “not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16-17). The exclusive truth of the gospel was not meant to exclude, but include. As the apostle Paul said, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”(1 Tim.2:3-4).

With its “one throne, one world” theme, Psalm 47 puts an exclamation mark on the meaning of salvation history.⁷⁹ “The people of the God of Abraham” are drawn from every tribe, language, people and nation (Rev 5:9). Under the highly exalted rule of God they will become one people: the redeemed sons and daughters of Adam, the children of Abraham, and brothers and sisters in Christ. However, the gospel path to this new creation involves “the unexpected kind of ‘exaltation’ which will begin the process of ‘gathering’ the peoples: ‘I, when I am lifted up . . . , will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 178.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

Psalms 45-48 line up well with Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. The last days have begun in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The beginning of the end has passed and the end of all endings awaits his second coming. Jesus prayed these royal psalms and they are reflected in his teaching on the kingdom of God. These four royal psalms (45-48) strengthen our praying imagination by drawing us out of our small worlds into the global Kingdom of God. Worship is not optional, it is essential. It is not an imposition, but our greatest desire. "For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise" (Ps 47:7).

Mount Zion

*Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.
God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress.*

Psalm 48:1-3

Metaphor is a powerful tool in building the psalms. The psalmist takes physical, tangible, concrete objects and transforms them into symbols that testify to the nature of God. Meaning is deepened when that which can be seen and touched is compared with what is unseen and intangible. These biblical images resist idolatry and embrace testimony. The psalmist builds up the believer's understanding by using these visual aids to bring out the essence of who God is and what God is doing for us. The same truth could be spelled out conceptually, but poets know that metaphor is more compelling in communicating truth to hearts and minds. It is easier to internalize the truth when we can visualize its meaning.

The fortress city of Zion with its high towers and ramparts is the psalmist's vivid resource for describing the majesty of God. However to understand the psalm we have to realize that the fortress metaphor is not meant to "picture" God, but to proclaim that God *is* our fortress. The motive of the psalmist is not to inspire Israel's engineers to get to work building Jerusalem. There is no pride of place, only the passion to praise the Great King. The psalmist is not boasting about the greatness of Jerusalem nor does he intend to trigger a tenth century B.C. "arms' race." Instead, the psalmist is using the object lessons of defense, security, and military superiority to describe the unique and transcendent nature of the majesty and splendor of the Great King of Israel. After all, Yahweh is the One who makes wars to cease and breaks the bow (Ps 46:9).

When the psalmist describes Mount Zion as "beautiful in its loftiness" he's not literally claiming that Mount Zion is "the joy of the whole earth" because of its spectacular elevation. The aesthetics of Zion are relational, not statistical. The psalmist's spacial imagery equates mountain

grandeur with human fulfillment. The apostle Paul did much the same when he challenged “the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ (Eph 3:18). The psalmist uses two names for God, Yahweh and Elohim. Yahweh stands for the personal, covenant-keeping God of Israel – “I Am”. Elohim is the plural of intensity, derived from El the common word for god, and declares to all people everywhere that Israel’s God is the transcendent God exalted over all other gods. The psalmist backs up the theological primacy of Elohim by likening Mount Zion to “the heights of Zaphon” (Ps 48:2).⁸¹ “In pagan mythology, the chief god of the pantheon dwelt on Mount Zaphon.”⁸² The psalmist is implying that the true presence of God can only be experienced on Mount Zion, “the true Zaphon.”⁸³

The comparison between Zion and Zaphon suggests a dynamic cultural equivalent. Popularly perceived centers of power have proliferated around the globe exerting a compelling gravitational force. Human nature is drawn to these centers of power. But our personal experience of these centers of influence and culture quickly tends to demystify them, and often the height of our aspiration is matched by the depths of our disillusionment. Working at the center is not what we thought it would be.⁸⁴ Although Mount Zion was not overly impressive geographically it represented the very presence of God, and that’s what made it so special. The dynamic relationship between Mount Zion and Yahweh corresponds to Jesus Christ and his Church. The essence of Christ’s power is made manifest in and through the church, the body of Christ, which is often not very impressive either. As surprising as it may seem, the supremacy of Christ over all things creates a special identity and purpose for the church. Jesus is not only Lord of the universe but the head of the church and his presence fills not only the cosmos, but the church! The apostle Paul extends this “fullness” to the church, the body of Christ in the world. God “placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:22-23). We might think that the cosmos is a far greater priority than the church, but just the opposite is true. Jesus is the Lord of the universe for the sake of the church.

“At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence” (Ephesians 1:22-23, Message).

God’s plan is for the world to grasp Christ’s cosmic supremacy through God’s new society the church, even as it was God’s plan for Israel to convince the world that Mount Zion was “the city of the Great King” (Ps 48:2).⁸⁵

⁸¹ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 173. Wilcock suggests that the psalmist embeds ingeniously the four points of the compass, covering north (Zaphon = north), east (“east wind,” Ps 48:7), south (“right hand = south, Ps 48:10), west (“behind,” Ps 48:13). Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 353, finds the evidence for this interpretation tenuous.

⁸² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:123. Ross writes, “The reference may be to a mountain in Syria, thirty miles north of Ugarit, called Jabel as-Agra’.”

⁸³ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 353.

⁸⁴ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 118.

⁸⁵ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 25.

The Kings of the Earth

*When the kings joined forces,
when they advanced together,
they saw her and were astounded;
they fled in terror.
Trembling seized them there,
pain like that of a woman in labor.
You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish
shattered by an east wind.
As we have heard,
so we have seen
in the city of the Lord Almighty,
in the city of our God:
God makes her secure forever.*

Psalm 48:4-8

A coalition of hostile armies are terror struck by the mere sight of the city of God. Panic stricken they flee in dread. They are swept away and shattered like ships caught in a fierce storm. The very thought of fighting against Zion causes them to tremble and fills them with sharp pain – like the intense pain of a woman in labor. The kings of the earth cannot even look in Zion without quaking in fear and running away. This battle scene may not be prophetic, but its hyperbole points forward well beyond Israel’s experience.⁸⁶ It is difficult to imagine the coalition reeling and fleeing at the mere sight of Jerusalem. As Kidner suggests, “the scene is more like the world-wide conspiracy of Psalm 2. . . . The language is sweeping enough to celebrate the great victories in ‘the wars of the Lord,’ and to anticipate the end itself.”⁸⁷ It is reminiscent of the apostle John’s description of the fall of the great city Babylon (Rev 18) and the great supper of God (Rev 19).

The sight that terrified the kings of the earth inspires thanksgiving and shalom in the minds and hearts of the people of God. One person’s abject dread is another person’s absolute joy. Two radically different visions are compared. “The sight that horrified kings saw was the same sight that thrilled the eyes of pilgrims as they approached the city of Jerusalem.” The kings saw “an impregnable fortress keeping them out.” The pilgrims saw “a city permanently established by God, offering them joy and protection.”⁸⁸ The pilgrims have *heard* and *seen* that the city of God is a place of everlasting security. They know this truth from the faithful testimony of the saints who have gone before and they know this truth through their own personal experience. They have heard it, seen it, lived it. They are ready to worship!

Meditation and Testimony

*Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing love.*

⁸⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:124. Ross argues that these verses “represent the way that God has delivered the city in the past. They do not present a vision of the future, a prophetic word, but an account of an event or events that serve to maintain the traditional glorification of the city.”

⁸⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 180.

⁸⁸ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 354.

*Like your name, O God,
your praise reaches to the ends of the earth;
your right hand is filled with righteousness.
Mount Zion rejoices,
the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments.
Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them to the next generation.*

*For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide to the end.*

Psalm 48:9-14

The holy city invokes meditation on God's unfailing love and inspires a global testimony that reaches the ends of the earth. His Name and his actions are "filled with righteousness" and the people of God rejoice because of God's wisdom. The psalmist encourages the people to walk around Zion and "count her towers," and "set their hearts on her ramparts," and "examine her citadels." Ironically, this metaphoric invitation is the psalmist's way of redirecting the people's hope away from military might to the Lord's righteousness and judgment. What counts is not the superiority of Jerusalem's defense system, but God's unfailing love (Ps 48:9), the power of God's righteousness (Ps 48:10), and the wisdom of God's judgments (Ps 48:11). God is their fortress. He is their high tower, ramparts, and citadels.

This metaphoric link between the character and might of God to the visible, tangible, concrete images of defense corresponds to the architectural and building metaphors of the New Testament. You will not find a single word about church facilities in the New Testament, but the apostles enjoyed elaborating on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God's people.⁸⁹ The apostle Paul spoke of building on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:20-22).

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 apostle Peter drew on a similar metaphoric impact when he wrote, "As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him - You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual household to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Clearly, the strength and solidarity of the people of God were not reflected in church buildings but in their union with Christ Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Early

⁸⁹ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57.

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).⁹⁰

The final verse of Psalm 48 glorifies God, not Zion. The importance of the city of God lies in the presence of God among his people. The permanency of his covenant promise and abiding presence lasts for ever and ever. Like a shepherd he is faithful and will guide his people through all that threatens, even the ultimate threat of death itself. Once again we are reminded of the “upper room comforts” - the Parousia, the Passion, the Paraclete, and the Presence. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and he has promised, “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3). Meanwhile the Lord Jesus commissions us to “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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

⁹⁰ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57.

Wisdom calls for a worship song on the riddle of life and death and the Sons of Korah oblige. Psalm 49 challenges all who use their wealth and self-reliance to live in denial of death. With a bent toward natural reason the psalmist approaches the subject philosophically. Without referencing God's special revelation or specific events in salvation history, he makes his case for all people everywhere to hear and agree that wealth is no defense against death. Death is no respecter of persons and in the end no matter what their net worth or worldly status may be "they are like sheep destined to die" (Ps 49:14).

Ernest Becker described the human dilemma this way: "As soon as a man lifts his nose from the ground and starts sniffing at eternal problems like life and death. . .he is in trouble. Most men spare themselves this trouble by keeping their minds on the small problems of their lives. . .They 'tranquelize themselves with the trivial' . . ."91 Psalm 49 challenges the denial of death by encouraging the poor and exposing the wealthy.

A Song to be Heard

*Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
both low and high,
rich and poor alike:
My mouth will speak words of wisdom;
the meditation of my heart will give you understanding.
I will turn my ear to a proverb;
with the harp I will expound my riddle:*

Psalm 49:1-4

Imagine Irish singer-songwriter Bono, lead vocalist and primary lyricist for U2, belting out this psalm. The first word, "Hear!" invoked in the mind of the Israelite, the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). The truth that follows is rooted in "the unity and universal rule of Yahweh," and the Israelite knows that for certain, but the song the poet sings is meant for all peoples, all who live in this world.⁹² The pedagogical strategy of the psalmist is to craft a message that will gain a hearing among those who do not necessarily acknowledge Yahweh's universal rule. For this unique psalm the worship leader does not assume a view of the world that is shaped by salvation history. The psalmist is like the apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17) striving to find a way to communicate the truth of God to the world at large – a world unfamiliar with Abraham and Moses and the Covenant promises.⁹³ To do this, the psalmist assumes the shared experience of the human condition. People everywhere are looking for insight into the riddle of life and death. They feel vulnerable and powerless before the "high and mighty" who boast of their riches and power. Then on the basis of this shared experience the psalmist

⁹¹ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 178.

⁹² Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:747.

⁹³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 96.

makes a claim about himself. He professes to speak words of wisdom from his heart. We can choose to believe him and listen or we can refuse, but either way we have to deal with his explicit claim and stated intention. What the poet has to say comes from his “heart seasoned understanding of life” (Ps 49:3 Message). Finally, the psalmist chooses a medium that has universal appeal – a song set to music. His communication strategy consists of a universally recognized subject, a clear profession of soul-searching integrity, and his artistic commitment to “solve life’s riddle with the help of a harp” [or a Gibson J-200] (Ps 49:4, Message).

Destined to Die

*Why should I fear when evil days come,
when wicked deceivers surround me –
those who trust in their wealth
and boast of their great riches?
No one can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for many –
the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough –
so that they should live on forever
and not see decay.
For all can see that the wise die,
that the foolish and the senseless also perish,
leaving their wealth to others.
Their tombs will remain their houses forever,
their dwellings for endless generations,
though they had named lands after themselves.
People, despite their wealth, do not endure;
they are like the beasts that perish.*

Psalm 49:5-12

Implicit in the singer’s question, “Why should I fear?” is an allusion to the fear that grounds the life of faith, namely, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7). Given his aim to reach an inclusive audience he explores two pressing fears that everyone can identify with. First, the fear of evil days, when “wicked deceivers” are nipping at his heels, like snakes along the path ready to strike.⁹⁴ Second, the fear of the rich and powerful who seem insulated from the ills common to man and who use their wealth, not to serve others, but to disadvantage others and oppress the weak. The psalmist seeks to eliminate the fear induced by these two expressions of evil by taking in the big picture. Wisdom calls for a new perspective. Our destiny is not in the hands of our foes “that seek to work us woe” nor is it in hands of the wealthy who pride themselves on their possessions and seek to dominate others. The psalmist reflects on a simple gospel truth to make his case: “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them.” He states this truth as a simple fact of life without apology or embellishment. The psalmist reminds his audience that wealth cannot control human destiny. No one has the

⁹⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:134. Ross translates Ps 49:5, “Why should I fear in the days of adversity, when the iniquity at my heels surrounds me.”

purchasing power to redeem a human life. Death is humanly inescapable. The wealthy may think that they can buy their way to happiness and a long life but they are “terribly mistaken.”⁹⁵ Only God can redeem a human life, but the psalmist waits to make that point until verse 15. First, he lets the powerlessness of the wealthy and the leveling effect of death sink in. Jesus echoes this truth when he asks, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

The psalmist states the obvious: everyone is going to die, whether they be rich or poor, wise or foolish. Death is the great leveler. You and I are going to die, and how much money we have is not going to make a difference. The psalmist implies that the denial of death is especially pronounced among the wealthy. The poet’s lyrics identify two specific ways their arrogant quest for immortality is expressed: (1) They inwardly compensate for their frailty by building elaborate and enviable homes. Their physical dwelling-places give them a sense of permanence. (2) They name things after themselves. Like the people who built the Tower of Babel they strive to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4).

But who is fooling who? Despite the big mansion, a heart attack can render the wealthiest person “homeless” in an instance. We are as defenseless against death as the animals are. Ernest Becker reasoned that we conger up “immortality symbols” to overcome our fears and feelings of vulnerability. Wealth is one of the prime immortality symbols, but it is not the only one. We can focus on sports or sex or success or style or anything that catches our imagination to avoid thinking about our “tragic destiny.”⁹⁶ David Goetz writes, “An immortality symbol is not really about the thing (bank balance, home, car, child, job, etc). It’s about the glory that the thing bestows on me.”⁹⁷ The poet songwriter exposes the myth of these “immortality symbols” and let’s it be known that redemption is possible, but only in God.

The Myth of Self-Sufficiency

*This is the fate of those who trust in themselves,
and of their followers, who approve their sayings.
They are like sheep and destined to die;
death will be their shepherd
(but the upright will prevail over them in the morning).
Their forms will decay in the grave,
far from their princely mansions.
But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead;
he will surely take me to himself.
Do not be overawed when others grow rich,
when the splendor of their houses increases;
for they will take nothing with them when they die,
their splendor will descend with them.
Though while they live they count themselves blessed –*

⁹⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:101.

⁹⁶ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 3.

⁹⁷ Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 42.

*and people praise you when you prosper –
they will join those who have gone before them,
who will never again see the light of life.
People who have wealth but lack understanding
are like the beasts that perish.*

Psalm 49:13-20

There is an implicit contrast between Israel's wisdom tradition, concisely stated in Proverbs 3:5-6, and the fate of those who trust in themselves. The me-centered world of our own making is the alternative reality to the God-centered world of creation and eternity. To concentrate day and night on our feelings, potentials, needs, wants and desires, is to live in denial of the soulful truth that we have been made in God's image and depend upon his mercy.⁹⁸ The psalmist likens those who trust in themselves to a herd of dumb sheep shepherded for slaughter. The vivid image is a sharp reversal of the twenty-third Psalm, where the shepherd leads, guides, provides and protects the sheep. Instead of being led besides quiet streams and green meadows, these sheep are being led to their deaths.

Like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes the psalmist briefly interjects the faith of the "upright" in God's redemptive deliverance. He reassures those who trust in the Lord that they "will prevail" over the wealthy "in the morning." Unexpectedly, the poet's song turns personal: "But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself" (Ps 49:15). The redemptive climax of the psalm is linked to the earlier reference to redemption (Ps 49:7) and it is embedded in the negative description of those who trust in themselves. This is the only time God is the subject of the psalm, "in the realm where the rich thought they were in control, but are not."⁹⁹ The psalmist is confident that God will redeem his life from Sheol and "take" him. The same expression is used in Psalm 73:24: "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory." "How much the psalmist actually understood is unclear," writes Ross, "but the words convey the idea of a hope that contrasts with the death and descent of the wicked to an unseen world."¹⁰⁰ Those who fear the Lord and depend upon his mercy should "not be overawed when others grow rich and the splendor of their houses increases" (Ps 49:16). Mansion-building fools may be the envy of many, but their wealth will be given to others and their bodies will see decay.

The psalm concludes with a sober warning: without the fear of the Lord and the redemption that only God can provide the wealthy are senseless. They are, "like the beasts that perish." We need to keep the psalmist's universal message to all people in mind when we seek the wealth of the wealthy for our good causes. It is ironic that Christian mission organizations play down the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need for redemption when they request funds from philanthropic

⁹⁸ Yankelovich, *New Rules*, 8.

⁹⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:105.

¹⁰⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:151. See, Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 360, who takes an opposing perspective: "Against this bleak picture of the destiny of the wealthy, the poet quotes their (imaginary) words of self-confidence: "Surely God will redeem me. . ." See, Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:105. Goldingay writes, "The language of 15a especially parallels Hosea 13:14. Like other psalms, this one expresses a strong conviction that God is involved in the this-worldly lives of people, bringing healing and rescue from persecution."

foundations for humanitarian causes. In the name of social justice and medical care they soft pedal the gospel with the hope that the foundation will overlook their “spiritual” initiatives so that they will fund their humanitarian causes. “It is good to seek the common good,” writes Scot McKnight, “but not at the expense of personally surrendering to King Jesus. If the kingdom story is the true story, there is no good for the common good until humans surrender to King Jesus.”¹⁰¹

We can imagine Psalm 49 inspiring and informing Jesus’ parable of the rich fool in Luke 12. The correspondence between the psalm and Jesus’ teaching is striking.

“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

Then he said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.”

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Jesus concluded, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Whenever we pray the psalms we are reminded that they anticipate the gospel of Jesus Christ. We seek to understand the psalms as they were first prayed and used in worship, but we also seek to understand their meaning in the light of Jesus Christ. When the psalmist says, “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them – the ransom for life is costly, no payment is ever enough” (Ps 49:7-8), we gladly affirm that the Son of Man came “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). When the psalmist says, “God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself” (Ps 49:15), we look to Jesus who said, “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 there to 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).

We pray Psalm 49 in agreement with the author of Hebrews who confessed: “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:27-28).

¹⁰¹ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 37.

The global scope of these Zion psalms (Ps 46-50) celebrates the rule and reign of the Kingdom of God over all the earth and sets up Psalm 50's prophetic focus on the "consecrated people of God" (Ps 50:5).¹⁰² The whole earth is summoned by God to witness his reassurance and judgment of the people of God. Heaven and earth are commanded to hear what God has to say about worship! In Psalm 51 the focus will narrow down to the individual in need of repentance, restoration and renewal.

This sequence of Zion psalms written by the Sons of Korah is climaxed by an Asaph psalm. Asaph was the "worship pastor" during the reigns of David and Solomon.¹⁰³ He was a poet and a prophet with a distinctive, edgy style that was forceful and intense.¹⁰⁴ All twelve of Asaph's psalms are soul-searching and passionate.¹⁰⁵ Psalm 50 is a forceful reminder of what God expects from his "consecrated people." Instead of empty ritual and a form of godliness, God calls for the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving from lives devoted to his will.

On the day that Jesus drove out the sheep and goats and money changers from the temple courts, he might have prayed Psalm 50 in his morning prayers (John 2:13-22). Psalm 50 may have been on his mind when he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, ". . . True worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the father seeks" (John 4:23). The impact of Psalm 50 lines up well with the apostle Paul's spiritual direction: "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" (Rom 12:1).

Call to Worship

*The Mighty One, God, the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to where it sets.
From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.
Our God comes
and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and a tempest rages.
He summons the heavens above,
and the earth, that he may judge the people:
"Gather to me this consecrated people,*

¹⁰²The psalmist moves us from the royal wedding of the King (Ps 45), to "the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps 46), to the universal celebration of God's rule over all the nations (Ps 47), to the joy and peace of Mount Zion (Ps 48), to a warning to "all who live in the world," rich and poor alike, that redemption is found in God alone (Ps 49), and finally to what it means for the people of God to worship in Spirit and in Truth (Ps 50).

¹⁰³ 1 Chron 6:39; 15:17; 16:5

¹⁰⁴ 2 Chron 29:30; Neh 12:46

¹⁰⁵ Psalms 50, 73-83

*who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”
And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for he is a God of justice.*

Psalm 50:1-6

These first six verses invite reflection and provide a necessary correction to our casual approach to God. The coming of the Mighty One, God, the Lord, invokes the fear-of-the-Lord reverence.¹⁰⁶ The issue is not head-knowledge, but direct personal encounter with the living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “We don’t so much lack knowledge, we lack reverence.”¹⁰⁷ Asaph’s powerful lyrics, pulsate with brilliant images of light and sound, but we can only imagine how this ancient percussionist scored this cosmic inclusive summons. Psalm 50 restores the awesome “wow” and dreaded “woe” to vital worship. Asaph’s images of the living God refuse to be contained, explained, or domesticated. God is “inexhaustible, immeasurable and unfathomable—eternal, immortal and invisible. The highest mountain peaks and the deepest canyon depths are just tiny echoes of His proclaimed greatness. And the blazing stars above, the faintest emblems of the full measure of His glory.”¹⁰⁸

From Mount Zion, the center of unlimited power and unyielding justice, the Mighty One, God, the Lord, summons the earth and shines forth in beauty. This unique and majestic array of titles, El, Elohim, Yahweh, identifies the mighty God who transcends all other gods, the one who makes himself known in person is the “I Am” – the God of Exodus and Sinai, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David. This blazing and torrential manifestation of God, this epiphany of Divine activity and judgment has more to do with Revelation 1 than with Luke 2. Yet the church calendar associates Ps. 50:1-6 with Epiphany when we celebrate the coming of the magi to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords. The four hundred year silence of God is broken at the first Advent with an almost incomprehensible humility: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The apostle John’s Lord’s Day vision of the Son of Man fits with Psalm 50 (Rev 1:12-16).

Heaven and earth are summoned to the supreme court presided over by the God of justice. Kidner writes, “Everything at first points to a diatribe against the heathen, who are summoned to Zion, where sinful man must meet the impact of a deity at its most dazzling and overwhelming.”¹⁰⁹ But suddenly the tables are turned. It is not pagans who are judged but the so-called “faithful ones.” The apostle Peter’s admonition corresponds with Psalm 50: “For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

The “consecrated people” of God are subpoenaed to appear before the Righteous Judge. In some circles God is on trial. Well-meaning believers feel compelled to defend God on a host of issues,

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Waltke calls the phrase, “the fear-of-the-Lord”, “the quintessential rubric, which expresses in a nutshell the basic grammar that holds the covenant community together.” See Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁸ Redman, “The Otherness of God,” *Christianity Today* (September 7, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 186.

including the sanctity of life, the holiness of sexuality, the purity of marriage, the reality of the miraculous, the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the inclusiveness of the mission of the church, and the exclusiveness of the gospel. But in Psalm 50, God is not on trial, we are! It is our empty rituals and hard hearts that are being scrutinized by the God of justice and the whole world is watching. A young man who was raised in a harsh and judgmental religious home said to a friend of mine, "Sometimes I feel like I need to forgive God." To which my friend responded, "Maybe what you need to do is to forgive the people who painted a false and distorted picture of God."

Asaph is something like the court bailiff, declaring, "All rise! The God of justice is now presiding." We are not idle observers taking in the judicial proceedings, but the actual defendants who have been brought up on charges. Believers are on trial for the way they worship the Lord. There are two different types of defendants: The first group of defendants (Ps 50:7-15) are thoughtless worshipers, who are merely going through the motions, fulfilling their ritualistic duties without heartfelt understanding and thanksgiving. The second group of defendants (Ps 50:16-21) are hardened hypocritical worshipers whose blatant duplicity thinly conceals wilful collusion with evil doers.

"Hear This, My People!"

*Listen, my people, and I will speak;
I will testify against you, Israel:
I am God, your God.
I bring no charges against you concerning your sacrifices
or concerning your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.
I have no need of a bull from your stall
or goats from your pens,
for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird in the mountains,
and the insects in the fields are mine.
If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine, and all that is in it.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?*

*"Sacrifice thank offerings to God,
fulfill your vows to the Most High,
and call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me."*

Psalm 50:7-15

Asaph describes two vexing problems: sacrilege up and sacrilege down. Desecration goes upward in the form of embellishment, theological over-thinking, spiritual fantasizing, and obsequious piety. Desecration goes downward in the form of a dismissive and cavalier attitude,

moral indifference, and hard-heartedness. Empty formalism and flagrant disobedience cover the two ends of the spectrum. God commands a hearing reminiscent of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. . .” (Deut 6:4). The Shema summarizes beautifully the heart of the case the Lord has against his people. What was missing in their worship was not their sacrifices but their heartfelt love and genuine thanksgiving. They were in full compliance with the prescribed sacrifices and rituals, but they misconstrued the reason for sacrifices. Instead of their burnt offerings and sacrifices being a grateful expression of their dependence upon the mercy of God, the people thought that God was in need of their sacrifices. They projected their felt needs onto God by implying that God wanted what they themselves wanted – someone to meet their needs. Whether or not they ever went so far as to compare the Lord to “hungry” pagan deities is hard to say. The pagan Sumerian notion of “the care and feeding of the gods” was a foreign concept to the Israelites, but sadly in practice, a familiar habit.¹¹⁰ Religion that revolves around ritual observance invariably makes God out to be needy for our attention.

In God’s court, the Judge takes the people to task for their indefensible misunderstanding of true worship. God ridicules the idea that he somehow needs their blue-ribbon bulls or goats from their herds (Ps 50:9 Message). Don’t they know that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and all the animals in the forest? Besides, God doesn’t eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats anyways. The purpose of this mocking put-down is intended to show mindless ritualists how ridiculous they have been. When empty ritual replaces genuine faith and trust in Yahweh all that is left is pagan religion.

Psalm 50 awakens the Church to the danger of Christian idolatry. It is possible for well-intentioned believers to reduce worship to a performance that is self-satisfying but offensive to God.¹¹¹ Danish Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard echoed Asaph’s concerns when he wrote,

“Verily there is that which is more contrary to Christianity, and to the very nature of Christianity, than any heresy, any schism, more contrary than all heresies and schisms combined, and this is, to *play* Christianity. But precisely in the very same sense that the child plays soldier, it is playing Christianity to take away the danger, and in place of this to introduce power, worldly goods, advantages, luxurious enjoyment of the most exquisite refinements. . .”¹¹²

“Mere outward ceremonies possess no value,” Calvin argued as he reasoned from the prophets (Jer 7:22; Mic 6:7; Hos 6:6; Isa 1:12; 58:1-2; 66:3), driving the truth home that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Calvin warned against “a strong propensity . . . to form our estimate of God

¹¹⁰ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:762.

¹¹¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 94. Barth: “We must remember that everything will depend upon the Christians not painting for non-Christians in word or deed a picture of the Lord or an idea of Christ, but on their succeeding with their human words and ideas in pointing to Christ Himself. For it is not the conception of Him, not the dogma of Christ that is the real Lord, but He who is attested in the word of the Apostles. Be it said to those who account themselves believers: May it be given us not to set up an image, when we speak of Christ, a Christian idol, but in all our weakness to point to Him who is the Lord and so, in the power of His Godhead, the sovereign decision upon the existence of every person.”

¹¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom,’* 8.

from ourselves, and to degenerate into a carnal worship.”¹¹³ He claimed that in our fallen humanity we are “addicted to ceremonies” until we experience a vital relationship with the Lord that leads to the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.¹¹⁴

Like the prophets before them, the Mayflower Pilgrims were distressed over heightened religious formality in the absence of personal confession and commitment to Jesus Christ. At the risk of severe persecution they separated from the state church, the Church of England. Robert Cushman wrote *The Cry of the Stone* in 1619 (published in 1642), having fled from England to The Netherlands. What Cushman and his fellow Pilgrims found objectionable was the imposition of an external Christian identity on a population of unconverted souls – that is, calling “Christian” people who had no intention of following Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Church buildings staffed with officials administering ordinances did not make for true religion. “The visible Church of Christ,” Cushman explained, “is a company of people externally holy,” who voluntarily meet together “intending to perform the whole will and worship of God” according to the revelation of God.¹¹⁵ Cushman was quick to add that many believers may be weak and ignorant of the faith, especially at first, but it is their earnest desire to grow in their faith and faithfulness. The mere practice of baptism, holy communion, and preaching did not constitute real worship. Cushman describes the visible Church as a body of believers, gifted in the Spirit, practicing Christian love and church discipline, serving their neighbors outside the church, preaching the Word, administering the Sacraments, and sharing their provisions with the needy.¹¹⁶

Charles Spurgeon described the tension between ritual and relationship this way: “Sacraments (so called) and sacred rites are the main concern with unconverted but religious men, but with the Most High the spiritual worship which they forget is the sole matter. Let the external be maintained by all means, according to the divine command, but if the secret and spiritual be not in them, they are a vain oblation, a dead ritual, and even an abomination before the Lord.”¹¹⁷

The positive solution to “sacrilege up” is surprisingly simple. Augustine asks, “Say then, Lord our God, what do You want?” The psalmist’s answer is simple and straightforward, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Augustine’s reaction was relief, “I feared that you might expect something beyond my power to give. . .but this sacrifice of praise, that I can do!” We don’t have to raise millions of dollars to build tall steeples or travel to Timbuktu or mount a campaign to change the world. “We are without anxiety,” Augustine declares. “God requires of us the sacrifice of praise.”¹¹⁸ Augustine’s examples are easy to grasp: Zacchaeus knew exactly what to do; the poor widow had it in her purse; the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth had it in their hearts. In other words, to those who have been moved by their

¹¹³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 268.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹¹⁵ Cushman, *The Cry of the Stone*, 53.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

¹¹⁷ Spurgeon, “Psalm 50,” *Treasury of David*.

¹¹⁸ Augustine, *Psalm 50*, 185.

dependence on the mercy of God, authentic praise comes naturally and spontaneously.

Hardened Hypocrites Confronted

*But to the wicked person, God says:
“What right have you to recite my laws
or take my covenant on your lips?
You hate my instruction
and cast my words behind you.
When you see a thief, you join with him;
you throw in your lot with adulterers.
You use your mouth for evil
and harness your tongue to deceit.
You sit and testify against your brother
and slander your own mother’s son.
When you did these things and I kept silent,
you thought I was exactly like you.
But I now arraign you
and set my accusations before you.*

*Consider this, you who forget God,
or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to rescue you:
Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me,
and to the blameless I will show my salvation.”*

Psalm 50:16-23

The second constituency before the Mighty One includes hardened hypocrites, or the “sacrilege down” group. These people pay lip service to the will of God and then do as they please. They are covenant-breakers, violating the Ten Commandments one by one. The psalmist profiles them with a series of “synonymous pairs.”¹¹⁹ They are aficionados of god-talk and masters of religious rhetoric. They pretend to love the Word of God, but they really hate it and they throw it away like garbage. They collude with thieves and befriend adulterers. Their mouths are trained for evil and their tongues are weapons of deceit. No one, not even family, is safe from their false witness and slander. The psalmist’s profile of hardened hypocrites fits with the apostle’s warning to Timothy, “People will be lovers of themselves, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

Not surprisingly, given human nature, these hypocrites assumed that Yahweh was just like them. They mis-interpreted God’s silence as permission, when in fact it was an indictment against unambiguous evil. But now God has come and “will not be silent” (Ps 50:3). The God of justice has set his accusations before the hypocrite. He warns him of terrifying consequences. If anyone refuses to remember God and turn from his wicked ways, God will come and tear him to pieces.

¹¹⁹ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:763.

Like a lion ripping apart his prey, the hypocrite will die like a slaughtered lamb (see Ps 49:12, 14). Anyone tempted to blame God for hollow and hypocritical religion ought to take seriously the clarity of God's will and the severity of the judgment awaiting mindless religion and flagrant disobedience. Implicit in the conclusion of Psalm 50 is a call for repentance. Pure, heart-felt, life-changing thanksgiving coupled with a grace-filled determination to walk in the way of salvation is the best way to honor God. The antidote to religious performance and hypocrisy is as radical as it is simple. We hear it throughout scripture. "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Ps 51:17); "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8); "The true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

God graphically disabused misguided worshipers of any notion of his neediness by asking, "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" Jesus used an equally graphic image when he said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (John 6:54). God doesn't need us; we need God. How could it be said more dramatically than that?

Psalm 51 is a psalm for everyone who needs forgiveness.¹²⁰ When it comes to repentance and forgiveness it has been called “The Psalm of all Psalms.”¹²¹ This Spirit-inspired psalm instructs the people of God in the need for full forgiveness as the foundation for spiritual renewal and human flourishing.¹²² Since we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), we can identify with Psalm 51. The prophets are right, “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 53:6). “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). The apostle’s testimony is true. We are dead in our transgressions and sins and we gratify the cravings of our flesh and follow its desires and thoughts (Eph 2:1-3). Psalm 51 is the necessary soul-carving tool for forgiveness and renewal.

Tradition lines up Psalm 51 with a specific event in the life of David. The superscription reads: “For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.” The historical narrative behind one of the most powerful personal confessions in the Psalter is found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

Penitential Devotion

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in the secret place.*

Psalm 51:1-6

Psalm 51 divides into three stanzas. The first stanza focuses on *repentance* (1-6), the second on

¹²⁰ Psalm 51 is seen as a penitential psalm along with Pss. 32, 38, 102, 130, 143.

¹²¹ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 446. “‘The Psalm of All Psalms’ is the title the Anglican liturgist J. M. Neale ascribed to this psalm! In the medieval Roman Breviary, Psalm 51 was recited every hour at the conclusion of each monastic service, with the exception of Christmas and the forty-day session of Lent. For thirteen centuries it was repeated seven times daily.”

¹²² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:199.

restoration (7-12), and the third on *renewal* (13-19). These divisions may be helpful but the psalmist's spiritual direction cannot be reduced to three tidy concepts without missing the beauty and depth of the psalm. The soulcraft poetry of the psalms resists bottom-line propositional thinking. David begins with a cry. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." His plea depends upon the character of God. In this opening stanza two characters meet, the holy God and the heart-shattered psalmist. The penitent makes his appeal on the basis of two fundamental attributes of God: God's covenant love is loyal, unfailing, and steadfast; and God's compassion is great and merciful. To show respect rather than presumption David used the general term for God and made his appeal for forgiveness on the basis of God's grace, love, and compassion.¹²³

David's meditation on the critical moment of confrontation, when Nathan said, "You are the man!" is free of any excuses or rationalizations. He says nothing to defend himself. His only purpose is to declare his sin: blot out my transgressions // wash away all my iniquity // and cleanse me from *sin*. He uses three terms to describe his evil. Transgressions are willful violations of covenant trust. "Picture it as a raised fist against God's standard."¹²⁴ Iniquity literally means wayward, the result of having going astray. "Picture it as twisting or bending something straight, or of diverting/deviating from a standard."¹²⁵ Sin completes the triad and means missing the mark, falling short of the standard, violating the rules.¹²⁶ "Picture it as jumping up to reach a bar and being disqualified for falling short of it."¹²⁷

Four imperatives shape the psalmist plea for forgiveness, beginning with the first line of the psalm, "Have mercy on me, O God," followed by a second triad. Forgiveness is pictured in three images for cleansing: to blot out means to "wipe out my bad record," to scrape it all off, so as to completely remove my sin. The second figure of speech compares laundering to forgiveness. "Scrub away my guilt." The third figure, "cleanse me from sin," references the temple ritual for cleansing. "It normally would describe the process of ritual purification with washing with water followed by sanctifying with blood."¹²⁸ In David's case however his capital offenses against God's Law, adultery and murder, required the death penalty. "Leviticus makes it clear that no sin offering could be made for such offenses. All David could do was acknowledge his sins and plea for God's mercy. And the repetition of requests lets us see how intensely he was praying for this."¹²⁹ David's need for forgiveness points beyond the ritual itself to what the ritual foreshadowed. David did not know it at the time, but his plea for forgiveness pointed forward to the atoning sacrifice of the Son of David.

The painful tragedy that follows David's sin is recorded in 2 Samuel and serves as a type foreshadowing the Son of David. Nathan reassures David, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die." Nevertheless the consequences for his sin will hound him for the rest

¹²³ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:184.

¹²⁴ Waltke, *Psalms*, 468.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:182.

¹²⁷ Waltke, *Psalms*, 468.

¹²⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:182.

¹²⁹ Ibid., vol. 2:183.

of his life. His sons will copy their father's sinful behavior and David will suffer for their rebellion. However, the most tragic consequence for David's sin was the immediate death of his son. The child "that Uriah's wife had borne to David," was struck ill. David pleaded for his life. He fasted and spent seven nights lying in sackcloth on the ground, but to no avail. His son died. David's unnamed son who died because of David's sin causes us to think of Jesus, the Son of David, who died for our sins. It doesn't seem fair that David should live and his son should die. Nor does it seem fair that Jesus should die so we may live. David's anguish over his son's suffering, compares to God's love for us. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The repetition of the personal, possessive pronoun "my" five times with "me" the direct object of God's cleansing shows that David owns his sin personally. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." In other words, "I know how bad I've been; my sins are staring me down." He not only owns his sin existentially; he owns it theologically. "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" (51:4). David declares that his sin "is first and foremost against God."¹³⁰ He is not implying that he did not sin against others. The exclusivity of his statement is inclusive of everyone he has sinned against by his wilful and rebellious actions because they too belong to God. When David says to the Lord, "against you only have I sinned," he acknowledges "the relationship between *understanding sin* and *knowing God*."¹³¹ G. C. Berkouwer writes, "In all the multiformity of sin there is always a common trait: sin is always against God. Never can we get at the essence of sin as long as we ignore this relation of sin and God and regard our sin as a mere 'phenomenon' in human living. This fact is apparent when sin is described as enmity and rebellion, disobedience and alienation from God."¹³² Apart from God we can neither recognize our sin nor know enough to cry out for mercy. "Sin can be understood only from the vantage point provided by God."¹³³

The line, "so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" reinforces David's recognition of God's absolute holiness and righteousness. Everything that has been said is grounded in this truth and rooted in this conviction. David knows, and he lets us know, that his only recourse is to throw himself on the mercy of God. He says in effect, "Whatever your sentence, God, *you are just* for only you have the right to make that judgment. *You are blameless when you judge. . .*"¹³⁴ Paul will use this theological insight in Romans 3 to help build his case that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Jews and Gentiles alike are subject to the just and holy judgment of God. Both those who have been given the Law and those without the Law are under God's judgment. Even David, a man after God's own heart and precursor to the coming Messiah, stands condemned by the Law. There is nothing anyone can do to earn forgiveness; everyone is dependent on the mercy of God.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:186.

¹³¹ Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 183.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 183. Quoted from G. C. Berkouwer. *Sin*. Eerdmans, 1971, 242.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹³⁴ Waltke, *Psalms*, 471.

¹³⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:187. Ross comments, "He was affirming that from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not been in a sinful state – he was human after all. The verse does not mean that a little baby is a wicked sinner; but it does mean that everyone who is born is born in a state or condition of sin, and that state unchecked will

Paul does not quote any other line from Psalm 51, but the whole Psalm fits his Romans' argument. David's next line articulates a paradox, placing in juxtaposition the depravity of the human condition and the dignity of being made in God's image. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in the secret place" (51:5-6). David describes the deeply rooted tension we all share between living in a state of sin and living to please God. David describes human nature by "contrasting the state of sin with the divinely prepared capabilities." Our sin fits with our sin nature, but runs contrary to God's design. "God prepared the human spirit (also in the womb) with the capacity for truth and wisdom, which is what makes sin so painful to God."¹³⁶ Paul reveals this same vital truth when he says that the requirements of the law are written on our hearts and embedded in our consciences (Rom 2:15).

There is an intertextual correspondence between Psalm 51 and Romans. Paul's Romans argument shows how Paul prayed and preached Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11-12. The rhetorical structure of Romans 1-3 recapitulates the narrative structure of the story of Nathan's confrontation with David. Richard Hays explains:

"The reader of Romans stands in David's role, drawn by the invective of Romans 1:18-32 to pronounce judgment on pagan immorality, then unmasked and slapped by Paul's Nathan-like pronouncement: "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom 2:1). Romans 3, then, like the denouement of the David story, sets forth a pattern of human guilt, met by divine judgment and mercy; for the reader of Romans, as for David, there no escape from the righteousness of God."¹³⁷

Full Forgiveness

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*

*Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence*

naturally lead to acts of sin.."

¹³⁶ Ibid., 188.

¹³⁷ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 49-50. Hays continues, "There is little evidence in Romans to suggest that these structural parallels are deliberately crafted by Paul. It is more likely that the subconscious structural parallels between Paul's message and Nathan/David encounter led Paul to hit on Psalm 51 as an appropriate text to cite." On the other hand, when you see the intertextual correspondence between Romans and Psalm 51, that Hays so brilliantly identifies, it is difficult to imagine that Paul was not full aware of the thematic and textual connections that he was making. When the apostle prayed and preached Psalm 51 I imagine it sounded a lot like Romans!

*or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Psalm 51:7-12*

David's whole-hearted repentance is followed by a plea for full forgiveness and complete healing. He wants much more than a stay of execution; he wants complete restoration. Having walked into his doctor's office with a deadly terminal illness, he wants to walk out with a clean bill of health. Whereas he was down and out, he wants to be up and in. He captures the freedom of full forgiveness with a collage of images drawn from the rituals of atonement, celebration, and devotion. "Cleanse me with hyssop" draws us back to Moses and mount Sinai when Moses took the blood of the sacrificial animals and splashed it against the altar and then sprinkled it on the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod 24:8). This solemn act united covenantal obedience and sacrificial redemption in the mind of the people. The sprinkling of the blood reminded the people of the Passover and the instructions given to each family to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on the three sides of the doorframe (Exod 12:5-7). The apostle Peter echoes this purifying ritual when he identifies believers as "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and *sprinkled with his blood*" (1 Peter 1:2).

I remember sitting in a crowded New York restaurant with a young lawyer discussing the significance of the Passover and Christ's atoning sacrifice. "Do you know what happens when you take the blood of the lamb and sprinkle it with a hyssop branch against the door frame?" my lawyer friend asked. In a gesture that caught the attention of others in the restaurant, he jumped up from his seat and swung his imaginary hyssop branch dipped in blood to one side and then to the other and finally straight up and down. "Do you see?" he said. "There in the doorway the sprinkled blood makes the sign of the cross!"

Once again David returns to the image of being scrubbed clean, "Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." The prophet Isaiah will use this figure as well, "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'" (Isa 1:18). 1 John 1:9 echoes Psalm 51 and captures the essence of David's plea for full forgiveness and complete cleansing. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

David follows up his plea for spiritual purification with a plea for emotional healing. He not only wants to be forgiven, he wants to feel forgiven. "Let me hear joy and gladness." The combination of "joy" and "gladness" denotes "enthusiastic celebration and the juxtaposition of physical hearing and psychological exuberance underscores complete well-being.¹³⁸ The effect of sin is complete, rendering us dead to God and deaf to the sound of joy. Only full forgiveness can revive the body, mind, and soul. David captures what this holistic healing looks like in striking metaphor, "let the bones you have crushed rejoice." In an age without modern medicine and

¹³⁸ Waltke, *Psalms*, 475.

orthopedic surgery, a crushed bone meant acute chronic pain. David compares once-crushed bones dancing to once-crushed spirits rejoicing.

Metaphor follows metaphor as David elaborates on the meaning of forgiveness. He pleads with God, “Hide your face from my sins,” as he repeats once again his opening petition, “blot out all my iniquity” (51:9). Yet it is not enough for the psalmist to have his slate wiped clean and for God to let up on the scrutiny. He needs God to give him a fresh start, a pure heart, and a steadfast spirit. He requires divine atonement and forgiveness, but he also “needs from God an inward spiritual grace to accept his forgiveness and to build on it.”¹³⁹ But even as he says this, he pleads, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (51:11). David is not listing items on a spiritual formation list. He is crying out for God’s help to put his sin behind him and to move forward in the power and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He is a broken man who earnestly wants to be remade by God. He sums it all up with his final plea, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (51:12). He knows that his “steadfast spirit” and his “willing spirit” are dependent on the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He saw first-hand the devastating results of God’s withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from his predecessor King Saul. David does not want that to happen to him (1 Sam 18:12).

Spiritual Renewal

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
Open my lips, Lord,
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.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

*May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Psalm 51:13-19

Forgiven, restored, and empowered by God, David is ready to serve. He is eager to teach rebels, like himself, the “ways” of God’s redemptive love and grace, “so the lost can find their way home” (Ps 51:13 Message). The psalmist is fully aware that his testimony of praise is voiced in

¹³⁹ Ibid., 475.

wake of his deliverance “from the guilt of bloodshed.”¹⁴⁰ “You who are God my Savior” becomes the focus of his praise and witness. “Praise transforms petition from self-absorption to God’s exaltation. True repentance concerns itself with God’s reputation, not the penitent’s.”¹⁴¹ “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Ps 51:15). The broken and contrite heart “knows how little it deserves yet how much it has received.”¹⁴² To know how lost we were and how loved we are frees us to be God’s ambassadors of grace. “When our lips are opened, we do not speak of ourselves but of God’s praise.”¹⁴³

David’s capital sins have exposed the inadequacy of the Law to bring about redemption. The whole sacrificial system was put in place to point forward to the ultimate atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the Spirit, David has the wisdom to see that the prescribed rituals do not save – only God in his mercy and grace saves. It is in the spirit of full forgiveness that David declares, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.” At this point in the arc of repentance and redemption David is not so much affirming “the inappropriateness of hypocritical worship,”¹⁴⁴ as he is declaring the redemption beyond the sacrificial system. Going through the motions to be seen by others, all the while harboring unconfessed sin, is always offensive to God. What David says here taps into the theme that runs throughout Scripture. It can be heard in Samuel’s rebuke of Saul, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 22). It is stated again by the prophet Hosea: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

The Book of Hebrews brings this line of reasoning to its most explicit revelation. The law, with all of its ceremonial procedures and external regulations, including the priesthood, the tabernacle, and the sacrifices, was designed by God to point exclusively to Jesus Christ, who “was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:28). Hebrews calls for a decisive end to religion, even the best religion ever conceived and strategically designed by God for our salvation. Hebrews demonstrates the Sinai Covenant’s inability to atone for sins in the face of God’s judgment.¹⁴⁵

David has come to realize that his sacrifice is “a broken and contrite heart” and God’s mercy and grace makes possible full forgiveness and complete redemption. Roberta Hestenes explains,

“This ‘brokenness’ speaks not of self-worthlessness nor a malformed personality, nor deep clinical depression. It points toward a deeper reality, the response to a prompting of the Spirit in certain circumstances of need, demand, or spiritual yearning and hunger. Brokenness is a yielded heart open to God, a heart emptied

¹⁴⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:196. Ross explains, “The word used is ‘bloods’ (literally), the plural referring to shed blood (‘bloods’ is a metonymy of effect for murder); so it is translated ‘bloodguiltiness.’”

¹⁴¹ Waltke, *Psalms*, 478.

¹⁴² Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 111.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:197.

¹⁴⁵ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 482.

of pride and self claims, of all arrogance, knowing our sin, our self-deception, our frailty, weakness and inadequacy. We discover ourselves again to be hungry and thirsty, poor and needy when we had thought ourselves full and needing nothing. Along with this awareness comes a rediscovery of God's love, mercy and forgiveness--His affirmation of us, care for us, and claim upon us."¹⁴⁶

David's "brokenness" is precisely the state of grace described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Beatitude-based believers are aware of their desperate need for God. We never graduate from being poor in spirit. We never advance beyond a broken and contrite heart. This is the spiritual profile of the follower of Jesus Christ. Finally, the benefit of full forgiveness and spiritual renewal extends to the city as a whole. Jerusalem's prosperity is captured in two images: well-fortified walls and God-pleasing worship. The whole city is built up physically and spiritually by the psalmist's genuine brokenness before God. The ultimate security of the city rests in the mercy of the loving God who forgives, redeems and restores to true service and worship.

¹⁴⁶ Hestenes, "Personal Renewal: Reflections on 'Brokenness,'" 23-24.

The psalmist promises in the previous psalm to “teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you” (Psalm 51:13). Psalm 52 fulfills this moral imperative “by offering two contrasting pictures” so as to prove “that there is only one way to live.”¹⁴⁷ Are we surprised that this poetic portrait of the great hero which details his love of evil and deceit is crafted for worship? Churches do not worship the Lord that way today, yet the ability of Christ’s followers to discern good and evil is essential. Sadly, such discernment appears to be at an all-time low. Like the Israelites in Isaiah’s day professing Christians are inclined to “call evil good and good evil” (Isa 5:20). When an arrogant, deceitful, and deceptive person – the kind of person described in Psalm 52 – receives widespread popular support from Christians you know something is terribly wrong. Discernment has little to do with the politics of the left or the right but a great deal to do with biblical wisdom. When Christians fail to discern right from wrong and persist in honoring someone who is “a disgrace in the eyes of God” (Ps 52:1), the consequences are tragic. Confusion runs deep when the people of God cannot tell the difference between a Daniel and a Nebuchadnezzar or when they mix-up Jesus and Pilate. If it were not for the pernicious nature of evil, it might be impossible to explain how believers could willingly embrace a person who consistently lies and practices deceit as a way of life. For Christians to honor such a person disparages the name of Christ, weakens the Body of Christ, and damages the mission of the Church.

The reason this psalm is in the Psalter is to help prevent the people of God from falling for the deceiver – a person whose popularity is built on falsehood, worldly power, and propaganda. The great hero perpetrates fake news, defames the righteous, and does whatever he can to cling to power. He proudly boasts that he will solve people’s problems and make them great again. His mouth lays claim to heaven and his tongue takes possession of the earth (Ps 73:9). You would think that of all people the followers of the humble King would be appalled at the great hero’s selfish and narcissistic ways. But astonishingly, many professing Christians are staunch supporters of a person who boasts “in his great wealth” and loves evil more than the good (Ps 52:3, 7).

Psalm 52 challenges believers to do the hard work of discernment. We must not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the great hero’s duplicity and deception. The psalmist calls the people of God into worship for the stated purpose of discerning the manipulative ways of evil. The psalmist paints a vivid evil-in-person portrait, followed by a picture of human flourishing rooted in God’s wisdom and beauty. Psalm 52 corresponds to Jesus’ call to seek first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33) and relates directly to the apostle Paul’s prayer for the saints at Philippi, that their *love* would “abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that [they] may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

¹⁴⁷ Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 459, 462. Tanner observes, “Theologically, this psalm shares much in common with Psalm 1. Both depict two divergent ways of life. The one is a way of sin and judgment, and the other is a way that brings delight and praise. Both psalms even use the imagery of the righteous one being like a tree planted deeply in a secure place (1:3 and 52:8) provided by God. Instead of depending on human resources, both clearly make God’s way of life the only that any sane person would choose.”

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11).

Evil-in-Person

*Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?
Why do you boast all day long,
you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?
You who practice deceit,
your tongue plots destruction;
it is like a sharpened razor.
You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.
You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!*

*Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:
He will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
The righteous will see and fear;
they will laugh at you, saying,
“Here now is the man
who did not make God his stronghold
but trusted in his great wealth
and grew strong by destroying others!”*

Psalm 52:1-7

Evil in the abstract is nonthreatening, but evil-in-person is deeply disturbing – even terrifying. Simone Weil said it well, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”¹⁴⁸ From a distance, the evil person is a charismatic personality, a dashing figure, one who beguiles the masses. But up close and personal, evil is ugly. It is feared like a contagious disease or a dreaded malignancy. Psalm 52 weighs the impact of evil up close and personal.

The back story for Psalm 52 sets the scene: David fled the royal court when he learned that King Saul was intending to kill him. He ran to Ahimelek the priest at Nob for food. A frightened and inquisitive Ahimelek asked David, the commander of Saul’s elite troops, why he was traveling alone. David lied and Ahimelek believed him. He told Ahimelek that he was on a secret mission for the king and that he had left in such haste that he didn’t have time to get food and his sword. David’s deception might have worked if Doeg the Edomite, one of Saul’s officials had not been there and overheard the conversation.

Later, when Doeg reported the incident to King Saul, he implied that Ahimelek knowingly aided and abetted David in his escape. By fueling the king’s paranoia with blatant misinformation

¹⁴⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 70.

Doeg deceptively proved his loyalty to Saul. Arguably, David's deception of Ahimelek was as much for the priest's safety as it was to expedite his escape. He lied in order to preserve Ahimelek's neutrality and deniability. Doeg's partial truth, edited selectively and selfishly, only served to promote himself and indict Ahimelek. In spite of Ahimelek's honest defense, Saul ordered eighty-five priests to be put to death. When the king's officials were unwilling to kill the priests of the Lord, Doeg the Edomite "turned and struck them down" (1 Sam 21-22).

Doeg fits the Psalm 52 profile. He was intent on evil and trained in deception. He knew how to evade the truth and promote a lie. Underneath a respectable facade, he was malicious and treacherous, a person who loved evil more than good.¹⁴⁹ Such a person may appear successful, but he will not last long. The person who is like Doeg faces "everlasting ruin." The psalmist speaks directly to such a person. God will "break you down," "sweep you away," "throw you out," and "pull you up."¹⁵⁰ God will get rid of "you" every which way he can, and the righteous "will watch and worship. They'll laugh in relief" (Ps 52:6 Message). The laughter of the righteous recalls the description of the "One enthroned in heaven" laughing at the kings and rulers of the earth who band together against the Lord's Anointed (Psalm 2:2-4). The laughter "is joy at the ultimate breaking through of justice long hidden."¹⁵¹ The righteous can count on the end of evil. The great hero's trust in wealth and his capacity to destroy others will be judged once and for all. He "made his passion for destroying people the measure of his strength and security" and in the end God takes him out.¹⁵²

God's Unfailing Love

*But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever.
For what you have done I will always praise you
in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good.*

Psalm 52:8-9

"But as for me," sets up a stark contrast between the uprooted and soon-to-be-thrown out "mighty hero" and the firmly rooted faithful person who trusts in God's unfailing love. The psalmist turns personal: "But I am like an olive tree." The well chosen image taps into the olive tree's reputation for endurance and longevity and for the multiple benefits of its fruit for food, energy and medicine. In Gethsemane's olive grove on the Mount of Olives Jesus may have reflected on Psalm 52. Who better than Jesus to set the contrast between the great hero who loves evil and the Savior bound for the cross because of evil. The image of a flourishing olive tree and the significance of the house of God converge in the lives of those who trust in God's unfailing love. The psalmist envisions optimal pleasure when ordinary humanity is devoted to the praise of

¹⁴⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:206.

¹⁵⁰ See Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:208. Ps 52:5 Message.

¹⁵¹ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:146.

¹⁵² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:209.

God in the company of God's people. There is no higher calling than to say with the psalmist, "I will hope in your name, for your name is good" (Ps 52:9).

The differences between Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 are slight but significant. They offer a new slant on the basic message of the psalm. I entitled Psalm 14 *Nabal's Psalm*, because the Hebrew word for fool is *nābāl* and because his story embodies the message of both psalms (1 Samuel 25:25). The superscription for Psalm 52 refers to Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam 21-22) and the superscription for Psalm 54 refers to the Ziphites (1 Sam 26).¹⁵³ In between these two accounts of hostility against David, we have the story of Nabal. Only this time, instead of focusing on individual Israelites who foolishly ignore God (Ps 14), Psalm 53 shifts “to foreigners who are foolish enough to think they can attack and destroy the people of God.”¹⁵⁴ This concern for the nations is consistent with the use of *Elohim* for God in Psalm 53 (Book II) instead of the more personal name for the Lord, *Yahweh*, used in Psalm 14 (Book I). In the sequence of Zion Psalms, Psalm 53 addresses the nations.¹⁵⁵ Ross concludes, “Psalm 14 seems to focus on comfort for the faithful; Psalm 53 stresses a warning for the wicked.”¹⁵⁶ The key textual difference is in verses five and six:

*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 14:5-6

*But there they are, overwhelmed with dread,
where there was nothing to dread.
God scattered the bones of those who attacked you
you put them to shame, for God despised them.*
Psalm 53:5

The psalmist has chosen to nuance Psalm 53 for a reason. In the world, the faithful, those who reverence God and depend upon his mercy, appear vulnerable to the foolish who deny God and despise his ways. Salvation awaits the righteous because the Lord is their refuge, but judgment comes down hard on the corrupt because they are despised by God. They may ignore God, but God does not ignore them. God terrifies them. He scatters their bones and puts them to shame. The psalmist is convinced that the line between practical atheism and outright atheism is very thin. Both states of denial are highly unstable and corrupt at the core. But the difference between the faithful and the foolish is the difference between life and death, salvation and judgment. Both psalms look for the salvation that comes from Zion, when the people of God will be restored and will rejoice. Psalm 14 gives hope to the faithful who are vulnerable to the foolish and who use their power to oppress. Psalm 53 is a warning to the fool. The consequences for denial are shame, guilt, and fear.

The Shame of Fools

*The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”*
Psalm 53:1

¹⁵³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 196.

¹⁵⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:215.

¹⁵⁵ See Ps 44:2, 5, 13; 45:5, 17; 46:6, 10; 47:1, 8, 9; 48:4; 49:1; 50:1.

¹⁵⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:215.

The fool's denial is articulated either in the secret recesses of his heart, that inner hidden sphere of intentional denial, or in the passionate core of his heart-felt conviction. Either way, whether the denial is covert or overt the fool is a fool. Whether the fool is religious or secular, the fool has said in his heart "There is no God." Whether rich or poor, smart or stupid, the verdict is the same. The fool who confesses that there is no God receives no credit for honesty only the shame of living in denial.

Fools claim to live in a bubble of meaninglessness. Physicist Steven Weinberg insists that it is a scientific fact that the universe is meaningless. Scientists may think they are doing meaningful work — they "build telescopes and satellites and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working on the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy."¹⁵⁷ From Weinberg's perspective all scientists are confused—borderline psychotic, in their search of meaning, when there is no meaning to be found. Purpose is only a figment of our imagination. Whatever appearance of meaning there may be, the universe is ultimately meaningless.¹⁵⁸

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins contends that belief in God is a by-product of a quest for survival. The perceived need for religion is related to Darwinian survival. Children are dependent upon the advice of their parents for protection and well-being. From one generation to another need-to-know knowledge, necessary for survival, is mixed up with useless superstitious perspectives. Sense and nonsense are passed down from one generation to another.¹⁵⁹

Dawkins argues that religion is the by-product of a deeply ingrained psychological disposition to trust others and the inability to distinguish what is real and unreal. The "useful programmability" and "gullibility" of a child's brain accounts for religion being passed down from one generation to the next. The reason moths fly directly into the candle flame is because they are genetically hardwired to use moonlight 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, religion is a by-product of genetic hardwiring that predisposes us to believe in the authority of an older generation. He also believes that religion makes about as much sense as a moth flying directly into the flames.

Dawkins finds it more probable to believe that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the cosmos than to believe in the God who created the universe. He argues that "luck" and the development of life by natural selection are better explanations for life than God. "Luck" is a major concept pulled in by brilliant fools to make sense of life. "Luck" never shows up in their indexes, but it is offered as a major explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future. Richard Dawkins attributes both the origin of life and the origin of human consciousness to luck. "Once that initial stroke of luck has been granted," argues Dawkins, we're off and running with evolution.¹⁶⁰ Bill Bryson concludes his masterful work on the science of life by saying how "awfully lucky" we are

¹⁵⁷ Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes*, 154-155.

¹⁵⁸ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 16-17.

¹⁵⁹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 172.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

to be here—“doubly lucky” in fact, because we have the singular ability to appreciate the privilege of existence. He credits our survival to “a nearly endless string of good fortune.” We are only at the beginning of this “one planet, one experiment” experience, but we will “require a good deal more than lucky breaks” to “make sure we never find the end.”¹⁶¹

If luck is the best explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future; if love is little more than a biological drive to pass along our genes; if meaning is entirely self-created; then wonder is best described as a strange mood that comes over us at odd times. Meaning and wisdom are only illusions. In an uncreated world of nature alone, joy is an individual stroke of good luck. Present moment happiness is the key. Nobel laureate Francis Crick summed us up this way: “*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.”¹⁶²

Nietzsche drove the denial of God to a fatal and nihilistic conclusion. He contended that the human animal is naked. There is nothing to life but the will to power and the survival of the fittest. What others whispered to themselves in their heart, Nietzsche embraced as a core conviction and shouted it from the housetops. He had the courage of his convictions, even if it drove him mad. Nietzsche sought to reverse the notion of shame and fear. Instead of running and hiding, the way Adam and Eve did when they realized they were naked, Nietzsche wanted true men to believe in the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery. “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”¹⁶³ Nietzsche gave narcissism its marching orders. “Egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul.”¹⁶⁴ “The noble soul has reverence for itself.”¹⁶⁵ For Nietzsche there were only two kinds of people, the exalted and the exploited, the proud and the humble, the powerful and the petty, the hardened and “the doglike people who allow themselves to be maltreated.”¹⁶⁶ Humility was unbecoming the noble soul. To exploit and dominate was a worthy goal for the man of superior rank and self-made self-worth.

Nietzsche claimed Christianity was “this most ingenious, unscrupulous, and dangerous systematization of all the means for producing orgies of feeling under the cover of holy intentions. . .” He called for “unconditional honest atheism” not as an antithesis to an ideal, but as an “inner consequence” to “the awe-inspiring catastrophe of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*.”¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche’s maddening efforts to overcome the shame of our wilful rebellion against God is worked out in countless ways across the spectrum of ordinary life. We grab for fig leaves to cover our nakedness. We make immortality symbols out of our children. We look for transcendence in sex. We try to fill the void with adventure. We keep fear in check with alcohol. We prop up our egos with a new car or a new house. We worry far more about what our friends think of us than what God thinks

¹⁶¹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, 478.

¹⁶² Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3.

¹⁶³ Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” sec. 23, 221.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 265, 405.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 287, 418.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 260, 395.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, sec. 27, 596.

of us, because if we're honest we are practical atheists. We may not take it as far as Dawkins and Nietzsche do, but we take it far enough.

The Guilt of Fools

*They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.
God looks down from heaven
on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.
Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good, not even one.
Do all these evildoers know nothing?
They devour my people as though eating bread;
they never call on God.*

Psalm 53:2-4

Corruption is the inescapable byproduct of saying “There is no God,” whether one whispers it in his heart or posts it on *facebook*. Belief and behavior are inseparable. The way we think is the way we act (Prov 23:7). We know that the apostle Paul had Psalm 14 and 53 in mind when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Romans 1 elaborates on the psalmist’s opening theme of the fool. The apostle wrote, “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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools . . .” (Rom 1:21-22). He then elaborated on the psalmist’s description of “corrupt” and “vile.” When the truth of God is exchanged for a lie, God gives people up to their shameful lusts and to a depraved mind. They “become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity” (Rom 1:26, 28-29).

The apostle takes his message further and deeper than the psalmist did. It is not just foolish Israelites living like practical atheists or foolish pagans denying the living God, the verdict of “fool” belongs to all of us. We are all guilty. Psalm 14 pictures the 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 these psalms to make his case that Jews and Gentiles alike are corrupted by the power of sin. He quoted from the first three verses shared by both psalms 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. “Paul thus encourages us to be realistically hopeless about humanity and then grateful for what God has done in Christ.”¹⁶⁸

The psalmist uses anthropomorphic language to describe God’s shock and dismay at man’s mind-boggling inhumanity to man. It is as if the universal scourge of evil knows no limits. The

¹⁶⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, vol. 2:217.

depth of depravity never hits bottom. These evildoers, these “practitioners of iniquity,” are so “spiritually blind that they do not know what they do.” They devour God’s people “as if it were as natural as eating bread.”¹⁶⁹ It is important to note that the beautiful and seductive side of evil consumes people just as much as the ugly and raunchy side of evil does.

One of the benefits of consistently praying and meditating on the psalms is a deepening understanding of evil. Evil, both in ourselves and in others, will always be shocking. But if we ignore the Bible’s analysis of evil and skip over its dark and disturbing descriptions of evil, we invite a naivete and ignorance that increases our vulnerability and confusion.

In the Book of Revelation, the apostle John places the beautiful side of evil 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 and warheads. The oppressive world system legitimizes abortions-on-demand and turns children into immortality symbols. Evil is in the dark alley mugging and evil is in the corporate windfall. There is a bull market on Wall Street and poverty runs rampant. The street-wise pimp and the corporate CEO have something in common.¹⁷⁰

The Fear of Fools

*But there they are, overwhelmed with dread,
where there was nothing to dread.
God scattered the bones of those who attacked you;
you put them to shame, for God despised them.*

Psalm 53:5

The person who says in their heart, “There is no God,” experiences all three deep emotions: shame, guilt and fear. These feelings are tangible and real and cannot be explained away as a figment of the imagination. They are the first consequences of the judgment of God. The fragile psyche of the fool may be readily apparent or deeply hidden by either a hardened exterior or a flippant persona. But whether the dread is concealed or acknowledged it is a sign that we are made in God’s image and that evil is a violation of our core identity. In the blink of an eye, the psalmist goes from dread where there should be no dread, to a battlefield disaster where God scatters the bones of the fool. The consequences for denial are devastating. The fool’s disdain is matched by God’s judgment. On this side of judgment, shame, guilt, and fear, are meant as an early warning signal, a gift of God, calling the fool to change his ways and turn to God for mercy. Their acknowledgment is often the first step toward repentance and reconciliation.

The Absence of Fools

*Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When God restores his people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*

Psalm 53:6

¹⁶⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:221.

¹⁷⁰ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 238.

When Jesus prayed Psalm 53 he alone understood how the “salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” He was aware that to rescue fools in the eyes of God he had to become a fool in the eyes of the world. He humbled himself “by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:8). After describing Mount Zion and the Most Holy Place, the author of Hebrews describes Jesus suffering “outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (Heb 13:12). Until Jesus came and died for us no one knew exactly how God’s salvation would come out of Zion, but now we do! Jesus experienced ultimate denial and abandonment in order to rescue and redeem all those who have said in their hearts, “There is no God.”

By God’s grace, the invitation stands open to all “fools,” because we have all turned away and we have all become worthless (Rom 3:12). In the spirit of Psalm 53, the apostle warns against deception as he testifies to the power of justification by faith in Christ:

“Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:9-11).

Evil is no excuse for withdrawing from worship. Psalms 51-64 explore the necessity of worship when the believer is under attack.¹⁷¹ Knowing that God is his only source for refuge David models for us worship under pressure. He refuses to wall off his fears and frustrations from worship.

We are tempted to cover-up in worship; the psalmist strips down and bares his soul. We are intimidated, threatened, bullied, and despised, but no one would know it from our prayers. Our falsetto piety inhibits true lament and repentance and renders our worship bland. We hide in worship; the psalmist pleads in worship. These “save me” psalms line up with our lives in ways that demand our attention.

The Name of Jesus

Save me, O God, by your name;

vindicate me by your might.

Hear my prayer, O God;

listen to the words of my mouth.

Psalm 54:1-2

The clarity of the appeal dissolves all pretense. The brevity of the appeal cuts to the chase. When the first words on our lips are “O God, save me,” we leap from any hint of formality to a “code red” emergency. Distress seeks not to impress but to confess my desperate need for God’s saving intervention. The language conveys in tone and intent earnestness. We pray this way when we are “beyond the reach of human assistance” and we acknowledge our total dependence upon God.¹⁷² The plea of the psalmist for salvation and vindication is in keeping with the promise of the apostle, when he wrote, “. . .the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. And 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 8:26-27). In contrast to Psalm 51, David knows he is innocent and he is counting on God to listen very closely to his prayer.

Salvation “by your name” is shorthand notation for the fullness of God’s character and actions. Everything that is true about God is subsumed under the name of God. The *Name* “refers to the whole of the divine manifestation, the character of God as revealed in his relationship and dealings with his people.”¹⁷³ In many ancient as well as contemporary cultures, the name of a person represents an individual’s character, family history, and cultural status. As Westerners, however, we tend to use names as arbitrary labels to differentiate people from one another. We are not in the habit of infusing a name with the history, memory, and character of a person’s life.

¹⁷¹In Psalm 51, David names himself as enemy number one. He chronicles in subsequent psalms the efforts of his enemies to plot destruction (Ps 52:2) and to devour the righteous (Ps 53:4). Arrogant foes try to kill him (Ps 54:3) and close friends seek to betray him (Ps 55:13).

¹⁷²Calvin, *Psalms*, 322.

¹⁷³Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:231.

However, within the Old Testament the name of God is used as a powerful expression of God's character and actions. When God made himself known to Abraham, he identified himself: "I am God Almighty [El-Shaddai]; walk before me and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). Contrary to the gods and myths of Abraham's culture, God disclosed himself as the powerful one whose presence invoked Abraham's personal loyalty and obedience. God revealed himself according to his own personal prerogative, choosing to define himself in successive stages to the people of Israel by name. This pattern of revelation is especially evident in God's self-disclosure to Moses: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them" (Exod 6:2-3).

Out of compassion for the plight of the Israelites, God revealed more of himself. When Moses asked for further identification to lend credibility to his mission, he sought the meaning of God's name. In response, God declared his sovereign power ("I Am Who I Am" - Exod 3:14), in the flow of his personal and historical relationship with Israel. Far from being a nameless, impersonal force, the God of creation chose to be known by his covenant relationship with specific individuals who walked before him and obeyed him.

In the highest forms of Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist thought, God is imagined to be a nameless and undifferentiated spiritual reality beyond personality. The conception of God in Islam is impersonal and deterministic. Allah is associated with power and transcendence. Contrary to these various descriptions, the God of the Old Testament reveals himself through specific acts, propositional teaching, and personal communion. Honoring the name of the Lord God involves an exclusive relationship with him (Exod 20:3-4; Ps 44:20; 79:6; Isa 42:8) and specific obedience to his commands (Lev 18:21; Deut 18:20; 2 Chron 7:14; Amos 2:7). Apart from God's own initiative, people would be unable to honor his name. He has promised his enablement to all who earnestly seek to honor his name (Exod 20:24). He overrules wickedness and crushes oppression "for the sake of [his] name," in order to protect his own witness among the nations (Ezek 20:9).

The significance of this Name-theology carries over and deepens with the name of Jesus. Through the Incarnation, God once again took the initiative that is exclusively his to reveal himself more completely. This time the revelation took the form of God's ultimate medium of communication. As in the past, God's disclosure of his character was personal and historical; now through the Incarnation it reaches its climax in a single individual, who was born "when the time had fully come" (Gal 4:4). As shocking as it may have seemed to the Jews, the apostles were compelled by the Spirit of God to attribute to Jesus all that was represented by the name of the Lord God. The Jewish notion of monotheistic exclusivity made it virtually impossible for the disciples to invent the theological equation between the name of Jesus and the name of the Lord God. Rather, the disciples took their lead from Jesus. Like the prophets before him, Jesus claimed to come in the name of the Lord, but unlike the prophets his name became synonymous with the name of the Lord God. He challenged his followers to welcome little children in his name, because "whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). Jesus promised his presence "where two or three come together in my name" (Matt 18:20). When the disciples returned from their preaching and healing ministry, they were excited about

the power of Jesus' name: "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17).

To pray Psalm 54 today is to acknowledge that there is a striking parallel between the meaning of the Lord God's name in the Old Testament and the meaning of Jesus' name in the New Testament. Those who believe and obey are called by his name (Num 6:27; 2 Chron 7:14; Rev 3:12-13; 14:1; 22:4). Only through his name does salvation come (Ps 79:9; Isa 43:1-7; 54:5; 63:16; Joel 2:32; John 20:31; Acts 4:12; Rom 10:13). His name is betrayed by those who claim his name but reject his ways (Jer 14:15; 29:9; Matthew 7:21-23; 24:4-5). His name alone is worthy of all praise and glory (Isa 45:23; Zech 14:9; Phil 2:9-10). When the apostles referred simply to "the Name" (Acts 5:41; 3 John 7), they affirmed the direct relationship between Jesus and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All that was attributed to the name of God in Israel's experience was carried over and applied to Jesus in the faith and practice of the early church.¹⁷⁴ The apostle Peter boldly preached this truth to the rulers and elders of the people 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).

Strangers

*Arrogant foes are attacking me;
ruthless people are trying to kill me –
people without regard for God.
Psalm 54:4*

The peril inspiring David's urgent appeal for salvation is summed up in three parallel lines. The psalmist's enemies are literally described as "strangers" or "foreigners," who are ruthless and violent, and estranged from God. The designation of "strangers" is drawn from the Hebrew and Greek texts, even though some manuscripts have "arrogant foes." The description is ironic because the superscription ties the psalm to the opposition of the Ziphites who were David's fellow countrymen from the tribe of Judah (Josh 15:24). The Samuel narrative describes two occasions when the Ziphites took the initiative to prove their loyalty to King Saul by betraying David into his hands (1 Sam 23:19-29; 26:1-25). The Ziphites approached Saul with specific intelligence that David was hiding out at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph and they offered to hand him over to the king. David must have thought that with friends like that who needs enemies. He was being betrayed by his own people.

For anyone praying this psalm who has found themselves similarly betrayed by "friends" will find the exchange between the Ziphites and Saul typical of the decorum that often covers-up ruthlessness. Saul's thinly veiled contract on David's life oozes with god-talk: "The Lord bless you for your concern for me. . . Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty. . ." (1 Sam 23:21-22). Conventional wisdom played in Saul's favor but anyone paying attention to what God was doing in Israel "could not lend himself to be made a tool of Saul's blind fury."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 65-74.

¹⁷⁵ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:153.

Another striking contrast between Psalm 54 and the narrative in Samuel is the “dependency paradox.” In the absence of human assistance the psalmist acknowledges his utter dependence upon the help of God. But in the narrative David spares Saul’s life twice, once when he was in the back of the cave and crept up and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe (1 Sam 24:4), and a second time when he snuck into Saul’s camp at night when everyone was asleep and stole Saul’s spear that was stuck in the ground near his head (1 Sam 26:12). Both times, David refused to “lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed” and he pledged to leave Saul’s future in the Lord’s hands. “But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam 26:11). This puts Psalm 54 in a new light. David had the power to solve his problems. He had plenty of human initiative and assistance, but instead he chose absolute dependence upon the Lord’s deliverance. He refused to take matters into his own hands. He wanted everyone to know that his help came from the Lord. Matthew Henry was right when he said, “This is not a prayer of malice, but a prayer of faith.”¹⁷⁶

God is my Help

*Surely God is my help;
the Lord is the one who sustains me.
Let evil recoil on those who slander me;
in your faithfulness destroy them.
I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you;
I will praise your name, Lord, for it is good.
You have delivered me from all my troubles,
and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes.*

Psalm 54:4-7

“Surely” or “Behold” signals a sudden shift from pleading to confidence.¹⁷⁷ He is certain that he has been heard. The psalmist declares, God is my helper. He knows his life is in the Lord’s hands and he entrusts himself to the Lord’s sustaining grace. He recognizes “that unchecked evil has a way of recoiling on itself.”¹⁷⁸ He is confident that the Lord will judge evil according to his faithfulness and truth. David “looks beyond the crisis” and makes a vow of thanksgiving for his deliverance.¹⁷⁹

We understand this psalm best on the lips of the Son of David. Jesus came unto his own but his own did not receive him (John 1:11). He “endured such opposition from sinners” without growing weary and losing heart (Heb 12:3). Jesus refused to take matters into his own hands (Matthew 26:53-54). David’s submission to the Lord’s will parallels Jesus’ submission to the Father’s will for the sake of our salvation, Jesus offered a freewill sacrifice, but unlike David, our Lord sacrificed himself once and for all to do away with sin. David has been delivered for his name’s sake, for “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

¹⁷⁶ Henry, *Psalms*, 228.

¹⁷⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:233.

¹⁷⁸ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 198.

¹⁷⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:161.

The sequence of “save me” psalms (Ps 51-64) in Book II is similar to King David’s passion narrative in Psalms 3-7 in Book I. To pray these psalms is to be reminded of the antagonism that exists between the way of the world and the way of Christ. The people of God unintentionally provoke the animosity of the world and become vulnerable to malice, betrayal, abuse, and contempt. The faithful stand in desperate need of deliverance. We should not be surprised that so many psalms are dedicated to passionate pleas for divine intervention. Psalm 55 is a sober reminder 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 the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

In the upper room on the night he was betrayed, Jesus insisted on preparing his disciples for the animosity of the world. We pray Psalm 55 retrospectively in the light of Jesus’ warning and challenge. He told the disciples that “if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18). He gave the disciples’ a heads-up so they would not be blind-sided by persecution. “All this I have told you so that you will not fall away” (John 16:1). As he walked through the city of Jerusalem with his disciples down into the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane, he reassured them that in spite of the world’s hate “the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:11). “In this world you will have trouble,” he warned. “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The apostle Peter echoed a similar warning when he wrote, “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12). It is helpful to keep this perspective in mind as we pray Psalm 55.

Culture of Evil

*Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
because of what my enemy is saying,
because of the threats of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering on me
and assail me in their anger.*

*My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen on me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, “Oh, that I had wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest.
I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;*

*I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm.”*

*Lord, confuse the wicked, confound their words,
for I see violence and strife in the city.
Day and night they prowl about on its walls;
malice and abuse are within it.
Destructive forces are at work in the city;
threats and lies never leave its streets.*

Psalm 55:1-11

The faithful begin with prayer, not with cut-flower prayers intoned in obsequious piety, but with psalms unfiltered and raw. The psalmist admits to being agitated and upset, restless and distraught. He feels compelled to moan. He pleads with God not to hide from his plea or ignore his prayer. The law commanded the Israelite to watch out for his neighbor. “If you see your fellow Israelite’s ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner” (Deut 22:1). The psalmist draws on that same language when he appeals to God not to hide from his prayer.¹⁸⁰ He has reached a breaking point. He feels crushed under the weight of “my” enemy’s insults, anger, and threats. It is as if the psalmist has run out of verbs to describe his confrontation with evil. He is enveloped by terror, beset by fear, overwhelmed by horror, assailed by anger, and overcome by suffering. It is hard to imagine any situation that could be more terrifying than the one he finds himself in. But here is where we discover the power of the psalms to articulate our fears and feelings. The psalmist gives us a vocabulary of lament that meets our need no matter how dire our situation may be.

Psalm 55 can be prayed by the woman who has been raped, because the psalm expresses the utter horror of this violent act and the deep dread that it instills. The child raised in an abusive family and living in constant fear can identify with the psalmist’s plea. The divorcee who has been abandoned by a callous and heartless spouse can find words that do justice to the shame and sorrow she feels. The psalmist gives us words to express our emotions, and when these words are combined with the Spirit’s wordless groans (Rom 8:26) we are reassured that God is listening to our plea.

The psalmist’s impulse is to escape, to fly away like a bird, and find refuge in the wilderness far from trouble. This is not necessarily a bad option or a wrong action. The most responsible thing a person can do may be to get out of the situation. No one should feel consigned to stay in an abusive relationship or remain trapped in a life-threatening situation. In cases of chronic abuse, permission to divorce is as valid as if the abuser is an adulterer or an unbeliever who insists on a divorce. Adultery, abandonment and abuse qualify as acts of marital unfaithfulness and the freedom to fly away ought to be respected.¹⁸¹

This doesn’t mean that escape is a viable option in every dire situation, but seeking refuge “far

¹⁸⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 199.

¹⁸¹ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 202.

from the tempest and storm” may be a sensible course of action and the psalmist is casting no aspersions against it. But the ultimate solution lies not in escape but in the Lord’s salvation. The Lord is able to confuse and confound the ways of the wicked. The psalmist quickly turns from contemplating flight to praying against the evil. In broad strokes he describes the violence and strife of the city. Social injustice runs rampant. No one is safe from malice and abuse. Intimidation and lies are how the world operates. The psalmist sketches a culture of evil that is undermining the moral order of the city.

A friend pastors a church a short ten minute drive from my home, but it might as well be in a developing country overseas. The church is one hundred and twenty-nine years and situated in an economically depressed community. His parishioners hear gunfire throughout the night and he routinely conducts funerals for young men killed in drive-by-shootings. In his neighborhood, sitting on your front porch can be as dangerous as being on the front line in a combat zone. Parishioners in their 50s and 60s are living on fixed incomes and facing the challenge of raising grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The parents of these children are working minimum wage jobs and struggling to make it from pay check to pay check. In situations where there are no grandparents some children as young as five or six have to fend for themselves. Many of the young women in his congregation go from one relationship to another looking for a soul mate only to be disappointed over and over again by men who are only interested in sex.

Both young men and young women long for a relationship with their father who has long since abandoned the family. He is either dead, or in jail, or has started another family. Young men are discouraged from excelling in school because it’s not cool. They are expected to prove their manhood by sexual exploits or packing a gun. Young women become pregnant and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and ignorance. The sins of the city permeate my friend’s church community even though he faithfully preaches the gospel and works tirelessly to lead his people in Christ. Psalm 55 describes how my pastor friend feels as he cries out to God. He is overwhelmed by the horror and the terror of his community. The impulse to flee is strong, but he continues to preach the gospel. Along with the psalmist he asks the Lord to confuse the wicked and confound the forces of evil.

Betrayal

*If an enemy were insulting me,
I could endure it;
if a foe were rising against me,
I could hide.
But it is you, a man like myself,
my companion, my close friend,
with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
at the house of God,
as we walked about
among the worshipers.*

Let death take my enemies by surprise;

*let them go down alive to the realm of the dead,
for evil finds lodging among them.
As for me, I call to God,
and the Lord saves me.
Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice.
He rescues me unharmed
from the battle waged against me,
even though many oppose me.
God, who is enthroned from of old,
who does not change –
he will hear them and humble them,
because they have no fear of God.*

*My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.
His talk is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords.*

Psalm 55:12-21

Scholars favor a broad application of the Psalm 55 to situations of betrayal and conflict. Yet there are hints in the psalm that point to Absalom's rebellion. One of David's most trusted counselors, Ahithophel, betrayed David and conspired with Absalom (2 Sam 15). It is conceivable that David had either Absalom or Ahithophel in mind as he describes a person whom he considered to be his equal, a close companion, a trusted and intimate friend, a counselor, and a fellow worshiper. The close association of Psalm 51 with these "save me" Psalms (51-64) may also imply a connection with Ahithophel's betrayal. As we said in Book I, the Samuel narrative (2 Samuel 13-18) chronicles the messy moral chaos of David's reign after his murderous affair with Bathsheba. David's family unravels and the evil consequences impact the moral order of the city. Lust, rape, murder, conspiracy, and insurrection fill a narrative that climaxes in Absalom's covert power play for the throne. Once again, as in the case of Psalms 3-7, the tragic history of Absalom's coup and David's flight from Jerusalem may lie behind Psalm 55.

It is difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalm 55 and not finding in the psalm a description of the religious and political opposition that was mounting against him. The Gospels depict the scribes and Pharisees venting their anger and plotting his death. Jesus' words, "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you?" (Matthew 17:17), correspond to the psalm. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus found in Psalm 55 a description of the anguish of his heart (Jer 4:19), the impulse to flee to the desert (Jer 9:2), and in Judas he experienced the deception of a close friend (Jer 9:4).

In the upper room, Jesus used a common, ordinary gesture of friendship when he dipped the

bread in the dish and gave it to Judas. “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him” (John 13:27). The implication is that this genuine act of friendship, was the decisive moment at which Judas yielded fully to the Tempter’s agenda. The way in which Jesus exposed his betrayer gave Judas every possible way out. At the table he could have confessed his sin and turned to Jesus for forgiveness. But Judas pushed past the point of repentance and confession. He steeled his will against Jesus’ friendship and pursued a course of action that ended in death. War was in his heart. A few hours later, Judas greeted Jesus in the garden with “Rabbi!” undoubtedly said with characteristic reverence and respect, but hidden behind his smooth words was a dagger to the heart. Judas used a gesture of intimate friendship when he gave Jesus a kiss in the garden (Mark 14:45). Both gestures, the way Jesus gave Judas the bread and the way Judas greeted Jesus, were traditional signs of hospitality. At the table, Jesus preserved Judas’ secret, but in the garden, Judas greeted Jesus with a kiss to identify him for the arresting party. Jesus loved Judas and his betrayal was painful to endure, but he was able to process the treachery of a close friend with whom he once enjoyed sweet fellowship by praying Psalm 55 and Psalm 41.

God Cares for You

*Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you;
he will never let
the righteous be shaken.
But you, God, will bring down the wicked
into the pit of decay;
the bloodthirsty and deceitful
will not live out half their days.*

*But as for me, I trust in you.
Psalm 55:22-23*

The adventurers who climb Mount Everest hire Sherpas from the high mountainous region of Nepal to guide them up the mountain and carry their heavy packs. To be clear, the Lord is not our burden bearer; he’s not our Sherpa. We don’t cast our burdens on the Lord so he can carry them for us. The Lord doesn’t care about our burdens; he cares about us and “he will never let the righteous be shaken” (Ps 55:22). The word “burden” is drawn from the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX) and should be translated from the Hebrew as “whatever is given you, your appointed lot.”¹⁸² In other words, “Throw onto Yhwh what is given you, and he—he will sustain you.”¹⁸³ The Lord promises his strength to the believer “to endure the opposition and by faith overcome it, because he will not let the righteous be moved.”¹⁸⁴

The apostle Peter quoted only a single line from the Septuagint version of Psalm 55:22 in his letter, but the entire context of his letter reflects the message of the psalm: “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to

¹⁸² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 202.

¹⁸³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:177.

¹⁸⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:256.

the humble' (Prov 11:31). Humble yourselves, therefore, 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. Be alert and of sober mind. 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 the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:5-11).

Humility belongs to those who embrace their absolute dependence on the mercy and wisdom of God.¹⁸⁵ They are willing to cast everything on the Lord, knowing that God will lift them up in due time. The apostle Paul echoes the same conviction in Philippians (Phil 4:4-7). God's answer to our prayers is calculated to bring joy – real joy, lasting joy, the kind of joy the world cannot take away. The psalmist is confident that the Lord will bring down the wicked. Those who seek to do others in will be done in. Their time will be cut short. David's bottom line: "But as for me, I trust in you." Goldingay draws out the pastoral application of Psalm 55. He "encourages people of prayer

- to throw onto God what God or other people throw onto us.
- to do this on behalf of churches in other parts of the world if we do not experience such attacks, as we enter into the trouble and harassment that they experience.
- to be open with God with the inner turmoil of our hearts and the outer turmoil that causes this.
- to be open with God about the way we could long to be away to the safety of some other place where we would not be subject to such experiences.
- to urge God to act directly to frustrate the plans of people who attack us and our sister churches.
- to draw God's attention to ways in which such malice characterizes the place where we live.
- to grieve before God at the way people who were members of our communities or churches are the people who are now attacking us.
- to ask God to punish our attackers rather than taking matters into our own hands.
- to trust God to do that and to protect us."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 156-157.

¹⁸⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:179.

The ways of the world run counter to the Lord's way. Nietzsche wrote, "In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills."¹⁸⁷ He argued that the Christian Faith was a myth created out of fear of "an incurable pessimism;" the avoidance of a deep down unteachable, unyielding spiritual fate that "life itself is the will to power."¹⁸⁸ "The cardinal instinct of an organic being," Nietzsche reasoned, was self-preservation. All talk of motive, purpose, freedom, and morality is meaningless. "I shall repeat a hundred times; we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!"¹⁸⁹

To be "kept in the holy name of God" requires commitments to be made that lie "outside the comprehension of the world."¹⁹⁰ "If the Church does not rest on a point outside the world it has no leverage with the world." Missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin continues, "The Church is marked off from the world by the fact that it has received and must witness to the word of God which is the truth and which calls in question all the so-called axioms, absolutes, and self-evident propositions which are the stock-in-trade of the world's life."¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," sec. 23, 221.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 13, 211.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, sec. 16, 213.

¹⁹⁰ Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 231

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

These “save me” psalms confront worshipers with their deep need for forgiveness and their pressing need for rescue. We require deliverance, not affirmation, and these psalms prove it. We cannot cope with evil on our own, either the evil within or the evil without. We are lost sinners (Ps 51), oppressed by evil big shots (Ps 52), living in a corrupt culture (Ps 53), attacked by arrogant foes (Ps 54), and betrayed by close friends (Ps 55). Our natural inclination is to avoid the blunt honesty of these psalms and wall off the world’s stark reality from our worship. The psalms challenge the nature and practice of true spirituality. The tension between fear and trust is the focus of this psalm and we are challenged to work this out in worship.

The superscription identifies this psalm with David’s escape to Philistine country, to the region of Gath, to the hometown of Goliath, where David sought refuge from Saul’s hot pursuit. Presumably, David didn’t expect to be recognized by the Philistines, Israel’s arch enemy. But his reputation preceded him and he was spotted immediately. The locals even knew Israel’s victory song that had been written about him: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’ (1 Sam 21:11). You can understand why the Philistines weren’t dancing to the tune. The “thousands” celebrated in the song referred to the many Philistines who died at the hands of Israel’s most famous warrior David.

Psalms 34 and 56 are associated with David’s narrow escape from the Philistine king. The beauty of these two psalms stand in sharp relief with David’s performance as a madman. In Psalm 34 David memorialized his deliverance from the Philistines and king Achish. In Psalm 56 he works through his theology of trust. Before he describes his enemies, he begins with a plea for mercy, “Be merciful to me, my God.” This line is not a pious perquisite, a necessary liturgical preamble, but the essential truth upon which all else depends. Mercy, not merit, is the true worshiper’s overture to God. When we pray Psalm 56, we seek to mean what he meant, not merely echo his sentiment. His lament is God-centered, juxtaposing fear and trust. His bottom-line, is clear: “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” Like the psalmist we want to be honest before God and with ourselves about our weakness and fear.

Hot Pursuit

*Be merciful to me, my God
for my enemies are in hot pursuit;
all day long they press their attack.
My adversaries pursue me all day long.
in their pride many are attacking me.
When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise –
in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
All day long they twist my words;
all their schemes are for my ruin.*

*They conspire, they lurk,
they watch my steps,
hoping to take my life.
Because of their wickedness do not let them escape;
in your anger, God, bring the nations down.*
Psalm 56:1-7

Calvin sums up the psalmist's opening perspective. First, "he acknowledges his weakness, in so far as he was sensible of fear," but he refuses "to surrender his hope." Second, "he makes no pretensions to the lofty heroism which condemns danger," but he confidently anticipates God's favor.¹⁹² True spirituality does not mean putting on a happy face and "faking it to make it." Real piety faces the very real dangers of living in an evil world with crooks and cancer, bullies and bombs, predators and plagues. But in the midst of trouble and fear the faithful remain confident in the Lord's deliverance. "Fear and hope may seem opposite and incompatible affections," wrote Calvin. But the vital experience of hope requires "some measure" of fear. "In a tranquil state of the mind, there is no scope of the exercise of hope."¹⁹³

The mix of fear and trust is evident in the psalmist's description of the enemy. "All day long" they press their attack and "all day long" they twist his words. Their "hot pursuit" lasts "all day." They are like a pack of dogs nipping at his heels. The psalmist is being watched day and night. He is subject to constant surveillance. His enemies lurk in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to pounce. Their arrogance gives them the audacity to think their hatred of him is justified and their cause is just. But in the middle of his description of the enemy he breaks off to pledge his trust in God. "In you" have I put my trust. "In God, whose word I praise." Trust in God is rooted in his word and the better we know his word the more resilient will be our trust. Goldingay observes that the reference to God's word comes at the center of the *fear-trust-word-trust-fear* sequence. The wisdom of the word of God is crucial "to move between fear and trust." Goldingay writes, "It is enthusiasm for God's promising word that makes trust possible. Only in this psalm is God's word the object of praise."¹⁹⁴ If we are not grounded in the word of God we are subject to the whim of our emotions. This is why we need "a ready familiarity" with the word of God, "to hold our emotions up to the clear testimony of God in Scripture."¹⁹⁵

Psalm 56 fits with Jesus' public ministry. His enemies did what David's enemies did. They were relentless in their "hot pursuit." We can put David's military battle with the Philistines side-by-side with Jesus' spiritual battle with the religious leaders. Patrick Reardon comments on the five episodes in Mark 2:1-3:6 in which "the enemies of Jesus interrogate and investigate Him, spy on Him and finally reach a sinister resolve: 'Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him' (Mark 3:6)."¹⁹⁶ Both David and the Son of David battled opposition to God's covenant promises. The parallel between Psalm 56 continues today in the struggle of the Church against her arrogant enemies.

¹⁹² Calvin, *Psalms*, 349.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁹⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:185.

¹⁹⁵ Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1:826.

¹⁹⁶ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 109.

The apostles identified with the psalmist's theme. They understood the mix of fear and trust and like the psalmist they sought to prepare Christ's followers for conflict with the world that they neither sought nor deserved. Peter warned, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12). Even though they sought to show proper respect, keep a clear conscience, and live at peace with everyone, suffering was inevitable. Suffering for the cause of Christ meant "all kinds of trials" (1 Pet 1:6), including, false accusations (1 Pet 2:12), "ignorant talk of foolish people" (1 Pet 2:15), harsh treatment by superiors (1 Pet 2:18), suffering for doing what is right (3:14), and ridicule for a righteous lifestyle (1 Pet 4:4). Peter does not specify the actual circumstances of the "the fiery ordeal," nor does he attempt to explain all the ways, "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). Ordinary believers in their ordinary lives are called to take after Jesus and endure suffering for the cause of Christ. To think otherwise leads to the kind of blind sided attack that Peter warns believers to guard against. "Don't be surprised! . . . But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:12-13).¹⁹⁷

When David asked, "What can mere mortals do to me?" we can rest assured that he was not feeling invincible. If anything, he was feeling vulnerable and weak, but in the mix of fear and trust, trust wins out. In this regard, he foreshadows the words of Jesus, "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 soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). This first stanza ends with David's appeal to God for his righteous judgment. This plea to hold the wicked accountable and "bring the nations down," is in keeping with New Testament truth. Ross acknowledges that "this kind of prayer might make the modern believer uncomfortable" but "it is a righteous prayer."¹⁹⁸ 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).

Record my Tears

*Record my misery;
list my tears on your scroll
are they not in your record?
Then my enemies will turn back
when I call for help.
By this I will know that God is for me.
In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise –
in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can man do to me?
I am under vows to you, my God;
I will present my thank offerings to you.
For you have delivered me from death
and my feet from stumbling,*

¹⁹⁷ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 132-135.

¹⁹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:270-271.

*that I may walk before God
in the light of life.*

Psalm 56:8-13

David begins the second stanza of Psalm 56 with an unusual request. “Record my misery.” He is on the run from Saul and hiding out in the wilderness. Yet he asks God to keep a record of his wanderings to prove that God really cares about him. He needs God to keep track of his close calls and dangerous escapes. He imagines God writing each incident down and keeping his account up-to-date. Today we might ask God to keep track of chemo treatments or demeaning encounters with a boss or the mocking comments from a colleague who ridicules the faith. David does not rehearse before the Lord all of his miserable encounters in prayer. He leaves it to the Lord to keep track of his misery index. If God is keeping score, he doesn’t have to.

Along this same line, David asks the Lord to keep a record of his tears. In Hebrew, David asks the Lord to collect his tears literally in a wine-skin container. This metaphor presents a challenge to translators. The NIV reads, “list my tears in your scroll,” and the ESV reads, “put my tears in your bottle.” In any respect, the point is clear. The psalmist depends on the knowledge that God knows what he is going through. For some of us it may be hard to imagine that God really cares about us right down to the details of our suffering. Yet, Jesus said to his disciples that “even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. . .” (Matthew 10:30).

We have a strange way of imposing our relational limitations on God. We can hardly imagine that God knows each one of us personally, that he knows everything about us, and that he knows and cares about us the way he knew Abraham or David. There are no average believers. God knows each and everyone of us better than we know ourselves. Jesus said that the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). If the first will be last and the last first, then there are no generic Christians (Matthew 19:30; 20:16). No one is flying under the radar of God’s personal attention and providential plan.¹⁹⁹ Our tears are recorded; our hairs are numbered. God knows our misery index. “God is faithful,” wrote the apostle Paul; “he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

As the psalm progresses, David’s confidence grows. Earlier he said, “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you” (Ps 56:3). Now, he says, “When I call for help,” my enemies will turn back (Ps 56:9). He repeats the refrain, “In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord (Yahweh), whose word I praise – in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps 56:10-11). This time he emphasizes the loving, covenant faithfulness of *Yahweh*, and repeats his confidence in God’s word. The psalmist boldly declares his deliverance as if it had already taken place. And maybe it had. Kidner believes that the explicit point of the psalm is a celebration of answered prayer. The psalmist is looking back in gratitude. He longs to fulfill the vows he made in the midst of his adversity and offer his thank offerings.²⁰⁰ But maybe his deliverance hasn’t come, and he is looking forward in anticipation. Faith and faithfulness meet in the ambiguity of the prophetic

¹⁹⁹ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol. 1:60.

²⁰⁰ Kidner, *Psalms*, vol. 2:205.

present and the future hope. Either way, the psalmist is walking by faith in the presence of God. He is not wandering around in confusion and fear. He is not lost in the dark; he's living in the light, in the realm "where Yhwh's [Yahweh's] face shines on people."²⁰¹ The Lord Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

²⁰¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:189. See Numbers 6:24-26.

In our world a tense standoff between danger and devotion is not abnormal. Turmoil and trust are thrown together in a range of emotions that is hard to put into words. This is why the Psalms are so important, because they give us the words – they give voice to the soul. Fear and faith are mingled in circumstances beyond our control. True, we may not be on the run from a violent and narcissistic king Saul as David was, but many of our brothers and sisters in Christ can identify readily with this psalm because they are victims of persecution. We need to learn to pray Psalm 57 on their behalf and our own.

Psychologists compare pictures drawn by children who have experienced war with pictures drawn by children who experience divorce. The remarkable similarity of these pictures indicates that the emotional toll on children of divorce compares to the ravages of war. Without minimizing the extreme suffering experienced by the persecuted church, it is important to understand that western believers can enter into the experience of Psalm 57 for the sake of their fellow believers who are being persecuted. We may not be living in hot zones of life-threatening persecution but believers who live out their faith in Christ-like humility are often socially ostracized and ridiculed for their faith. They face the daily pressure to conceal their faith, compromise their ethics, and conform their conduct to the spirit of the times.

The superscription attributes the back story to when David and his small band of men hid from Saul and his army of three thousand (1 Sam 24:2). As it happened, Saul picked the same cave that David and his men were hiding in to relieve himself. It's not surprising that David's men saw this twist of fate as a God-given opportunity to strike: "This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" And for a moment David must have thought so himself, because he crept forward within striking distance and cut off a corner of Saul's robe. But no sooner had he made his move, but he regretted it, saying, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord" (1 Sam 24:4-6).

In the back of that dark cave, David's soul caught up to his destiny. As tempting as it was to take matters into his own hands, David was convinced that he must not usurp the will of God and strike the Lord's anointed. Willed passivity is the intentional and disciplined surrender of our will to the active will of God. By submitting to the Lord, David demonstrated a faith that flew in the face of worldly reason and human impulse. He was content to let God's promises work out according to God's will. In that moment of surrender, David was fully alive to God. Later, when David composed the psalm, he translated the darkness of the cave into a sunrise doxology. Whatever pain he felt was swept up into praise, so much so that Psalm 57:7-11 is quoted in Psalm 108:1-5 as pure praise.

The Sending, Saving God

*Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you I take refuge.*

*I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed.
I cry out to God Most High,
to God, who vindicates me.
He sends from heaven and saves me,
rebuking those who hotly pursue me –
God sends forth his love and his faithfulness.
I am in the midst of lions;
I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts –
men whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.*

Psalm 57:1-5

In Psalm 57 the saving action of God overshadows the initial lament. While the psalmist's cry for mercy is intense and necessary, he cannot express his anguish without extolling the sufficiency of God's salvation. The weight of his testimony falls on the provision and protection of the Lord's steadfast love. Praise has the upper-hand, even though the psalmist longs for refuge. The poet intensifies his appeal for mercy through repetition and then directs his appeal to "my God." Implied in David's definitive statement is his exclusive commitment to God. He has no one else to turn to, because he doesn't want to turn to anyone else. Only God Most High is able to shelter him under his wings until the disaster passes and only God is able to vindicate him.²⁰² David knows that his salvation is dependent on the action of God, but there is never any doubt in his mind that God will intervene to save him, rebuke his enemies, and send forth his love and faithfulness. The psalmist is not informing God of what needs to be done as much as he is describing what God is already doing. He transposes his need into testimony and his plea into witness.

Jesus and his followers pray Psalm 57 with an explicit and personal understanding of the relationship between "sending" and "saving." Like the psalmist, we need "God to not be confined to the heavens but to become involved in events here on earth."²⁰³ We echo the psalmist's plea, "Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me" (Ps 43:3). We confess, "God sends forth his love and his faithfulness" (Ps 57:3). We pray this psalm today knowing that God showed his love for us by sending himself – by coming in person. The apostle Paul wrote, "But when the set time had fully come, God *sent* his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God *sent* the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. . . ." (Gal 4:4-6). John wrote, "He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). Jesus' prayer in John 17 underscores this truth: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom

²⁰² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:283. Ross writes: "Trusting in the shadow of God's wings not only looks ahead to protection under the current difficulty, but looks back to the foundation of the faith" (see also Pss. 17:8; 36:7; 61:4 and Matt 23:37).

²⁰³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:195.

you have sent”(John 17:3). Salvation is defined very specifically. It is to know the one, true and living God and to honor Jesus Christ whom he sent – “God’s Autobiography to the world.”²⁰⁴ God’s love and faithfulness came in the person of God’s one and only Son. In his high priestly prayer Jesus emphasized that the *sending, saving* credibility of the gospel depended on the disciples knowing that Jesus was the *sent one*. “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 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 17:7-8).

Moreover the *sending strategy* of the triune God continues today in the Body of Christ. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you *sent me* into the world, I have *sent* them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (John 17:17-19). Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is the means by which we are “taken up into his perfect consecration to the Father and *sent* into the world to continue, not only by verbal proclamation but also by common life which embodies the same consecration, his total consecration of love and obedience to the Father.”²⁰⁵

Jesus expected his followers to prove to the world that he was the *sent one* by their oneness. He prayed, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have *sent me*” (John 17:20-21). He emphasized that the credibility of the gospel depended on this unity. He prayed, “I have given 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. Then the world will know that you *sent me* and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

The psalmist likens his enemies to a pride of ravenous lions who are ready to devour him. Their sharp tongues and teeth are like sharp spears and arrows. The psalmist draws his metaphors from a lion attack and hand-to-hand combat in order to illustrate the verbal assault of his enemies (see Ps 56:5). His image fits the persecution faced by the early church and by today’s church. The apostle Peter said that believers were suffering “grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Pet 1:6). He challenged them to bear up under false accusations (2:12), unjust suffering (2:19), threats (3:13), slanderous ridicule (3:16), and abuse (4:4).

The psalmist paints a grim picture of grave danger only to throw the whole scene in sharp contrast with a glimpse of heaven’s glory. David breaks into doxology: “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth” (Ps 57:5). His refrain, repeated twice, overshadows doom and gloom with grace and glory. “The imperative ‘be exalted’ is a prayer for God to reveal himself in his majesty and his glory in the exercise of his dominion in heaven and earth (see, e.g., Isa 6:1).”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Bruner, *John*, 967.

²⁰⁵ Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 233.

²⁰⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:286.

Resilient

*They spread a net for my feet –
I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path –
but they have fallen into it themselves.
My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.*

Psalm 57:6-11

A theology of trust and a psychology of confidence converge in Psalm 57 to form the resilient saint. This is not the only example of true spirituality, because those who pray the psalms are well acquainted with the angst of raw lament. Students of the psalms learn that there is a full emotional range available to those who worship God honestly. But there is something to be said for the emotional relief of a steadfast heart and a melody of praise. After the dirge, the psalmist breaks out in songs of praise. The psalmist knows the danger of the well-laid trap; he has experienced depression from distress, but that's not the full story. Those whose "tongues are sharp swords" and who "have dug a pit in my path" invariably cut themselves up and fall into their own trap. Evil boomerangs. The perpetrator of evil falls victim to his own devices.

The experience and expectation of deliverance releases within the soul of the psalmist the spiritual endorphins of praise. David's exuberance can hardly be contained. He is still "in the midst of lions" and in danger of entrapment, but here and now, in this moment, his steadfast heart will "sing and make music."²⁰⁷ The dark cave of desperation and depression gives way to a new day. Instead of a cry for help, the psalmist shouts, "Awake, my soul!" Peterson's paraphrase reads, "I'm ready, God, so ready, ready from head to toe, ready to sing, ready to raise a tune: 'Wake up, soul! Wake up, harp! Wake up, lute! Wake up, you sleepyhead sun!'" (Ps 57:8, Message).

As discussed earlier (Psalm 42-43), the preferred name for God in Book II is Elohim, the plural form of El (the plural of intensity) emphasizing that Israel's God is the God above all gods.

The psalmist confesses that Elohim is not Israel's tribal deity but in fact the God of all the

²⁰⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:288. Ross writes: "The word 'steadfast' means established, fixed, firm, secure; and the fact that it is the heart that is steadfast means that he is firmly established in his faith so that his affections and actions are loyal to God. This quality of steadfastness is what the penitent prayed for in Psalm 51:10, a steadfast spirit, for without it he would waver in his faith and make the wrong choices."

nations, the God for all peoples. But in his crescendo of praise, the psalmist uses “Yahweh,” the more personal name for Israel’s covenant-keeping, covenant-loving Lord, to emphasize that Yahweh is the Lord of the nations and that all the peoples “are supposed to be brought to the knowledge of God.”²⁰⁸ The apostle Paul argues in Romans that Christ fulfilled the promises made to the patriarchs when he made it possible for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy. He quotes from the psalms: “Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name” (Rom 15:9; Ps 57:9; Ps 18:49).

The psalmist takes it further, the Lord of the nations is the Lord of the universe. There is a “cosmos-wide reach of God’s commitment and truthfulness” and a “cosmos-wide manifestation of God’s splendor.”²⁰⁹ No matter how personal the psalms may be we are encouraged to never lose sight of the universal scope of God’s glory.²¹⁰ Delitzsch writes, “Here we perceive the self-consciousness of a comprehensive mission, which accompanied David from the beginning to the end of his royal career.” And this mission extends not only to the nations but to the universe. “Heaven and earth have a mutually involved history, and the blessed, glorious end of this history is the sunrise of the divine doxa over both, here prayed for.”²¹¹ Jesus echoes the scope of this psalm in his high priestly prayer when he prays, “Father, glorify me in our presence with the glory I had with you before the world began The glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:5, 24).

²⁰⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 366.

²⁰⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:199.

²¹⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 112.

²¹¹ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:178.

If there was no psalm like Psalm 58 in the Psalter our spirituality would be distorted.²¹² The absence of a credible outcry against sin and injustice is in itself wrong. Silence in the face of sin is inexcusable. To wish for evil to go unnoticed and unchecked – free of any consequence, is to be guilty of complicity. If we do not express our horror at the violence and injustice we are unwitting accomplices in acts of terror perpetrated against our neighbors. Psalm 58 is a Spirit-inspired perspective on human depravity, its cruel nature, its necessary judgment, and its ultimate defeat.

The willed passivity described in Psalm 57 depends upon the emotional outrage of Psalm 58. It is totally true that we are evil – evil to the core and sinners from birth (Ps 51:5). But it is wrong to feel uncomfortable with the vehemence of the psalmist’s outrage. We are all sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Our hearts are desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). This is all true, most assuredly, but to relativize atrocities in the name of original sin is to minimize the horrendous consequences of social and systemic evil. It is not because we are sinless that we condemn sin; it is because we are forgiven sinners saved by grace that we raise an outcry against evil and injustice.

The person who excuses sin by saying, “everybody’s doing it,” is a person looking for approval and self-justification. It is wrong to challenge the psalmist by saying, “Let him who has no sin cast the first stone,” as if he is somehow exonerating himself by condemning others. It is indeed true to say, “Whenever we confront a wrongdoer, no matter how evil, we are looking in a mirror,”²¹³ but it is not the best thing to say to a survivor of genocide or a rape victim or an abused wife or a parent who just lost their children in a drive-by-shooting. The psalmist’s moral outrage is predicated on his own repentance and restoration (Ps 51), for which “he has only God to thank.”²¹⁴ But David’s personal salvation is not the immediate issue in view. His outrage against evil is the pressing concern. It is right and good that the psalmist makes his case against evil, calls down curses on the wicked, and looks to God to vindicate the righteous.

“*You snakes!*”

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly?
Do you judge people with equity?
No, in your heart you devise injustice,
and your hands mete out violence on the earth.
Even from birth the wicked go astray;
from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies.
Their venom is like the venom of a snake,
like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,
that will not heed the tune of the charmer,*

²¹² Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 209. Wilcock reports that the 1980 Service Book excused Anglicans from ever having to use Psalm 58 in worship.

²¹³ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 123.

²¹⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 209

however skillful the enchanter may be.
Psalm 58:1-5

The psalmist asks God to neutralize the unnamed perpetrators of injustice, the mighty ones who should be making just decisions, but are not. David's outrage is kept impersonal on purpose. He doesn't need to name names or spell it out. God knows who's who. Nor does he take matters into his own hands. He does not act; he prays. Only God is in a position to execute judgment and bring about justice. The "rulers" or "top dogs" or "little masters of the universe" are all those who are in positions of authority. They may be officials, politicians, leaders, educators, administrators, lawyers, judges, officers, pastors, supervisors, bosses, managers, executives, parents, grandparents, etc. Anyone who is entrusted with the responsibility of setting things right, whose task is to bring about justice, whose role is to protect the innocent and defend the vulnerable, and whose calling is to pursue justice and judge the wicked.

There is a striking contrast between the heart that is steadfast in Psalm 57:7 and the heart that is deceptive in Psalm 58:2. The psalmist freely traces the roots of evil and injustice to the heart of those who hide behind their institutional responsibilities and professional loyalties. They feel a few steps removed from their moral responsibility, so they turn a blind eye to injustice: the school principal who doesn't bully kids directly, but just doesn't do anything to prevent it; the hospital administrator who is aware that irregularities in billing penalize the patient, but doesn't do anything to fix it; the doctor who serves her patient well, but let's the system over-charge for her services; the pastor who shows favoritism to the wealthy parishioner and caters to his ego, because he cannot afford to lose his support; the manufacturer who knows his company's product is dangerously flammable but doesn't want to be a "whistle blower." The psalmist knows that the "rulers" who devise injustice in their hearts and use evil to enhance their power may never see their victims face to face. They may never meet, but they are as guilty of violence as if they had personally assaulted their victims. Their wilful acts of evil are hidden under "standing operating procedure" and "how they've always done it."

On Jesus' last visit to the temple before his crucifixion he delivered a scathing rebuke of the religious leaders. He called them hypocrites and, following Isaiah's example, pronounced seven woes against them (Matthew 23:13-36; see Isaiah 5:8-6:5). He accused them of being blind guides and turning people away from God. He railed against them, "You hypocrites . . . full of greed and self-indulgence." He even called them snakes, possibly echoing Psalm 58:4. He let it rip, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33). Like the perpetrators of injustice in Psalm 58, Jesus claimed the Pharisees were steeped in sin "from birth." They were of their father the devil. They stopped listening to God long ago (John 8:43-44). Like a cobra that no longer responded to the vibrations of the enchanter's flute, the Pharisees were unable to hear what Jesus said.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 209. Kidner quotes G. S. Cansdale, who writes, "It is now agreed that all snakes are deaf, . . . and the charmer holds their attention by the movement of his pipe, not its music" (G. S. Cansdale, *Animals of Bible Lands* (Paternoster, 1970), 206. Astrid Riecken writes, "Scientists have long struggled to understand how snakes, which lack external ears, sense sounds. Now, a new study shows that sound waves cause vibrations in a snake's skull that are then "heard" by the inner ear." Astrid Riecken, *The Washington Post*
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-snakes-hear-without-ears/2011/12/29/gIQAuseoWP_story.html?ut

Seven Curses

*Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!
Let them vanish like the water that flows away;
when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.
May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.
Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns –
whether they be green or dry – the wicked will be swept away.
The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,
when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

Psalm 58:6-10

Seven graphic images capture the psalmist's prayer to bring the wicked to justice and to end their reign. Drawing on his creative skill, the poet paints a picture of evil rendered powerless. For all their bravado and clout, the wicked end up like a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, snail slime, an early miscarriage, tumble weed blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. The impact of this horrendous seven-fold description reduces evil to a pile of burnt garbage. What was once a grave threat has been reduced to nothing. Evil's agents are no longer to be feared.

If we "modern Christians living in reasonable comfort do not like the violence of the way the Scriptures talk about these matters"²¹⁶ it may be because we do not sufficiently identify with our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer injustice and oppression. Patrick Reardon writes, "This psalm is chock full of hatred – hatred of evil, arrogance, injustice, and hardness of heart."²¹⁷ The evocative nature of the psalm shares God's passion against evil. The apostle echoes the sentiment of the psalm, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9).

Vindication

*Then people will say,
"Surely the righteous still are rewarded;
surely there is a God who judges the earth."*

Psalm 58:11

God's administration of justice will bring joy to the people of God ("The righteous will be glad when they are avenged") and in the end everyone will recognize that God is just and righteous and rewards those who do his will. Calvin insisted that this rejoicing was "under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit" and was perfectly consistent with the mercy of God. It had nothing to do with that "cruel satisfaction which too many feel when they see their enemies destroyed." The righteous rejoicing over the judgment of God had nothing to do with the "unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge."²¹⁸

m_term=.ae5272243dc0.

²¹⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:209.

²¹⁷ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 114.

²¹⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 377-378.

Commenting on Psalm 58, Spurgeon emphasized that the righteous “will have no hand in meting out, neither will he rejoice in the spirit of revenge, but his righteous soul shall acquiesce in the judgments of God, and he shall rejoice to see justice triumphant.” Spurgeon added, “There is nothing in Scripture of that sympathy with God's enemies which modern traitors are so fond of parading as the finest species of benevolence. We shall at the last say, ‘Amen,’ to the condemnation of the wicked, and feel no disposition to question the ways of God with the impenitent. . . .The damnation of sinners shall not mar the happiness of saints.”²¹⁹

It is hard to imagine a world where there will be no more corruption or oppression and where God’s rule and reign will establish the righteous order of the new heaven and the new earth. Psalm 58 anticipates the end of evil and human injustice.²²⁰ But the end of evil is only part of the story. God’s provision of redemption and reconciliation precedes God’s judgment of sin and death. Salvation takes precedence over judgment, because God “is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God in his grace entered into our world of injustice and evil and took upon himself the judgment we deserve. “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). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole’” (Deut 21:23). The truth is clear, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” but it is also true, “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24).

The psalmist is right to pray down judgment on the wicked. He wants to render the wicked powerless. He pictures a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, a slimy snail, a tragic miscarriage, desert scrub brush blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. But when we pray Psalm 58, we know that Jesus Christ suffered crucifixion, the most despicable and most dehumanizing capital punishment humans have devised. But even beyond that, he 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 comprehends all the lamentations of all God's people throughout all of time. All other cries of anguish, all the “Gethsemanes,” all the “Golgothas” look to this moment for resolution. 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.²²¹ We cannot pray Psalm 58 without remembering the full story of salvation and judgment.

²¹⁹ Spurgeon, “Psalm 58,” *Treasury of David*.

²²⁰ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 222-224.

²²¹ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 149.

Faithfulness to God can be a dangerous calling. Obedience and devotion provoke the rulers of this age to conspire against the righteous. This sequence of “save me” psalms (Psalms 51-64) explores the forces of evil arrayed against the psalmist. The threat spectrum begins with himself and his passionate plea for forgiveness, “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 51:2). The threat continues with the big bully who loves evil rather than good and falsehood over truth (Ps 52:3), followed by the fool who devours the people of God like bread (Ps 53:4) and a gang of arrogant and ruthless foes who want to kill him (Ps 54:3). Even his beloved friend and companion betrays him (Ps 55:13) and his adversaries twist his words (Ps 56:5-6). The psalmist repeatedly finds himself in the midst of ravenous lions (Ps 57:4), surrounded by cobras ready to strike (Ps 58:4). These psalms drive out whatever naivete we might have had about the on-going struggle with evil.

Under Attack

*Deliver me from my enemies, O God;
 be my fortress against those who are attacking me.
 Deliver me from evildoers
 and save me from those who are after my blood.
 See how they lie in wait for me!
 Fierce men conspire against me
 for no offense or sin of mine, Lord.
 I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.
 Arise to help me; look on my plight!
 You, Lord God Almighty,
 you who are the God of Israel,
 rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
 show no mercy to wicked traitors.
 They return at evening,
 snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.
 See what they spew from their mouths –
 the words from their lips are sharp as swords,
 and they think, “Who can hear us?”
 But you laugh at them, Lord;
 you scoff at all those nations.
 You are my strength, I watch for you;
 you, God, are my fortress,
 my God on whom I can rely.*

Psalm 59:1-10a

The superscription lines up Psalm 59 with David’s narrow escape from King Saul’s hit squad. This was the fifth attempt on David’s life. The first was when Saul in a rage hurled his spear at David as he strummed the lyre (1 Sam 18:10-11). His second attempt put David on the front line,

with Saul saying to himself, “I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!” (1 Sam 18:17). The third attempt involved the bride price for Saul’s daughter Michal. Saul wanted a hundred Philistine foreskins in exchange for his daughter in marriage (1 Sam 18:24). The fourth attempt was like the first. David was playing the lyre for Saul when “an evil spirit from the Lord came on Saul” and he hurled his spear at David, but David escaped (1 Sam 19:9-10). In a fifth attempt Saul ordered men to watch David’s house and kill him in the morning. But Michal warned David and helped him escape through a window (1 Sam 19:12). This is the occasion that might have inspired the psalm, but David enlarges on the problem of evil to include the nations (Ps 59:5, 8). This suggests that the existential threat posed by Saul is only a symptom of the larger concern among the people of God for justice and judgment. The emotional intensity of David’s deeply personal prayer for deliverance is held in tension with David’s confidence in the Lord’s ultimate protection of the righteous and the definitive judgment of the wicked. There is an “artistic mixture of imagery and factual statement” that produces “a positively eerie scenario of hostile intimidation” and an impressive description of God’s complete command of David’s situation and Yahweh’s complete sovereignty of the nations.²²²

Striking contrasts are woven into the fabric of this psalm. The psalmist holds his desperate situation in tension with the security of God’s impenetrable defenses. His plight is emphasized by the repetition of “me” and “my” while the enemy’s plurality stands for an impersonal collective of unbelief – the nations. Wicked traitors spew their curses but the Lord only laughs at their opposition. The psalmist gloats over those who slander him, but fears that a quick end to their evil will only promote more evil (Ps 59:11). He requests a slow judgment so people will not forget. The terror at night yields to morning songs of praise. Howling dogs are drowned out by love songs to Yahweh. The hungry howl and those who look to the Lord sing.

The psalmist claims his innocence. He has done nothing wrong to deserve this wicked opposition. If original sin allows no room for common grace and relative innocence, then there is no point in adjudicating justice on this side of eternity. We become like Job’s counselors, always finding fault in the person who suffers. Job cried out to his would-be comforters, “Search out my faults and probe after my sin – though you know that I am not guilty. . .” (Job 10:6-7). The psalmist’s innocence echoes Psalm 7: “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” (Ps 7:3-5).

Psalm 59 corresponds to Christ’s “sacred Passion” because he was hounded by evil people who conspired against him even though he was completely innocent (2 Cor 5:21). It is true that only Jesus was able to provide an unblemished sacrifice for our sins. But we need not challenge the psalmist’s claim to innocence or say that only Christ could make this claim of innocence.²²³ Christ’s righteousness and our righteousness in Christ come together in the believer’s experience of Psalm 59. It is scandalous that one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion. Jesus became a victim because

²²² Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:213. Quoting Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, vol. 2:85.

²²³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 115.

he was righteous and those who follow him can expect the same treatment.²²⁴

To pray for deliverance is to pray for two inseparable acts of divine mercy, judgment and salvation. The psalmist pleads for the Lord God Almighty, “Arise to help me; look on my plight!” and “Rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors.” Throughout the Bible, salvation and judgment are brought together. Two groups of people are held together in the same vision: those who have thrown themselves on the mercy of God and those who have persisted in resisting God’s will. The Book of Revelation pictures the saints inside the city gates. Their robes are washed in the blood of the Savior. But outside are the dogs: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Revelation 22:14-15).

Those who suggest that this psalm is not a truly Christian one need only read the many New Testament passages that call for eternal judgment. If we edit out the call of judgment we disable our understanding of evil. We commit spiritual malpractice by withholding a necessary diagnosis against evil that needs to be prayed and believed. With that said, we join Jesus in praying for our enemies and for those who persecute Christ’s followers. We pray for their salvation. We pray that the gospel will have an impact in their lives and in ours.

The psalmist likens his enemies to a pack of snarling stray dogs scavenging the city. Spurgeon described them as “unowned, loathsome, degraded, lean, and hungry.”²²⁵ King Saul has let loose his assassins, with orders to kill David in the morning, but the psalmist uses the threat of physical violence as a metaphor for the verbal violence perpetrated against the righteous. Not many believers feel the threat of a hit squad out to kill them (although some believers live under such a threat). But many believers identify with the pain caused by the sharp sword of verbal abuse, slander, ridicule, false testimony, gossip, and deception. The psalmist links the threat of physical violence with verbal violence. Lisa Barrett reports, “Words can have a powerful effect on your nervous system. Certain types of adversity, even those involving no physical contact, can make you sick, alter your brain – even kill neurons – and shorten your life.”²²⁶ The psalmist takes seriously the full range of opposition from state sponsored persecution to malicious gossip and slander. His response is to pray. Instead of responding to his enemies’ hate speech with his own version of vitriolic rhetoric he prays and in his prayer he hears the Lord’s laughter and scorn.

The apostle Peter addressed the problem of hate speech in his epistle. He challenged believers to repay insult, abuse, and reviling with blessing.²²⁷ In the midst of an antagonistic and abusive honor-and-shame culture Peter emphasized “Jesus’ non-retaliatory stance” (1 Pet 3:15-16).²²⁸

²²⁴ Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 160-161.

²²⁵ Spurgeon, “Psalm 59,” *Treasury of David*.

²²⁶ Lisa Feldman Barrett, “When Is Speech Violence?” *New York Times*, July 15, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/opinion/sunday/when-is-speech-violence.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone>

²²⁷ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 105-106.

²²⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 607.

The get-even strategies that fight fire with fire are eliminated. To curse or retaliate are not options for believers who have been called to bless. They lay down the weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, in order to pick up the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness.²²⁹ The self-control required to bless your accusers and slanderers is evidence of “a supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23).” Professor 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.”²³⁰

The psalmist paints a frightful picture: enemies attacking, evildoers out for blood, assassins lying in wait like a pack of hungry dogs, and a constant barrage of violent threats. To all of this he gives the Lord’s response: “But you laugh at them, Lord; you scoff at all those nations” (Ps 59:8; see Ps 2:4). By faith, the psalmist takes on the perspective of his God. He ends the first half of the psalm with a powerful burst of confidence: “You are my strength, I watch for you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely” (Ps 59:9-10a).

Songs of Praise

*God will go before me
and will let me gloat over those who slander me.
But do not kill them, Lord, our shield,
or my people will forget.
In your might uproot them
and bring them down.
For the sins of their mouths,
for the words of their lips,
let them be caught in their pride.
For the curses and lies they utter,
consume them in your wrath,
consume them til they are no more.
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob.
They return at evening,
snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.
They wander about for food
and howl if not satisfied.
But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of your love;
for you are my fortress,
my refuge in times of trouble.
You are my strength, I sing praises to you;*

²²⁹ Harink, *1 Peter*, 92.

²³⁰ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 218.

*you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.*
Psalm 59:10b-17

A confident David (a gloating David!) calls for judgment, but his plea for a qualified judgment foreshadows the apostle Paul's description of judgment in Romans one. Instead of killing the wicked off in one fell swoop, he wants their slow demise to be an object lesson warning people of the consequences of evil. If God gives them up to their sinful desires and evil ways, they will be caught in their pride and consumed (slowly) by God's wrath (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) and the just and holy judgment of the God of Jacob will become "known to the ends of the earth" (Ps 59:13).

The return of the snarling dogs for a second time indicates that the danger persists. Nothing has changed. The night terror continues, but the psalmist's solid confidence in God is renewed. "You are my strength; you are my fortress; you are my God on whom I can rely." Like the devil, the dogs wander around looking for what they can devour (1 Pet 5:8) and they howl "if not satisfied." But their nocturnal howling is met with songs of praise in the morning. Spurgeon wrote, "The greater our present trials the louder will our future songs be, and the more intense our joyful gratitude."²³¹

Throughout the Samuel narrative we read that David played the lyre (a stringed instrument that can be compared to a small harp or guitar). Twice, while David was playing for Saul, the king in a fit of rage hurled his spear at him (1 Sam 18:10-11; 19:9-10). One can only imagine the trauma of playing a soothing stringed instrument one moment and in the next dodging a spear and fleeing for one's life. But whatever traumatic association existed in David's mind between music and violence, he found music the best way to express his confidence and praise. "I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love" (Ps 59:16).

²³¹ Spurgeon, Psalm 59, *Treasury of Psalms*

This is an unusual “save me” psalm because the crisis facing the people of God is the absence of God. With sledgehammer blows the psalmist pounds out his depressing message. God has spurned them and shaken them to the core. God has unleashed his anger against them. The need of the hour is deliverance, deliverance from God, not from personal sin or an evil bully or a corrupt culture or arrogant foes. Yet, God alone is their one and only deliverer. The psalmist calls on God to save the people of God from God.

If the superscription is accurate, the back story in the Samuel narrative requires reading between the lines (2 Sam 8:1-14). The historical account attributes a series of decisive military victories to David. He expanded Israel’s territory by conquering the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans, and the Edomites. The tenor of the report is summed up in the line: “The Lord gave David victory wherever he went” (2 Sam 8:6). What is missing is the anguish of Psalm 60. Apparently as David was fighting the king of Zobah who was intent on reestablishing Aramean control in the region of northern Iraq, the Edomites in the south waged a campaign that threatened Jerusalem. This opened up a two front war and David responded by sending his commander Joab and his brother Abishai to fight the Edomites (1 Chron 18:12-13).²³²

Psalm 60 was inspired in that critical moment when David learned that the Edomites were marshaling thousands of troops on the southern central border of Israel. The psalm must have been in his heart and on his lips during those anxious days as Joab and his division raced south to defend Israel’s heartland. The Israelites prevailed over the Edomites in the battle of the Valley of Salt making good on the promise prayed: “With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies” (Ps 60:12).

Rejected by God

*You have rejected us, God, and burst upon us;
 you have been angry – now restore us!
 You have shaken the land and torn it open;
 mend its fractures, for it is quaking.
 You have shown your people desperate times;
 you have given us wine that makes us stagger.*

Psalm 60:1-3

In Psalm 60 David sounds like Job, only in this case, it is the collective experience of the people of God as a whole that identifies with Job’s anguish. The psalmist makes no attempt to get behind the cause of the suffering and discover the reasons for God’s anger. Nor does the psalmist attribute their hardship and upheaval to evil powers. The danger Israel faced is attributed to God exclusively. The psalmist accepts the fact that the people of God are on trial yet like Job he refuses to put God on trial.

²³² Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 215; Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 215.

On behalf of Israel, he cries out to God. He does not proclaim Israel's innocence nor defend the people; he simply states the fact that God is against them. The psalmist doesn't appear to feel betrayed as much as weak, vulnerable, and exposed. He is disinterested in secondary causes. He traces these "desperate times" "not merely to some intermediate point in the chain of causation" but to God. He "sees the chaotic picture as, in principle, intelligible and under a single ultimate control."²³³ The advantage of attributing defeat to the will of God, instead of to the enemy or to personal agency, means the worshiper is free to concentrate exclusively on the action of his sovereign God. The psalmist says neither "they have done this" or "we have done that," but to addresses God directly, "You have. . . You have. . . You have. . . You have. . . You have." In that moment of awful realization, when rejection and upheaval break upon the people of God, the psalmist simply cries out to God, "You have been angry – now restore us!" (Ps 60:1).

Beloved by God

*But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner
to be unfurled against the bow.*

*Save us and help us with your right hand,
that those you love may be delivered.*

Psalm 60:4-5

In the middle of David's victorious northern campaign he is reminded of Israel's complete dependence upon the mighty hand of God. David the warrior-king re-discovers under life-threatening pressure his need of the Savior. Israel's very existence is impossible apart from God. Only with God can Israel succeed. David's initial shock (Ps 60:1-3) yields to a confident hope in the midst of the conflict. The fear-of-the-Lord, that bound phrase that defines the devotion of God's people, is outwardly signified by a battlefield banner. The banner of the Lord is lifted high and carried into battle. The psalmist intentionally contrasts the five "You have" – hammer blows with a contrasting sixth note filled with praise: "You have raised a banner to be unfurled against the bow."

The people of God are challenged "to be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:9). They are reminded that "the battle is not [theirs], but God's" (2 Chron 20:15). The banner is a metaphor for the identity and mission of God's people. They are not asked to unfurl a white flag of surrender but to lift high the banner of their God.

Psalm 60 reminds us that our hope is in the Lord and not in ourselves. We take our lead from the Lord Jesus who said, "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30). When Jesus disputed with the Pharisees, he clarified the source of his power and authority. He said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). For the Son of David and his followers to pray Psalm 60 is to acknowledge that apart from Christ we can do nothing. We share in the apostle Paul's conviction, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13 KJV). We see a corresponding link between Psalm 60 and the apostle Paul's experience when the Lord said

²³³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 216.

to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

The psalmist gives us the words to pray when the bottom falls out of our world. Instead of itemizing a myriad of requests, David offers a simple prayer: “Save us and help us with your right hand, that those you love may be delivered” (Ps 60:5). The complexity of a two-front multi-national military conflict comes down to a cry for help. The right hand of God is more than able to handle the threat and the ground for appeal is the identity of the beloved. Everything that needs to be prayed is contained in that single sentence. We are reminded that no matter how complex and chaotic our situation may be it comes down to this simple prayer for help.

Ruled by God

*God has spoken from his sanctuary:
“In triumph I will parcel out Shechem
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.
Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet,
Judah is my scepter.
Moab is my washbasin,
on Edom I toss my sandal;
over Philistia I shout in triumph.”*
Psalm 60:6-9

The word of God has spoken and God’s kingdom strategy will prevail. The land belongs to the Lord. Ross writes, “By selecting these representative sections, the psalmist was recalling the ancient allotments of the land by the Lord in order to reiterate the fact that the land belonged to the Lord.”²³⁴ David’s prayer for deliverance rests on the revealed promises of God. The land does not belong to various people groups; it belongs to the Lord. “In a few bold strokes the early history and distinctive areas of Israel are called to mind, and the chief agents of defense and rule (helmet and scepter) are named.”²³⁵ Kidner draws special attention to the repeated “mine” and “my” to underscore that everything belongs to the Lord and this emphasis on God’s possessiveness only serves to affirm the lasting inheritance of the land to the people of God.

With the coming of Christ, the true and lasting Son of David, there is a new inheritance that is described as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:4). This inheritance fulfills and transcends the covenant promises given to Israel. It is no longer tied to geography, ethnicity, or nationalism. “The notion of a holy land is superseded by that of a holy community (1 Peter 2:4-10).²³⁶ The boundaries of the Promised Land have been effectively shifted to the global reach of the gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The people of God are drawn from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). The messianic community is no longer ethnically and geographically limited to Jews and Israel. There is an open invitation to Jews and Gentiles, religious and secular alike, to come home to Jesus Christ. Our new home is

²³⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:342.

²³⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 217.

²³⁶ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 336.

anywhere Jesus is, whether in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia or in Butte, Montana.

Led by God

*Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?
Is it not you, God, you who have now rejected us
and no longer go with our armies?
Give us aid against the enemy,
for human help is worthless.
With God we will gain the victory,
and he will trample down our enemies.*

Psalm 60:9-12

David's four-part conclusion is in the true character of a godly leader. The king asks a critical question, makes a painful observation, issues a desperate plea, and offers a confident hope. The question is asked by David, not the Lord: "Who will bring me to the fortified city?" The rhetorical question highlights the need of the hour and states the obvious – no human leader can accomplish this victory. Edom is on the verge of attacking Israel and all of Israel is praying that Joab and Abishai will arrive from the northern campaign in time to defend Israel. But to David's point, Israel's destiny does not lie in the hands of the army, but in God.

There is no hint of triumphalism in David's question, "Who will lead me to Edom?" He may have been a conquering king fresh from a series of military victories, but he does not presume upon God's mercy. The Edomite threat has humbled David to his core and he wants all to know that he bows low before the sovereign Lord of Israel. David knows that he and his people are completely dependent upon the Lord to lead them. He stands in need of the Lord's rule and reign and he wants all to know that "human help is worthless" (Ps 60:11).

For the Christian, "the fortified city" points forward to "the great city" described in the Book of Revelation. It represents the power of evil arrayed against the people of God. No human leader is sufficient for the challenge; no army can achieve the victory. This line from Psalm 60 takes on special significance in the light of the incarnation of God. The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus who "suffered outside the city gate" in order "to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb 13:12). The citizens of the New Jerusalem have been washed in the blood of the Lamb who suffered outside the city gate. God goes outside the city to die on the cross in order to lead us into the City of God.

The fortified city of Edom continues to symbolize the world's opposition to Christ and his kingdom. Down through the centuries the Edomites opposed the people of God and sought their destruction. The fifth century BC prophet Obadiah prophesied against Edom. In spite of Edom's physical elevation and nearly impenetrable natural fortress, the descendants of Esau were destined for shame and judgment, because Edom had shown "violence against your brother Jacob" (Obadiah 1:10). Obadiah insisted that Edom was part of a bigger picture. He declared, "The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds

will return upon your head” (Obadiah 1:15). The house of Jacob will possess its inheritance and the house of Joseph will set on fire the house of Esau and it will be consumed (Obadiah 1:17-18). Obadiah prophesied that Edom as Edom would be no more: “There will be no survivors from the house of Esau” (Obadiah 1:18). But this is not the last word on the descendants of Esau. Under the rule of God, the descendants of Esau have a future. The mountains of Esau will be populated by the people of God. “Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom’s will be the Lord’s” (Obadiah 1:21). Obadiah envisions the future Kingdom of God embracing the land of the Philistines, Samaritans, Phoenicians, and Edomites.

Mount Zion and the mountains of Esau will be ruled by God’s justice. David’s strategy of conquest will become the Son of David’s strategy of redemption. “The last line of the prophecy takes a giant step out of the centuries of hate and rivalry and invective,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Israel, so often a victim of Edomite aggression through the centuries, is suddenly revealed to be saved from the injustices of the past and taking up a position of rule over their ancient enemies the Edomites. But instead of doing to others what had been done to them and continuing the cycle of violence that they had been caught in, they were presented as taking over the reins of government and administering God’s justice. They find themselves in a new context—God’s kingdom—and realize that they have a new vocation—to represent God’s rule.”²³⁷ Psalm 60 ends on a powerful note: apart from God we are helpless and lost, but with God “we will gain the victory” and God, not us, “will trample down our enemies” (Ps 60:12).

²³⁷ Peterson, *The Message*, 494.

The beauty and brevity of Psalm 61 reassures the worshiper that God provides permanent protection for those who trust in him. Psalm 61 captures poetically the experience of salvation. The psalmist shows us what deliverance looks like by providing a series of concrete images. Five metaphors illustrate the place of security: the unassailable high ground of the rock, the impenetrable fortress refuge, the unscalable strong tower, the unprecedented hospitality of the tent, and the undisturbed intimacy of a mother hen's wings. Coupled with these five spacial references are five specific references to time. The psalmist longs to tabernacle with God *forever*. He prays that the king's life will be extended for *many generations* and that he will be enthroned in the presence of God *forever*. He seeks to praise the name of God *forever*, without interruption, *day after day*. These ten references to time and place offer a comprehensive and personal description of deliverance.

Hear My Cry!

*Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
For you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the foe.
I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.
For you, God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

Psalm 61:1-4

There is no indication that the psalmist turns to God as a last resort having tried in vain to receive comfort from others first. Winston Churchill reportedly quipped that you can always count on Americans to do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities. A sign of spiritual maturity is when the Lord is our first recourse rather than our last resort. This is why personal and communal worship is vitally necessary for the people of God. The rhythms of grace built into our weekly routine remind us of our need for God's deliverance. The lament is as brief as it is intense. Desperation is in tension with devotion. The extremity of need is more than matched by a thorough, comprehensive and focused request for help. The theological depth that lies behind this cry is truly impressive, especially when prayed in the context of the body of Christ. The proportion of concern to confidence minimizes the worshipers predicament and maximizes the psalm's focus on God.

The psalmist's acute sense of need is established with a loud cry, from a distant place, at the point of utter exhaustion. The words are few, but the depth of meaning behind each phrase speaks volumes. Some commentators take "from the ends of the earth" literally, implying that

King David has been exiled from Jerusalem. They suggest that the Absalom conspiracy lies behind David's cry.²³⁸ But this need not be the case, as the feeling of being at "ends of the earth" is common to those who suffer. We need not travel far to feel alone and estranged from the love and comfort of God. Even when we are surrounded by a loving family or close friends we can feel alone. The first time I went to Mongolia to train pastors I felt like I had gone to the ends of the earth *literally*, but some of the Mongolian believers felt like they had gone to the ends of the earth *figuratively*. Because of Christ they were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. They were homeless in their home culture, exiled in their own country. In his letter to the "elect exiles" the apostle Peter explores the tension between *distance* from our familiar selves and our home culture and our *nearness* to God in the household of faith. It is helpful to see Psalm 61 as wrestling with emotional dissonance, that "ends of the earth" feeling, in a deepening quest for the presence of God. The psalmist's devotion for God overcomes the distance, not by retracing his steps back home but by being led to the rock.

The psalmist transposes his geographical metaphor ("from the ends of the earth") into highly personal terms: "I call as my heart grows faint." It is "not merely a statement of how one feels inside," but "the phrase suggests a person's whole being running out of energy."²³⁹ From the landscape to the inscape, the psalmist paints a bleak picture of his existential crisis. He is desperate. He cannot lead himself; he must be led. He cries out, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Embedded in this plea is an essential truth. Leadership is what God makes of us and not what we make of ourselves. To lead is to be led. King David knew then what Christ's followers must embrace today. We are no good to ourselves and others unless we are mastered by the Master. Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There is no other path to leadership than to be led "to the rock that is higher than I." Any form of leadership that is independent of the leading of the Lord fails from the start. Leadership in the name of Jesus means that we follow Jesus in everything we do.

All five metaphors, rock, refuge, tower, tent, and wings, speak of the presence of God. These concrete images speak of the solidarity of the people of God. David "piles up the images" to reinforce the all sufficiency of the saving presence of God.²⁴⁰ God is our rock and our tent recalls the words of Psalm 27, "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" (Ps 27:5). It is especially significant that Jesus applied these metaphors to himself. He is the rock upon whom the wise build their house (Matthew 7:24).²⁴¹ He is the Word made flesh, who "tabernacled" among us and revealed the Father's glory full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is the mother hen who longed to gather her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). He is the temple, who, when asked for a sign of his authority, answered, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"

²³⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 410. Calvin writes, "I agree with those who refer it to the time of the conspiracy of Absalom; for, had he not been an exile, he could not speak. . . of crying from the ends of the earth. . . .By some, indeed, the words have been understood figuratively, as meaning, that he prayed from the lowest deeps of distress; but I can see no foundation for this."

²³⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:237.

²⁴⁰ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 130.

²⁴¹ Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," 3, 9. Payne writes, "Here in the parables, the most assuredly authentic of all the traditions about Jesus, is a clear, implicit affirmation of Jesus' self-understanding as deity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that to depict himself he consistently gravitated to imagery and symbols which the Old Testament typically depict God."

(John 2:19).

Even more surprising is the fact that Jesus linked these metaphors to his followers. In Christ his followers become the rock, the refuge, the tower, the tent, and the wings. Jesus said to Peter, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). “As you come to him,” Peter wrote, “the living Stone . . . you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house. . .” (1 Peter 2:4-5). Christ’s followers (living stones) are being built by God into a spiritual household, a house of the Spirit, to be a holy priesthood. Like the psalmist, the apostle Paul stacked up the metaphors. Christ’s followers are fellow citizens in God’s kingdom, members of God’s household, and joined together to become a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:19-22). 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.²⁴²

The psalmist follows up his loud cry for help with a solemn vow of commitment. In the midst of worship, he is confident that his prayers have been heard. He is reminded of his heritage and his home among the covenant people of God. He is not alone. He is in solidarity with those who fear “your name.” Many years ago, Psalm 61 was a source of comfort for me. I was a young pastor in a conflicted church and this psalm gave voice to my anguish. I felt overwhelmed and exhausted. I prayed and sang the psalm for weeks as a plea, “Lord, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” And in time, like the psalmist, my confidence was renewed.

Prayer for the King

*Increase the days of the king’s life,
his years for many generations.
May he be enthroned in God’s presence forever;
appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.
Then I will ever sing in praise to your name
and fulfill my vows day after day.*
Psalm 61:6-8

The second stanza is a prayer of thanksgiving and is brimming with confidence. The king’s cry has been heard and his hope is renewed. He is safe and secure on top of the rock. The strong tower is his protection. The Lord’s tent is home and the wings of the Lord are his shelter. The psalmist’s attention shifts sharply from place to time and to the enduring promise of the Lord’s blessing. The psalmist’s perspective from the rock, that is to say from Christ (1 Cor 10:4), offers a vision that goes beyond David and his royal succession. To be led to the “rock that is higher than I” is to be led to the fulfillment of God’s promise to David (2 Samuel 7:16). The king’s prayer “was to be fulfilled to overflowing in the person of the king, the Messiah.”²⁴³

When we pray the Lord’s prayer, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10) we are praying in line with

²⁴² Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 58.

²⁴³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 220.

Psalm 61. The Christological fulfillment of the psalm comes to a climax in verse seven. The psalmist prays that the king will be enthroned in God's presence forever – "to live in the sphere of God's love, blessing, and protection."²⁴⁴ It is not a stretch to identify this prophetic petition with Jesus, the incarnate one, and to hear in Jesus' glory prayer in John 17 echoes of David's psalm. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he prayed, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him" (John 17:1-2). Along with the psalmist and the covenant people of God we are the beneficiaries of Christ's rule and reign. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6).

The imagery of the rock, refuge, tower, tent, and wings finds its essential meaning in David's final prayer request: "appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him [the king]." The true strength of God's kingdom is not found in "brick-and-mortar" fortresses or in anything else the world associates with power. It is found in God's love and faithfulness. To pray for God to "assign" or "prepare" these attributes is to "suggest a commissioning of servants (personification)."²⁴⁵ These attributes must be embodied in a person, and there is no person who embodied them more fully than Jesus Christ. David's petition recalls Psalm 43:3, "Send me your light and your faithful care [truthfulness], let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell." These two petitions in Psalm 61 and 43 earnestly seek "someone who explicitly embodies God's own qualities. . . . The emissary thus brings God in person."²⁴⁶ Jesus embodies the message of God. "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).

With this truth, the psalmist breaks into song. We know from the Samuel narrative how much music meant to David. Others may have been designated Israel's chief musician, but David was their worship pastor and he knew it was impossible to separate mind and heart. Worship is a matter of thinking and feeling. It is both intellectual and emotional, because it engages the mind and expresses the heart. As Henry Mitchell, an African-American pastor, liked to say, "If truth goes into your heart on the arm of emotion it will stay. But if it enters your heart unaccompanied, it will only visit for a short while and then leave." Praying and singing belong together. When the church teaches with wisdom and sings with gratitude, our minds and hearts are informed and inspired by the word of God.²⁴⁷

We pray Psalm 61 thinking of Jesus from beginning to end. The psalmist concludes with a vowed commitment to sing the praises "of your name" forever. The apostles found in the person of Jesus a direct link with the reality of God, represented by the name of Yahweh. Jesus not only embodied the message of God but also revealed the character of God. His name was synonymous with God himself. For he was given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow (Phil 2:9-10).

²⁴⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:241.

²⁴⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:358.

²⁴⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:32.

²⁴⁷ Webster, *The Living Word*, 105.

The pressing need for salvation remains, but the heart and character of the worshiper is brought into focus. Psalm 62 describes devotion to God and confidence in the Lord's deliverance. The superscription dedicates this David psalm to Jeduthun, one of the three worship leaders during David and Solomon's reign (1 Chron 16:41-42; 2 Chron 5:12; see Ps 39). The message of the psalm is clear, but the linguistic ambiguity of the Hebrew particle *'ak* presents a translation challenge. "It is an emphasizer," writes Kidner, "to underline a statement or to point a contrast; its insistent repetition gives the psalm a tone of special earnestness."²⁴⁸ The word occurs six times in the psalm at the beginning of verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9. The NIV replicates the emphasis by placing the word first in each line that it appears and translating it as a positive declarative, "truly" (v. 1, 2, 6), "yes" (v.5), and "surely" (v. 4, 9). The ESV translates the word restrictively as "only" or "alone" and embeds the word in the sentence:

"For God *alone* my soul waits in silence" (v. 1)
 "He *only* is my rock and my salvation" (v. 2)
 "They *only* plan to thrust him down from his high position" (v.4)
 "For God *alone*, O my soul, wait in silence" (v. 5)
 "He *only* is my rock and my salvation" (v. 6)
 "Those of low estate are *but (only)* a breath" (v. 9)

In order to accent the psalmist's emphasis and to remain true to the Hebrew original, it may be best to combine the declarative and restrictive sense of the word in our English translations.

"*Truly* my soul waits in silence for God *alone*" (v. 1)
 "*Truly* he *only* is my rock and my salvation" (v. 2)
 "*Surely* they *only* intend to topple me" (v. 4)
 "*Yes*, my soul, find rest in God *alone*" (v. 5)
 "*Truly* he *only* is my rock and my salvation" (v. 6)
 "*Surely* the lowborn are *only* a breath" (v. 9)

Quiet Confidence

*Truly my soul finds rest in God;
 my salvation comes from him.
 Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
 he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
 How long will you assault me?
 Would all of you throw me down –
 this leaning wall, this tottering fence?
 Surely they intend to topple me
 from my lofty place;
 they take delight in lies.*

²⁴⁸ Kidner, Psalms, 221.

*With their mouths they bless,
but in their hearts they curse.*
Psalm 62:1-4

Psalm 62:2 literally reads, “Yes, my soul is silence for God alone.” The implication being that the worshiper is waiting or trusting in the Lord silently.²⁴⁹ This is in contrast with Psalm 61:1, “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.” Needless to say, both approaches are valid and necessary, the former proceeding the latter, because “the words have all been said –or perhaps no words will come—and the issue rests with Him alone.”²⁵⁰ In any case, the psalmist has reached a place of quiet confidence in God. He declares God to be his sole source of salvation.

It is worth noting that silence is a major theme in Psalm 39, another psalm dedicated to Jeduthun. But in Psalm 39 the psalmist is unable to trust himself to verbalize his grief. He is too upset to speak. But in Psalm 62, the heart as well as the voice are quieted and at peace. Silence in Psalm 62 is not attributed to fear and confusion but to peace and confidence. Instead of feeling vulnerable, the psalmist feels safe and secure in the presence of God. In the words of Psalm 131, “I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother” (Ps 131:2).

There are many situations in the gospel narratives where we can imagine Jesus praying Psalm 62. Instead of reacting negatively to those who were out to get him, Jesus manifested a quiet confidence in the Father’s love and a total trust in the Father’s will. We picture him calm and unshakable in tense exchanges with the religious leaders and resolute in accomplishing salvation. Jesus transposes the psalmist’s descriptive language for God, “my rock,” “my salvation,” and “my fortress,” into his parables (“like a wise man who built his house on the rock” – Matt 6:24) and promises (“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” – Matt 16:18). As with the psalmist, Jesus uses these Old Testament metaphors to stand for God who alone is our present and eternal security, salvation and refuge.

Quiet confidence – a defiant serenity in the face of persistent opposition and harassment – demonstrates devotion on the other side of desperation. This is the discipline of surrender that says “yes” to God and “no” to the anger and resentment that can so easily build in trying circumstances. Jesus is our model for willed passivity. His quiet dignity and unbending resolve shapes our praying imagination and inspires our character. More often than not the Christian looks silly to the world. Here we are, still believing in the Incarnate One when the world tells us to believe in ourselves; still trusting in the Savior when the world trusts in subjective feelings and secularism; still worshiping the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while the world worships money, sex, and power. Should we be surprised that the way of the cross looks indefensible to the world?

In his prayer David addresses those who persist in trying to bring him down. His quiet confidence in God alone endures in a culture of chronic hatred, on-going persecution, and constant opposition. He marvels that his attackers and abusers never give up. He likens his vulnerability to

²⁴⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:367.

²⁵⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 221.

a broken down wall or a tottering fence just waiting to come down. His enemies fully intend to topple him and destroy him. They envy his position and seek to exploit his weakness. “Evil,” writes Kidner, “being ruthlessly competitive, is attracted to weakness, to give a last push to whatever is leaning or tottering.”²⁵¹ Ironically, this besetting enemy, who is intent on destroying the worshiper, makes an outward show of support while doing everything in his power behind-the-scenes to ruin him. He blesses with his mouth and curses in his heart. Sadly, this tragic dynamic is present in churches. Well-intentioned dragons make a public show of piety as they work to run good people out of *their* church. They sing hymns on Sunday and then through the week gossip and plot mischief. Like the man who literally made life hell for a young pastor. He saw his service on the church’s elder board as a mandate to get rid of the pastor. At every turn he was on the pastor’s case, condemning his preaching, slandering his character, questioning his work ethic, and challenging his sincerity. He went to every board meeting with the intent to do battle against the pastor. Make no mistake, the psalmist does not want us to be naive about the ways of the wicked and if we are worshiping in the spirit of Psalm 62 we will not be blind-sided.

In Christ Alone

*Yes, my soul, find rest (silence) in God (alone);
my hope comes from him.
Truly, he (alone) is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
My salvation and my honor depend on God;
he is my mighty rock, my refuge.
Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.*
Psalm 62:5-8

Having described his enemies as “the most dangerous kind, emerging from the ranks of would-be supporters,” the psalmist declares once again his total dependence on God alone.²⁵² His willed passivity has determined “to brood” no longer on “the traitors and their plots” and to drive out anxiety and fear with thoughts of God.²⁵³ Instead of dwelling on his own weakness and vulnerability he dwells on God who is his hope, his rock, his salvation, and his fortress. His fate does not lie in the hands of his assailants, but in the hands of God, who is his mighty rock and refuge. The psalmist declares boldly, “My salvation and my honor depend on God.” He prays against the fear and anxiety that is altogether natural and human in the face of such opposition by affirming his firm belief in the power of God to deliver him.

His prayerful spiritual direction extends beyond himself to others. He invites the people of God to affirm their trust in God alone and “to pour out [their] hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (Ps 62:8). Quiet unshakable confidence in God begins with pouring out our heart to God, knowing that he hears us, he loves us, and that he alone has the power to save. Jesus echoes the message of this psalm when he said, “Do not worry about your life” (Matthew 6:25). In the Sermon on the

²⁵¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 221.

²⁵² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:370.

²⁵³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 222.

Mount Jesus extends the prohibition against worry well beyond our enemies to the very essentials of physical life, like food and clothing. “Why do you worry about clothes?” Jesus asked. “See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.” Jesus’ point was basic: “So do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:28-33). Jesus’ reference to pagans seeking these things, presumably as their top priority, follows the psalmist train of thought. Jesus’ contrasting picture between pagan consumption and trust in God tracks the theology of Psalm 62.

God has Spoken

*Surely the lowborn are but (only) a breath,
highborn are but a lie.
If weighed on a balance, they are nothing;
together they are only a breath.
Do not trust in extortion
or put vain hope in stolen goods;
though your riches increase,
do not set your heart on them.
One thing God has spoken,
two things I have heard:
‘Power belongs to you, God,
and with you, Lord is unfailing love’;
and, ‘You reward everyone according to what they have done.’*
Psalm 62:9-12

Humanity on its own and estranged from God has nothing to offer, nothing to fear and nothing to hope for. Goldingay’s translation reads, “Yes, human beings are a breath; mortals are deceit. Going up on scales, they are less than a breath, altogether.”²⁵⁴ The word for “breath” is the key word in Ecclesiastes for “vanity” or “futility.”²⁵⁵ Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase captures the emptiness of humanity apart from God: “Man as such is smoke, woman as such, a mirage. Put them together, they’re nothing; two times nothing is nothing” (Ps 62:9, Message). The psalmist is not disparaging humanity made in the image of God; the psalmist is disparaging what human beings apart from God put their trust in. In our sin nature, we give ourselves to material things. We put our trust in images of worldly success. In our pomp and self-importance we create a facade that is nothing but a lie.²⁵⁶ The apostle James captures this verdict in a line that echoes the psalm, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

The psalmist extends his critique to how we earn our living. He implies that the temptation to

²⁵⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:250.

²⁵⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:372.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

become like his attackers threatens the faithful. Material gain at the expense of others is to be avoided at all costs. It is especially tempting when economic systems legitimize or legalize exploitation and oppression. Getting away with it is no excuse for anyone who fears the Lord. To be absorbed in acquiring riches, even by means acceptable to society, “counts as no less perilous than a life of crime.”²⁵⁷ The apostle Paul addressed this concern boldly and reassuringly, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides for us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim 6:17).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not rule out responsible living. He did not say, “Take no thought.” He said, “Do not worry.” Nor did Jesus equate anxious thought with hard work. What he forbids is a “crippling anxiety that drives one to seek security by one’s own efforts apart from the Father.”²⁵⁸ When we stop looking to our heavenly Father and start looking to ourselves, we are in trouble. Even the basic necessities of life were meant to become the raw material for trust in God. We can say all we want about our heart being right with God and our devotion being to him alone, but if we are constantly fretting about food or medicine or rent or car payments, our commitment is empty rhetoric. A refusal to worry and complain proves devotion on the other side of desperation.²⁵⁹

The undeniable fact that God has spoken definitively, not once, but twice, explains why David uses the particle *'ak* six times in this psalm and why we have translated the word declaratively and restrictively. The psalmist insists on asserting every truth in this psalm emphatically and earnestly, not because he is dogmatic, but because God has spoken. Everything said in this psalm rests on the unambiguous revelation and authority of God.

Three truths have been revealed and reiterated so that there is no doubt in the mind of the faithful. The first is this: “Power belongs to God.” The second, “With you, Lord, is unfailing love.” The third, “You reward everyone according to what they have done.” Truly, all power, all mercy, all justice, belong to God alone. The quiet confidence of the psalmist rests upon these three interrelated truths. The Psalm is rich in metaphors, illustrating power (rock, fortress) and mercy (salvation, refuge), but it is this third truth on just rewards that may require some further reflection.

Calvin was quick to say that the faithful are rewarded not for what we have achieved by their merit, but for what they have done by God’s mercy. “It is with a very different design than to encourage any such opinion [works based righteousness], that the Spirit promises a reward to our works – it is to animate us in the ways of obedience, and not to inflame that impious self-confidence which cuts up salvation by the very roots.” Calvin emphasized that God’s judgment of our works is based first on our forgiveness in Christ and second upon “the divine condescension” that accepts our works “notwithstanding all their imperfections.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 223.

²⁵⁸ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 336.

²⁵⁹ Webster, *The Easy Yoke*, 178-179.

²⁶⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 432.

On several occasions Jesus' teaching echoed the theology of Psalm 62. When he taught the cost of discipleship, he promised his disciples that he would bring about a definitive judgment. "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done" (Matthew 16:27). In the parable of the sheep and goats, the king distinguishes between those on his right, the sheep, and those on his left, the goats, by what they have done. To the sheep on his right he says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." And to the goats on his left he says, "Truly, I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." The King's judgment is final. "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:40, 45-46).

Jesus and the psalmist are on the same page. The theology of reward and judgment distinguishes between works' righteousness and the work of righteousness – between merit-based self-righteousness and mercy-based righteousness. This is consistent with the apostle Paul's emphasis, "For it is by grace 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. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:8-10). The Reformers insisted that we are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. True faith in Christ is always accompanied by the works of Christ.

Psalms 61-63 form a triptych, a three part picture of devotion that shifts attention away from the causes of danger and the need for deliverance and focuses on the worshiper. The enemy, whether it be the sinful self or a conspiratorial coup, remains an ever present threat, but in these three psalms the worshiper's passion for God dominates. In the first picture, the psalmist articulates a deep desire for God. He cries out to God out of the depth of his being. His vowed commitment is grandly inclusive of all he is and ever will be (Ps 61). In the second picture, he declares his quiet confidence in God alone. God is his rock, his salvation, his fortress, his hope, and his refuge. He confidently declares that he will never be shaken (Ps 62). In the third picture, David expresses his longing for God (Ps 63). He seeks after God with every fiber of his being. Every physical, emotional, and spiritual longing finds its true fulfillment in God alone. Taken together these three psalms guide us in the worship and praise of the triune God. In the Spirit, they exemplify a passion for Christ, to the glory of the Father, in the fullness of grace and truth.

The superscription attributes Psalm 63 to King David when he was in the desert of Judah presumably having fled Jerusalem because of the Absalom conspiracy (2 Sam 15-19). In Book I we identified Psalms 3-7 with Absalom's rebellion. This collection of psalms at the beginning of the psalter focuses our attention on the humiliation and vulnerability of David. They comprise his passion narrative and demonstrate David's desperate need for Yahweh's deliverance. Psalm 63 may fit that historical occasion, but its placement in Book II of the psalter is intended to reveal the heart and longing of the true worshiper.

Yearning for God

*You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
I cling to you;*

your right hand upholds me.
Psalm 63:1-8

The maxim of our age is emphatic: “I *think* therefore I am.” “I *desire*, therefore I am.” “I *feel*, therefore I am.” “I *dream*, therefore I am.” Our age believes that “we the people” define who wish to be. Identity, meaning, worth, and purpose are sourced in the self. The existential self has become an imperial self, independently conquering and colonizing, setting up self-rule and declaring, “Long live *me!*” Western Enlightenment Cartesian thought has had a profound impact on the way people think about themselves and how they act. The Puritan who said when you ungod God you unman man was surely right. We have forgotten who we are because we have forgotten God.

We are what we desire, but strictly speaking it is not desire alone that defines us but what and for whom we desire. The psalmist boldly declares his absolute devotion, affection, and obedience for God. “Oh God, You are my God! Earnestly I seek you.” His self-worth is not a human achievement but a divine endowment. He embraces the truth that he is made in the image of God. He knows in the depth of his soul that he was made for communion and community, for rational reflection and righteous obedience, for worship and work. He is called into a personal, face-to-face relationship with God and his longing answers that call.

The essence of who we are comes from God and is received by us as a gift. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). We have a soul because God created us with a soul. This means that we are not our own. That which is most dearly “me” is not mine. The genesis of soul-making lies not in ourselves but in our Creator and Redeemer. Jesus made this clear: the value of our soul is beyond our means: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Who we are and to whom we belong is a critical issue. We were never meant to be me-centered.²⁶¹ David leaves no doubt that he is radically God-centered. He even goes so far as to say that God’s love is better than life itself (Ps 63:3). That passionate conviction, delivered long before there was a firm understanding of the promise of everlasting life, cuts across the centuries of salvation history and relates directly to Jesus’ call to discipleship: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

Psalm 63 is packed with desire and all these desires are gathered into one.²⁶² For David worship is a verb. It is action. Worship is seeking, thirsting, longing, beholding, and glorifying. And the singular object of his worship is God. Worship sees God through the eyes of faith and beholds his power and glory. His voice and hands are lifted up in praise. His mind dwells on God, through the night he remembers him. Worshipers cling to God. They cleave to God. They stick to God. They hold on tightly to the right hand of God.

²⁶¹ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 43.

²⁶² Spurgeon, “Psalm 63,” *The Treasury of David*.

David's passionate whole person search for God was driven by his wilderness experience. We do not know whether he was in a literal desert or in an emotional place that felt like a desert. What we do know is that the essential wilderness is clearly marked on the map of spiritual formation. This "dry and weary land" is found in many places. As it was with Jesus in the Judean wilderness so it is with us. God leads us into difficult places. Jesus in the wilderness fits a pattern seen throughout the Bible: Job on the ash heap, Abraham on mount Moriah, Joseph in Egypt, David at En-Gedi, Jeremiah in the pit, and Daniel in the royal court.

The list of wilderness experiences is long. We end up in places where we feel abandoned by God, but it is there in the wilderness that our desire for God grows and deepens. The wilderness can be a university campus or a busy office. Sitting in a cancer clinic with an chemotherapy intravenous line in your veins counts as a dry and weary land. Jesus endured forty days in the wilderness, confronting the seduction of the devil at the point of his greatest weakness and vulnerability, but it left him resolute in his determination to seek the Father's will. Like our Lord, we are led by the Spirit where we don't want to go to end up where we ought to be. We go thirsty and hungry for the sake of the Gospel.

David relates his yearning for God to four physical locations: the wilderness, the sanctuary, the banquet, and the bedroom. He compares his whole person experience of God to these places in order to better understanding and round out his description of his desire for God. The wilderness provokes his thirst for God and stands in marked contrast to his experience of God in the sanctuary. The house of God inspires his lips and limbs to praise God with his whole being. The sanctuary is filled with the power of God's glory and satisfies his appetite for God the way a sumptuous dinner satisfies. On his bed at night he remembers all that God has done for him. He meditates on God through the night. He is as safe and secure as a little chick under the mother hen's wings chirping his praise.

Two final relational images sum up the psalmist's whole person search for God. David clings to God the way a husband and wife "cleave" together (Gen 2:24) and the way Ruth clung to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). But David understands that even the power to cling, to cleave, to stick to God comes from God. "My soul followeth hard after thee" (Ps 63:8 KJV) is made possible by God's right hand upholding him. The only reason we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling is because God works in us to will and to act according to his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13). Our passion for God is always upheld by God's passion for us.

David's devotion to God is best expressed in the line, "Your love is better than life." True intensity meets true ultimacy in a declaration of desire that transcends the many tempting intensities that demand our devotion. But these idols, pursuits, and passions, are devoid of ultimacy and when placed alongside God they rob us of knowing and loving God. For those who cannot identify with David's passion for God, Psalm 63 provokes a crisis of faith. The experience of seeking, thirsting, longing, and clinging to God belongs first to the Lord Jesus who prayed the psalms and then to all who take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus was in the habit of driving his truth home in radical ways. One of the boldest lines he ever

spoke contrasted devotion to him to devotion to family. He said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Let’s be clear. The love of family is an integral part of costly discipleship. What Jesus meant by his radical comparison was that family must never become an excuse that distances us from following him. Loving our family provides the opportunity for loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, strength and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Modify the comparison and you get the Tuscaloosa, Alabama pastor saying on Sunday morning, “If you are truly serious about following Lord Jesus Christ you will hate Alabama football.” Is the love of sports an integral part of cross-bearing discipleship? Yes, indeed, it can be. What Jesus rejects is the temptation to make too much of sports, to turn sports into a god placed alongside Christ. When sports or family or money or music or whatever the intensity may be becomes a competitor against the Lord for our devotion and worship, we need to hear Jesus’ radical word and repent. Nothing was ever meant to be the excuse that distances us from following Christ.²⁶³

The better-than-life-love celebrated in Psalm 63 demands more of God than David imagined when he crafted this psalm. The author of Hebrews stresses that God’s covenant love is based on the better covenant and the better priesthood of Jesus Christ, who gave the better sacrifice in the better tabernacle and who offers the better hope and the better promises. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). This is the better-than-life-love of Jesus Christ.

Anticipating Deliverance

*Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.
They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.
But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glorify in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.*

Psalm 63:9-11

The tone of the psalm abruptly changes as the pending threat and the need for deliverance re-emerges from the shadows. The psalmist boldly states as a fact that those who seek his life will be destroyed. They are marked for destruction and doomed to the pit. “Destroyers shall be destroyed. Those who hunt souls shall be themselves the victims.”²⁶⁴ They will be slaughtered by the sword so that their blood runs into the ground like water.²⁶⁵ Their unburied bodies will be eaten by jackals. This great reversal is a matter of fact declared without gloating. He has no intention of taking matters into his own hands. Vindication, not vengeance is the theme of his

²⁶³ Webster, “Intensity without Ultimacy: A Christian Perspective on Sports,” *The Other Journal*, March 21, 2016. <https://theotherjournal.com/2016/03/21/intensity-without-ultimacy-christian-perspective-sports/>

²⁶⁴ Spurgeon, “Psalm 63,” *Treasury of David*.

²⁶⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:262.

conclusion. Ross writes, “These enemies would have seen David die in the wilderness and his carcass finished off by packs of jackals, but what they had hoped for him will actually be their end.”²⁶⁶ Christians read this and know that God is patient “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The world may show contempt for the riches of God’s “kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead [all of us] to repentance,” but they are only “storing up wrath” against themselves “for the day of God’s wrath” (Rom 2:4-5). As repulsive as David’s picture of judgment may be, it is the truth confirmed throughout the Bible. As Calvin says of those who are adamant in their refusal to turn to God and receive his mercy, “. . . This is only preparatory to their everlasting destruction.”²⁶⁷

In sharp contrast to the horrific destruction of destroyers is the simple uplifting declaration of joy: “But the king will rejoice in God.” Deliverance, not destruction, is the king’s future along with all those who join him in swearing allegiance to God. Together, they will glory in God’s truth and power. Meanwhile “the mouths of liars will be silenced.” They will be “stopped up.”²⁶⁸ Their falsehood exposed; their lies will cease. They form a stark contrast to the heart-felt cry of Psalm 61, the quiet confidence of Psalm 62, and the soulful yearning of Psalm 63. King and people together will say, “Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.”

²⁶⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:388.

²⁶⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 442.

²⁶⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:262.

Psalm 64 brings this sequence of deliverance psalms (51-64) to a climax. The psalmist has examined evil from a variety of angles for the purpose of pleading passionately for God's deliverance. David embeds his theology of evil in the rhythm of worship and praise right where it belongs. Instead of leaving the depiction of evil to novelists, artists, and journalists, the psalmist assumes the poetic burden of naming and describing evil. He does this without using scare tactics and leveraging fear. His purpose is not to sensationalize how the bad the world is; his purpose is to highlight how great our dependence upon God must be. He leads us in prayer to encourage and embolden true worshipers in their stand against evil and fear.

By contrast our church services mention evil only in bland generalities and in clichéd abstractions. Evil is sanitized, spiritualized, and suburbanized in an innocuous religious vernacular that promotes indifference at the expense of comfort and hope. We have not learned from the psalmist how to deal with the reality of evil. We neglect the psalms because we cannot bring ourselves to pray the way David prayed. The psalms sound like a foreign language emanating out of a violent age that has little to do with us. Yet night after night we witness on TV the carnage of terrorist attacks, bombings, and gang violence. We track the opioid addiction crisis, teenage suicides, and inner city murders. Violence surrounds us, but we edit the psalms of enemy talk. Up-beat worship bolsters our self-confidence, pumps up our optimism, and reinforces our shallow view of the world. We ought to allow the Psalms to shape our theology of evil. The Psalms go deep into danger and deliverance and we should follow.

Lament

*Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint;
protect my life from the threat of the enemy.
Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked,
from the plots of evildoers.
They sharpen their tongues like swords
and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.
They shoot from ambush at the innocent;
they shoot suddenly, without fear.
They encourage each other in evil plans,
they talk about hiding their snares;
they say, "Who will see it?"
They plot injustice and say,
"We have devised a perfect plan!"
Surely the human mind and heart are cunning.*

Psalm 64:1-6

God is first and foremost our principal ally in the fight against terror. Prayer is not a pious cop-out but an essential first step in steeling the soul against the forces of evil whether in high places or in hidden terror cells. Law enforcement's chief weapon against terrorism is intelligence. The

ability to identify and track terrorists is crucial. Their goal is to expose secret cells, intercept communications, and disrupt their plots before they can carry out their vicious attack against innocent civilians. Intelligence is to the security services what prayer is to the worshiper. Without prayer, we lose perspective. We become paralyzed by fear, easily distraught, and susceptible to the enemy's intimidation. The psalmist turns to God, not in an abdication of responsibility or as a last resort, but for the wisdom necessary to face the enemy. God is his protector and deliverer. God supplies the intelligence and the insight required to understand and persevere against evildoers. Prayer unmasks the terrorist's hate-filled hoax perpetrated by the devil and destined for judgment.

The psalmist prays against the believer's number one enemy, fear. The dread of what the enemy threatens can intimidate and render the righteous powerless. This is why the psalmist prays for protection. Hatred invokes fear and unless that fear is conquered in the minds and hearts of the people of God it will lead to anguish, anger, resentment, vitriolic rhetoric, anxiety, timidity, acquiescence, and passivity. We are prone to these sinful reactions and that is why we pray, "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" (Ps 23:4). We embrace the wisdom of Proverbs: "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Prov 29:25).

The divine imperative for the people of God applies equally well to the New Testament people of God: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut 31:6). We agree with the apostle Paul's spiritual direction: "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 your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6-7).

In the upper room on the night that Jesus was betrayed he prayed for his disciples that they would experience the full measure of his joy even though the world hated them because of the gospel. Jesus set complete joy and worldly hate in striking juxtaposition, and drove the truth home that the disciple's fearless joy did not rest on themselves and their circumstances. "In this world you will have trouble," is a fact that cannot be ignored nor escaped. But the fact that Jesus has overcome the world through his cross and resurrection ought to bring out the best in his disciples (John 16:33).

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.²⁶⁹ "So we say with confidence," wrote the author of Hebrews, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Heb 13:6).

In Psalm 63 the psalmist describes his yearning for God. He earnestly seeks, thirsts, and longs for

²⁶⁹ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 98.

God. But in Psalm 64 the principal action belongs to the terrorist who conspires, plots, slanders, deceives, ambushes, and strategizes. Good and evil are placed side-by-side in a comparison that matches devotion to God with its polar and demonic opposite. By its very nature goodness is aboveboard and communal; wickedness is conspiratorial and secretive. Evildoers plot. The righteous serve.

The psalmist paints describes a situation that is surprisingly modern. Violence is rooted in the ideology of hate. The psalmist highlights the power of hate speech and traces its source to a crafty, devious mind (Ps 64:6). “Cruel words” are deadly and diabolical reasoning gives a twisted rational to violence. Hate filled, abusive, dehumanizing, manipulative, and slanderous words are powerful weapons of mass destruction. Without words there would be no racism or sexism or bigotry or betrayal or jihad. The psalmist knows the power of words to incite violence and inspire the weak to hate. Words are a catalyst for evil.

The devil has us right where he wants us. Centuries of tyranny and oppression have given way to personal liberties. People are free to live and work and travel without punitive restrictions and fear of persecution. But radical Islamists use these rights and liberties to plant hidden terror cells. Urban gangs engage in turf battles shooting to death children on their front porch. The drug trade enslaves millions of people in a downward spiral of addiction and destruction. And those employed to enforce the laws are so fearful for their lives that they are on a hair-trigger ready to kill with the slightest provocation. Under the cover of liberty and freedom anarchists, jihadists, white supremacists, abortionists, and power brokers of all kinds, “encourage each other in evil plans” and “plot injustice and say, ‘We have devised a perfect plan!’” (Ps 64:5-6). And God says, “Not so fast.”

Quick Reversal

*But God will shoot them with his arrows;
they will suddenly be struck down.
He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin;
all who see them will shake their heads in scorn.
All people will fear;
they will proclaim the works of God
and ponder what he has done.
The righteous will rejoice in the Lord
and take refuge in him;
all the upright in heart will glory in him!*

Psalm 64:7-10

The psalmist is confident that the elaborate strategies of the wicked will come to nothing *suddenly*. God’s arrows will burst their bubble. All their plotting and networking and hating will be shot down suddenly. Before the wicked know it, it will all be over. “The brevity of God’s countermeasures, after the elaborate scheming of the wicked, tells its own decisive tale.”²⁷⁰ The frightful havoc caused by terrorists is never minimized nor trivialized but the psalmist is

²⁷⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 227.

confident that it will be squelched by God *suddenly*. God has engineered evil to be self-destructive. The rhetoric of hate and the power of propaganda will boomerang and come back against its perpetrators and destroy them. “The shooters will be shot; those who planned to destroy the innocent will be destroyed – by one powerful word from God.”²⁷¹ God gives people up to their sinful desires and their shameful lusts and their evil plans (Rom 1).

The popular reaction to God’s judgment of the wicked and their sudden downfall is sobering. “All people will fear; they will proclaim the works of God and ponder what he has done.” Justice is awe inspiring. When goodness prevails and evil is put down even the cynical are forced to take note. Goldingay writes, “A speech act with positive significance replaces all the speech acts designed to have malicious effect.”²⁷² The faithful react with joy. David’s carefully crafted lament has been heard and answered by the Lord (Yahweh) whose mighty judgment delivers and vindicates the upright in heart. The beauty of the psalm itself reflects the joy and safety experienced by the people of God. The symmetry and balance of Psalm 64, observes Wilcock, exudes a settled confidence in the Lord of the universe and the hope of the world.

In God, protection (v. 1);
secret conspiracy (v. 2);
tongues, arrows, sudden shooting (vv. 3-4);
hidden cunning (vv. 5-6);
sudden shooting, arrows, tongues (vv. 7-8);
public proclamation (v. 9);
in the Lord, refuge (v. 10).²⁷³

²⁷¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:402.

²⁷² Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:270.

²⁷³ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 224.

We move from the psalms of existential crisis to psalms of exuberant praise. Psalm 65 is a new day. Having explored evil's many dangers and the pressing need for divine deliverance (Ps 51-64), the psalmist shifts decisively from a concentration on evil to a focus on blessing. Heartache and trauma gives way to the big picture of God's faithfulness. As we have seen throughout the Psalms certain psalms are designed to reorient the worshiper. We are given a fresh start. Powerful creation/wisdom/doxology psalms (Psalms 8, 19, 24, 25, 29, 33, 45,65) inspire the people of God to regroup under the majesty and sovereignty of God. The intensity of the daily struggle fades as doxology dominates the horizon. God's loving forgiveness and cosmic power eclipse the human struggle. These powerful praise psalms inspire the worshiper's well-being and strengthen her sanity. We need their relief and the truth they proclaim.

In this beautifully crafted psalm King David delights in the grand sweep of redemption and creation. God in Zion is present to all people, offering mercy and forgiveness, stilling the raging seas, calming the nations, filling every morning and every evening with his wonders. The two aspects of God's provision, "as meeting our most hidden and most obvious forms of hunger," the need for physical food and spiritual nourishment, our need for material well-being and our need for forgiveness "are held in strict balance."²⁷⁴ The psalmist pictures God as the Lord of the universe and the Hope of the world. God is the ultimate environmentalist, the master irrigationist, and the paramount farmer. The psalmist pictures the farmer's carts overflowing with produce as he makes his way home. David envisions meadows clothed with flocks and valleys dressed in grain. The silent joy of praise shouts to all. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. "The hills are alive with the sound of music."

The Prelude of Silence

*Praise awaits you, our God in Zion;
to you our vows will be fulfilled.
You who answer prayer,
to you all people will come.
When we were overwhelmed by sins,
you forgave our transgressions.
Blessed are those you choose
and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house,
of your holy temple.*

Psalm 65:1-4

The opening line in English, "Praise awaits you," is an interpretation of the literal Hebrew which reads, "For you praise is silence, O God of Zion."²⁷⁵ Or, "To you silence is praise, God in

²⁷⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 236.

²⁷⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:405.

Zion.”²⁷⁶ The link between silence and waiting recalls Psalm 62, “For God alone my soul waits in silence” (Ps 62:1). It is the hushed silence that sets the scene before intentional worship. It is like the orchestra, tuned and ready to play, falls silent, just before the conductor walks onto the platform. It is the silence of preparation and anticipation, the reverent prelude to personal prayer and songs of praise. The prophet Habakkuk may echo the psalmist when he writes, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab 2:20). “Silence is nothing else but waiting for God’s Word and coming from God’s Word with a blessing.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer continues, “But everybody knows that this is something that needs to be practiced and learned, in these days when talkativeness prevails. Real silence, real stillness, really holding one’s tongue comes only as the sober consequence of spiritual stillness.”²⁷⁷

Silence is a discipline of devotion. It is not an emptying of the mind; it is an act of remembering God’s answered prayers and God’s fulfilled promises. The silence calls forth a pledge or a vow from the worshiper declaring that the God of Zion is his sole object of trust and salvation. The repetition of “to you” focuses on the object of our praise. We come into worship with a personal vowed commitment to sing the praises of God. And we are not alone, “to you all people will come.” The true vision of worship is always inclusive of everyone both now and in eternity. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a sign that all people everywhere are invited into the presence of God by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to the glory of the Heavenly Father. Jesus’ great commission commands all disciples to take the invitation global. “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The apostle John envisioned a great multitude “that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9).

During the prelude of silence we are reminded of the forgiveness of our sins by the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The whole sacrificial system that grounded the psalmist’s understanding of forgiveness points us to Christ and his cross. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Left to ourselves we are overwhelmed by our sin and the sin of the world, but God has acted on our behalf to atone for our sins and the sins of the world. No matter how good and well-meaning we may perceive ourselves to be, we must acknowledge that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But praise God, we quickly add, “and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” The apostle Paul goes on to explain, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith” (Rom 3:23-25).²⁷⁸

Faith in God’s saving grace is accompanied by gratitude to God for his electing grace. The worshiper realizes that God’s gracious initiative creates access to God and draws us into his presence. We are cleaned up and forgiven, restored and healed, and made to feel welcome as guests of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Peterson paraphrases these verses: “We all arrive

²⁷⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:272.

²⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

²⁷⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:415. Ross writes: “The verb translated ‘atone’ means ‘expiate, pacify, atone.’ The word ‘atonement’ describes the work of God by which sin is expiated or purged and the penitent is placed in a peaceful relationship to the Lord. The psalmist knew that God removes sin and all its consequences through the sacrificial ritual; so atonement was the solution to his being overwhelmed by transgression.”

at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, our sins too much for us – but you get rid of them once and for all. Blessed are the chosen! Blessed the guest at home in your place!” (Ps 65:2-4, The Message). The apostle Paul elaborated on the psalmist’s perspective in his letter to the church at Ephesus. His opening praise-filled eulogy celebrates the grace of God. We are chosen, predestined, loved, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:3-14).

Songs of Joy

*You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,
God our Savior,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and the farthest seas,
who formed the mountains by your power,
having armed yourself with strength,
who stilled the roaring seas,
the roaring of the waves,
and the turmoil of the nations.
The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy.*

Psalm 65:5-8

Psalm 65 brings the deliverance psalms (51-64) to a climax with an assertion that calls forth praise. “You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior.” This is the answer that we have been waiting and longing for – God himself in action, revealing his awesome deeds of righteousness and bringing forth salvation. God alone is Lord of all, all sovereign in history and all powerful in creation. He is no tribal god, no ethnic deity. “For God so loved the world that he gave” himself (John 3:16). God our Savior is the hope of the world, the creator of the universe, and the Lord of the nations. Our prayers may be preoccupied with bullies and betrayers, but the answer we need is God himself. We need much more than relief from burdens and escape from dangers, we need the righteousness of God. God is the answer, but not a stripped down generic god who lacks the character and deeds of the God who saves. “God our Savior” has been declaring and revealing himself from the beginning, until finally he became one of us. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Hymn writer Margaret Clarkson describes the answer this way: “*Lord of the universe, hope of the world // Lord of the limitless reaches of space // here on this planet you put on our flesh // vastness confined in the womb of a maid // born in our likeness you ransomed our race.*”

The Irish rock band U2’s “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for” offers an anthem to the world’s unmet spiritual yearning. More celebration than lament Bono sings praise to the never ending quest for meaning. The heroic self bravely faces life’s adventure without answers but with a passion for the search. For the Christian, the song may suggest pressing on to take hold of Christ and his Kingdom (Phil 3:12-14), as implied by the line, “I believe that when Kingdom

comes // Then all colors bleed into one.” But for many indoctrinated souls the lyrics affirm that there are no answers only a search. It is believed that there is no infallible revelation of God; there’s only an indefinite unending search for meaning. The psalmist contradicts the spirit of the age – any age – when he celebrates the answer given by God: “You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior . . .” Without apology the psalmist revels in the fact that God has acted. God has spoken. The worshiper joyfully receives the message of God. There is nothing humiliating or subservient about this reception. Reason’s quest eclipses cynicism and skepticism and rejoices in the wonder and beauty of God’s revelation. The heart’s desire is met with God’s love and care. There is nothing demeaning or dehumanizing about this understanding and experience. Nor does the psalmist imply that the worshiper has a handle on God to manipulate and package up the truth of God for consumer demand. The power of God to form the mountains and to still the roaring seas leaves the worshiper in awe and wonder. “When we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit,” wrote Oswald Chambers, “we never talk in cold logic, we talk in passionate inspiration.”²⁷⁹

The God who stills the roaring of the seas and the tumult of the nations is sovereign over creation and human history. Jesus’ actions on the Sea of Galilee correspond to the description of God in Psalm 65. Jesus was asleep in the boat in the midst of a fierce storm, when he was awakened by his disciples who feared for their lives. “Master, Master, we’re going to drown!” Jesus “got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters” and calmed the sea. “In fear and amazement,” these hardened fishermen asked one another, “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, they obey him” (Luke 8:22-25). The apostle Paul echoed the theology of Psalm 65 when he wrote, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17).

The psalmist puts the tumult of the sea and the turmoil of the nations in perspective. God is sovereign. Everything must be seen through the eyes of faith. Jesus drew attention to what the disciples missed, “Where is your faith?” We live in a world where nature has gone wild and the nations are in uproar, but instead of finding excuses for dismay, the psalmist finds reasons for worship: “The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy” (Ps 65:8). The antidote to fear and anger and apathy and resentment is to look at creation and history through the eyes of faith. Over and against the roar of nature and the rage of politics, the psalmist finds lyrical beauty in God’s awesome wonders and in the rhythms of grace. Morning’s dawn and evening sunset call forth songs of joy. From East to West and from North to South, the whole earth is filled with the glory of God. Even in the midst of the storm or from a prison cell it makes sense to praise God.

Creator Care

*You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,*

²⁷⁹ Chambers, *So Send I You*, 21.

*for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.*

Psalm 65:9-13

Nature alone is a myth refuted patiently by the psalmist who intentionally gives credit where credit is due: “You who answer prayer // You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds // You care for the land and water it // You enrich it abundantly // You prepare the grain // You drench its furrows // You soften it with showers // You crown the year with your bounty.” God is the author of creation care and wisdom behooves us to join him in that endeavor. The God who calms the turbulent seas is also the world’s irrigationist, who waters the dry earth and ordains the earth’s abundance. The psalmist pictures God as a farmer returning from the harvest fields with a cart brimming to overflowing with fresh produce. Human industry is overshadowed by God’s gracious provision. The impulse to pride in human effort is checked. The psalmist surveys the wilderness, the hills, the meadows and the valleys and hears a silent symphony of praise. God has clothed the earth with grasslands, and wild flowers and flocks and grain. Creation shouts for joy and sings, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3).

This exuberant psalm of thanksgiving begins with an exclamation, “Shout for joy to God, all the earth!” and then never lets up on the pulsating rhythm of worship and invitation. We are not asked if we feel like worshipping. Nor are we instructed to wait for the mood to strike. The psalmist leads us in worship: Shout, Sing, Speak, and then Sing some more. The act of worship shapes the emotions of the worshiper, and not the other way around. We are meant to worship our way into feelings, not feel our way into worship. The whole earth is summoned to praise “the glory of his name” *gloriously!* This grand and vital worship is directed to the one and only sovereign God and is “never trivial, never pretentious.”²⁸⁰

Shout!

*Shout for joy to God, all the earth!
Sing the glory of his name;
make his praise glorious.
Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power
that your enemies cringe before you.
All the earth bows down to you;
they sing praise to you,
they sing the praises of your name.”*

Psalm 66:1-4

Worship in spirit and in truth expresses the confidence of God’s people. The psalmist extols the greatness of God’s strength so much so that even God’s enemies “come cringing” to him. They are forced to pay homage and acknowledge his awesome sovereignty.²⁸¹ Whether they cower in forced submission (Ps 18:44) or bow in humble worship, we know that sooner or later “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). Peter exhorted believers to “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 Pet 2:12).

Glory is a difficult concept to grasp. The Old Testament meaning of glory (*kāvôd*) is related to a verb meaning “to be heavy” (*kāvêd*). Glory belongs to that which is *weighty*, conveying the idea of *importance, significance, and preeminence*. The psalms emphasize this aspect of God’s glory: “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. . .” (Ps 24:7-8). True worshipers “declare his glory among the nations and his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps 96:3).

Influential people have a certain *gravitas*, pulling people into their orbit like the earth in orbit around the sun. Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may

²⁸⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 234.

²⁸¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:432

glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him” (John 17:1-2). There is no one who has greater *gravitas* and greater glory than the Son who is the radiance of God’s glory (Heb 1:3). We never would have imagined that the weightiness of God’s glory would be revealed at the cross. But God’s love determined that crucifixion and glorification meet here in Christ’s Passion for our salvation. “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” (Heb 2:10).

Redemptive Thanksgiving

*Come and see what God has done,
his awesome deeds for mankind!
He turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the waters on foot –
come, let us rejoice in him.
He rules forever by his power,
his eyes watch the nations –
let not the rebellious rise up against him.*

Psalm 66:5-7

We should be quick to hear this “come and see” invitation as a gospel invitation. It was what Philip said after he met Jesus to a skeptical Nathaniel, “Come and see” (John 1:46). Like an artist with a quick sketch the psalmist visualizes two events rooted in history: the Exodus Red Sea crossing following the Passover (Exod 14:21-22) and the Jordan River crossing into the Promised Land (Josh 3:14-17). Two brief lines “mark the beginning and the end of the exodus/wilderness period.”²⁸² Salvation is rooted in history – God’s redemptive history. The Passover and the Promise are remembered. They foreshadow John the Baptist’s bold proclamation, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29). The psalmist’s cryptic lines underscore the truth that these prophetic types point forward to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who crossed the Red Sea and the Jordan river are our redemptive precursors in God’s great salvation drama. They rejoice with us. We rejoice with them, “For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

Tested Thanksgiving

*Praise our God, all peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard;
he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.
For you, God, tested us;
you refined us like silver.
You brought us into prison
and laid burdens on our backs.
You let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water,*

²⁸² Tanner, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, 182-185.

but you brought us to a place of abundance.
Psalm 66:8-12

Two brief allusions to redemption are followed by multiple references to suffering. We may not be prepared for this startling post-salvation picture of affliction and trial, but we know that in the Psalms praise and pain are closely linked. “For you, God, tested us,” is a line that brings us up short and grabs our attention. The psalmist removes a lot of second-guessing, blame-casting, and victimization talk by taking the bad and awful things that happen to us and summing them up as God’s testing. He doesn’t worry about the immediate causes of our suffering. He focuses on ultimate meaning.

The psalmist is intent on caring for the worshiper before the crisis strikes “by building up the immune system of our souls.”²⁸³ Instead of blaming the oppressor, identifying the enemy, and accusing the devil, the psalmist sees the Sovereign Savior as the ultimate tester, who uses suffering to strengthen us and to display his glory. But isn’t this the truth that runs from Genesis to Revelation, namely, that God proves to “the world, the flesh, and the devil” the faithfulness of his people. Abraham on Mount Moriah, knife in hand standing over his one and only son; Job on the ash heap, asking God to end his life, saying, “Then I would still have this consolation – my joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One” (Job 6:10).

If Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), we should expect the same. 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). The author of Hebrews asks, “Have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as *his* children?” He quotes from Proverbs, “God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s *training*, the normal experience of children” (Heb 12:5-7, Message).

The psalmist has elaborated on the many afflictions of the people of God. You have “passed us like silver through refining fires, brought us into hardscrabble country, pushed us to our very limit, road-tested us inside and out, took us to hell and back” (Ps 66:10-12, Message). But then the last line of this stanza breaks the tension, as if to say, “Look at us now. You have saturated us with your goodness. Yes, finally, we’re flourishing.” “You have brought us to a place of abundance.” This sounds like the Old Testament equivalent to “nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom 8:39). One of my students described her experience this way: *“I felt academically ready for seminary. I looked forward to three and half years of immersion in Scripture. I was not prepared for the relational vortex that I would be thrust into. . . . For the first time in my life, I felt like a lonely outsider. Suddenly, I was on the fringe. And it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I desperately needed to be broken of my addiction to popularity and self-absorption. . . . I truly had to find my identity in Christ alone. . . . It freed and challenged me to grapple with my own sinfulness. . . . It penetrated me to such depths that one afternoon I found myself sobbing in the library writing a paper on Romans, so moved by the grace of Christ extended to me a sinner.”*

²⁸³ Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 124.

A few months ago I went through a box of my mother's letters. We moved the box from her apartment when she died. Twelve years passed before I got around to going through these letters. In the process I found a journal that she kept when I was eighteen. She wrote,

“Sometimes during morning devotions the Lord seemed to be impressing me with the thought that something was ahead that would not be easy to bear. . . . I was moved to cry whenever I sensed this, and then I would hear these words, spoken to my heart, ‘I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go’. . . . I felt the Lord reminding me, ‘I must require much.’”

She explained how the Bible plan that she was following directed her to Job: “I thought ‘no’ inwardly feeling that maybe this was because I would need the lessons in Job. . . . I did not really want to need these lessons. I skipped Job and went on to the next portion.” Then she explained that I had joined a book club and the first book to arrive was a verse by verse commentary on the Book of Job. Once again she was reminded, “I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go” (Gen 28:15).

She explained how she had bought Christmas cards early that year and feeling a bit bored she thought, “Why not do Christmas cards.” “I started to get them out,” she wrote, “and then I remembered the only other time I had ever done the Christmas cards this early was fifteen years ago when Don [my dad] was hospitalized for stomach cancer. I stood there for a moment with the cards in hand and then put them back, closed the drawer, and said aloud, ‘No, I won’t do the cards early.’” In the margin of her journal she added, “Many mornings in November after making Doug’s bed, I knelt beside it and prayed for him. I felt the need for this, yet I never felt this need before. I would then go to Jon’s room and after making the bed, kneel and pray for him, too. But I didn’t feel there an urgency as I did in Doug’s room.”

Looking back, my mother saw the various ways the Lord prepared her for my cancer diagnosis. At a routine college physical a lump was detected that proved to be cancerous and from there the psalmist says it all, “For you, God, tested us.” Looking back we see how the Lord prepared us and allowed/permitted/used that which was evil for our good, to deepen our dependence upon him and to strengthen our witness to God’s grace in adversity. Her spiritual immune system had been strengthened.

Joni Eareckson Tada has spent nearly fifty years in a wheelchair. She broke her neck in a diving accident that left her quadriplegic. She has used her entire adult life to testify to the fact that God can use the horror of tragedy and the deep anguish of suffering for his glory. In one of her many books, Joni imagines arriving in heaven with her wheelchair. In her new glorified body and standing on resurrected legs, she will say,

Lord Jesus, do you see that wheelchair over there? Well, you were right. When you put me in it, it was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. I do not think I would have ever known the glory of your grace were it

*not for the weakness of that wheelchair. So thank you, Lord Jesus for that. Now, if you like, you can send that thing off to hell.*²⁸⁴

Navy Seals suffer from post-traumatic stress, but not at the same rate as regular enlisted soldiers. The lower incidence of PTSD among Navy Seals is attributed to the extremely demanding Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training program. The program is not designed to get Seal candidates in shape physically as much as it is to get them in shape mentally and emotionally. Recruits have to be in excellent physical condition to qualify for Seal training. The purpose of the program is to subject recruits to maximum stress in order to test their ability to perform, stay focused and make the right choices under dangerous and hostile conditions. Researchers have concluded that those who survive the 75 percent drop out rate have learned how to control their emotions in a high-stress environment. They have trained their brain to moderate their emotions so that they can think and act more clearly.

The apostle Peter likened “grief in all kinds of trials” to a refiner’s fire that proves the genuineness of our faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). “Dear friends,” he comforts, “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 “fiery ordeal” comprehends the full range of suffering experienced by Peter’s readers and refers back to his initial thought (1 Pet 1:6-7). The purpose of suffering is positive. The fiery process tests the genuineness of the household of God. Peter’s image is drawn from the smelting process that refines silver and gold by removing the dross and impurities (Prov 27:21).

Personal Thanksgiving

*I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfill my vows to you –
vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
when I was in trouble.
I will sacrifice fat animals to you
and an offering of rams;
I will offer bulls and goats.
Come and hear, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.
I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.
If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.
Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!*

Psalm 66:13-20

²⁸⁴ Waters, *Why O God?*, 324.

Worship begins with all the earth shouting for joy, continues with the people of God calling out to the nations, “Come and see God’s awesome deeds,” and thrives in spite of or even because of suffering grief in all kinds of trials. Then, the psalmist brings it home with a personal word. He is like the leper who was healed by Jesus who returns to praise God in a loud voice, throwing himself at the feet of Jesus and thanking him (Luke 17:16). All the earth may shout and all the nations may bear witness, but unless I personally enter into worship in spirit and in truth I miss out on this grateful celebration. Public praise leads to personal thanksgiving.²⁸⁵ The psalmist highlights the experience of a worshiper who is all in, making good on the vow of praise, sparing no expense in offering up costly sacrifices, and willing to tell others what God has done. “Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (66:16). Since Jesus Christ was sacrificed once for our sins we no longer offer the sacrifices of rams, bulls, and goats. “For by one sacrifice [Christ] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14). Instead of offering ritual sacrifices or ceremonial offerings “we express our vows and offerings by giving God our lives.”²⁸⁶

The apostle Paul urged believers to offer their bodies “as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). Like all true worshipers, the psalmist knew that sin separates us from God and renders prayer ineffectual. This is why he said, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my prayer.” The psalm ends on a final note of praise, celebrating the Lord’s loyal love. As Kidner writes, “Yet the final word of gratitude is not for the answered request alone, but for what it signifies: an unbroken relationship with God, which is pledged, personal, and – since it might deservedly have been removed – ever a gift of grace.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 288.

²⁸⁶ Okorocho, *Psalms*, 672.

²⁸⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 236.

Psalm 67 offers a sweeping benediction to a sequence of praise psalms (Psalms 65-68) designed to offset the cry for deliverance that prevails throughout Book II (Psalms 51-64; 69-71). This interlude of pure praise shifts the focus from danger and deliverance to devotion and thanksgiving. After the dark night of the soul, the morning sunrise dawns on a beautiful day. The worshiper is refreshed and renewed by the Spirit's rhythms of grace. With every fiber of his being the psalmist resists the bland recital of religious rhetoric. David's doxology draws worshipers out of themselves and into thanksgiving and praise. Blessing God because we are blessed by God. God's grace always goes before, blessing the world, and making gospel praise possible.

The Scope of Blessing

*May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us –
so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.*

Psalm 67:1-2

The scope of salvation history stretching from Abraham's blessing to the apostle John's vision encompasses all the nations and extends to the ends of the earth. The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). God's command to Abram to "go" is inked in our praying imagination to Jesus' great commission to his disciples (Matt 28:19-20). Salvation history is bracketed by the means of grace and outreach to the nations. The Lord said to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. . . . I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3).

We hear echoes of Aaron's high priestly benediction in the opening verses of Psalm 67. Numbers 6:24-26 is a highly priestly blessing over the nation of Israel: "The Lord bless you and keep you. . . ." The psalmist's prayer is given by the people for the sake of nations: "May God be gracious to us and bless us." God's people are blessed so that God's "ways may be known on earth, your salvation among the nations." Psalm 67 is a priesthood-of-all-believers-prayer on behalf of the world. Aaron's priestly prayer for Israel has become David's prayer for the nations. We need God's grace and blessing to make known God's ways to the nations.

In a similar way, Jesus prayed for his disciples to impact the world. In his high priestly prayer in John 17 Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one, one with the Father and the Son, so that the world would believe that the Father sent the Son. Jesus put his own credibility on the line, when he tied the oneness of all believers to the mission of the Church. Incredibly, we are the answer to Jesus' prayer for the world. "When people believe that *God* (and no one else) sent *Jesus* (and no one else) in *the* mission of salvation — then people are finally at home with life's central reality. The Church does everything she can – from faithful preaching and praying to loving outreach and

service – to seek this faith in a deceived and uncentered world.”²⁸⁸

David’s prayer, “May God be gracious to us and bless us,” lines up with Jesus’ beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.” The Beatitudes offer a profile of blessing that counters anything the world has to offer. Jesus summed up his theory of happiness as eight fundamental emotional attitudes, eight convictions of the soul, eight character qualities of the inner person. Jesus paints a portrait of his blessed followers from the inside out. Each beatitude is a description of grace-shaped receptivity to the will of God. The beatitudes are not a list of legalistic prerequisites or moralistic preconditions. They frame an attitude of heart that turns to God in humility for God’s blessing. They picture what God’s grace does in a person’s life. We are poor and in need of God’s riches, sin-sick and in need of God’s forgiveness, humble and resting in God’s promise, hungry and in need of God’s provision, seeking to help, but in need of God’s help more, focused and in need of God’s vision, peacemakers and in need of God’s peace, and persecuted but protected by God’s promises. This is what it means to pray for God’s grace and blessing.

The blessing of God and the mission of God are inseparable. The redemptive trajectory encompasses the nations. The apostle John emphasized the church’s universal mandate to be a faithful witness to a lost and needy world. Seven times the phrase “tribe and language and people and nation” is used in The Revelation, but never in the same form twice.²⁸⁹ The global outreach of the gospel brings salvation to all the nations. The psalmist deftly and beautifully covers the all-encompassing nature of this salvation in a line that all too easily rolls off our tongue without impressing us with the magnitude of its meaning. How easy it is to say, “*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us,*” without comprehending our need for God’s grace and mercy, without grasping the full range of God’s physical and spiritual blessings, and without being filled with gratitude for God’s affection toward us. The people of God are blessed for a purpose: to make known the ways of God to the nations for sake of their salvation. In a word, salvation, comprehends all that we have been given in Christ. Living into this new reality depends upon God’s blessing from start to finish.

The Song of Blessing

*May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.*

Psalm 67:3-4

The psalmist invites the peoples of the world to praise God for his rule, his justice, and his guidance. The people of God from every tribe, language, people, and nation, have much to sing about. Spurgeon wrote, “Nothing creates gladness so speedily, surely, and abidingly as the

²⁸⁸ Bruner, *John*, 1008. (Emphasis his).

²⁸⁹ Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15.

salvation of God.”²⁹⁰ Nigerian theologian Cyril Okorochoa distinguishes between thanksgiving and praise. “We thank God for the blessings that he has given to us. We praise him when we think more of the Giver than the gifts, and realize that he is the Creator and Lord of all; he is holy, all-powerful and all-wise, our heavenly Father, our loving and gracious Savior.”²⁹¹ The peoples “are not merely confessing and realistically acknowledging how things are but rejoicing and resounding: that is, resounding with joy.”²⁹²

Spurgeon elaborated on what it meant for the nations to be glad and to sing for joy. “Some sing for form, others for show, some as a duty, others as an amusement, but to sing from the heart, because overflowing joy must find a vent, this is to sing indeed.”²⁹³ The impact of the indwelling word of God is evidenced in singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to the Lord (Col 3:16). Spurgeon looked forward to the day when the Lord would consummate his rule and reign, when “the age of song” would begin, and great multitudes from every nation, tribe, people and language would sing in a loud voice “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:10). That day will come, but in the mean time let those who have a passion for Christ sing for joy. Let them lift their voice in praise for God’s way (Ps 67:2a), God’s salvation (Ps 67:2b), God’s justice (Ps 67:4a), and God’s guidance (Ps 67:4b).²⁹⁴

The Source of Blessing

*May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.
May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.*
Psalm 67:5-7

In this interlude of praise (Pss 65-68) the emphasis is on God’s blessing reaching the world through the witness of the people of God. The whole world is meant to come to the knowledge of God’s ways. There is nothing narrow or limited about the scope of the blessing. The audience for God’s works is the whole earth, all the nations, and all the peoples. Ten times in seven short verses all the inhabitants of the whole earth are referenced. Five references to the people of God come at the beginning and the end of the psalm. Instead of it being “us” against “them,” it is “us” for “them.” God’s blessing is on a mission, invoking the knowledge of God’s ways, leading to heartfelt confession, resounding praise, and fear-of-God reverence. This is how we are to pray for the world.

The psalm concludes with an emphasis on the singular source of all blessing: “God, our God blesses us.” Jesus prayed the way the psalmist prayed on the night he was betrayed, “Now this is

²⁹⁰ Spurgeon, “Psalm 67,” *Treasury of David*.

²⁹¹ Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 672.

²⁹² Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:302.

²⁹³ Spurgeon, “Psalm 67,” *Treasury of David*.

²⁹⁴ Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 673.

eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Living as we do in the "global village" Christians are reminded daily that the greatest offense of the gospel is its exclusive truth claim. The apostles clearly understood the absolute claim of Jesus and declared, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The early church was convinced that Jesus was the culmination of a long history of revelation, the very self-disclosure of God. The exclusive truth claim of the gospel fits with the purpose of God's promise from the beginning. God chose one, small, weak, insignificant nation through which to make himself known and bless the world. The exclusiveness of the gospel is consistent with the character of revelation and the nature of God's own self-disclosure. There are not many gods to know, only one God makes his saving ways known to humankind. The apostles believed that the promise of God given to Abraham, that "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you," is fulfilled in Jesus. And each subsequent stage of salvation history, from Moses to the Prophets, from Jeremiah to David, anticipated the Savior; not an ethnic Savior, not a cultural religion, not a tribal deity, but the Savior of the world. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." (John 3:16). The one and only way makes sense because of the one and only Son!²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 58-60.

Psalm 68 brings the symphony of praise that began in Psalm 65 to a rousing crescendo. These four psalms (Pss 65-68) form an interlude of joy offsetting the intensity of David's deliverance psalms. From Mount Zion all four psalms share a global eschatological perspective calling the nations to worship. Psalm 65 celebrates the grand sweep of redemption and creation. Psalm 66 invites the world to come and see what God has done. Psalm 67 offers a sweeping benediction, the blessing of God for the people of God, "so that all the ends of the earth will fear him" (Ps 67:7). Psalm 67 accompanies Jesus' great commission the way a symphony orchestra enriches the performance of a tenor soloist. Psalm 68 inspires the apostle Paul's grasp of Christ's triumph over the cosmic powers and Christ's empowerment of the church through the gifts of the Spirit. Psalms 67 and 68 are linked in our understanding of salvation: commission and mission, the gifts of the Spirit and the consummation of the age. They come together in resounding praise.

The apostle Paul found in Psalm 68 a paradigm that runs through salvation history. Like an artist painting a mural, the psalmist captures glimpses of divine triumph in images and references that are "distinctively unspecific" but strikingly evocative of powerful moments in Israel's history.²⁹⁶ We can imagine Moses and Miriam's celebration of the Exodus (Exod 15) or Moses climbing up Mount Sinai to receive the word of the Lord (Exod 19) or the Song of Deborah reciting the victories of the Lord (Judges 5) or David dancing before the Lord with all his might as the ark of the Lord entered Zion, the city of David (2 Sam 6).

"This rushing cataract of a psalm – one of the most boisterous and exhilarating in the Psalter" has God marching to Zion in the tradition of the Exodus, the wilderness conquest, and the procession of the ark of the Lord. But the apostle saw even more in the redemptive and eschatological trajectory of Psalm 68. He saw the glorious march of God to Zion in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The triumph celebrated in Psalm 68 culminates in the "incomparably great power" that "raised Christ from the dead and seated him at [the Father's] right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19-21).

The Triumphal Procession

*May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
may his foes flee before him.
May you blow them away like smoke –
as wax melts before the fire,
may the wicked perish before God.
But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God;
may they be happy and joyful.
Sing to God, sing in praise to his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him – his name is the Lord.*

²⁹⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:310.

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*

Psalm 68:1-6

The psalmist's opening manifesto draws on the ancient words of Moses. Whenever the ark of the covenant set out, Moses said, "Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." And whenever it was set down, Moses said, "Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel" (Numbers 10:35-36). The ark represented the presence of the Lord going before the people (1 Sam 4:3), scattering Israel's enemies like a puff of smoke or a blob of wax melting in a fire.²⁹⁷ The psalmist understood that the ark-led wilderness trek conveyed typological or paradigmatic significance. The events surrounding Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan pointed forward to the climactic defeat of evil and the ultimate joy and happiness of the righteous. It was never a matter of being a small Middle Eastern nation on the edge of Mediterranean Sea. It was always about the defeat of the evil and the rule and reign of the Lord.

To "extol him who rides on the clouds" or to "prepare the way for him who rides through the deserts" points beyond human conquest and a human king and introduces the expectation of the Lord who comes to reign over all. The prophet Isaiah may echo Psalm 68:2 when he says, "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa 40:3). And in turn it was Isaiah's prophecy that gave shape to the ministry of John the Baptist who was the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Mark 1:3).

But in a surprising twist of description, the one who comes in triumph is not a fierce warrior but a father to orphans and a guardian to widows. He cares for the vulnerable, defends the oppressed, and leads the desolate home. The victory march is made up of family and leaves rebels stranded in the desert. "Ordinary potentates give their attention to the rich and powerful; but the Lord champions the helpless."²⁹⁸

Marching to Zion

*When you, God, went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.
You gave abundant showers, O God;
you refreshed your weary inheritance.
Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, God,
you provided for the poor.*

²⁹⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:468; Ps 68:2 The Message.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 470.

*The Lord announces the word,
 and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng:
 “Kings and armies flee in haste;
 the women at home divide the plunder.
 Even while you sleep among the sheep pens,
 the wings of my dove are sheathed with silver,
 its feathers with shining gold.”
 When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land,
 it was like snow fallen on Mount Zalmon.
 Mount Bashan, majestic mountain,
 Mount Bashan, rugged mountain,
 why gaze in envy, you rugged mountain,
 at the mountain where God chooses to reign,
 where the Lord himself will dwell forever?
 The chariots of God are tens of thousands
 and thousands of thousands;
 The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.
 When you ascended on high,
 you took many captives;
 you received gifts from people,
 even from the rebellious – that you, Lord God,
 might dwell there.*

Psalm 68:7-18

It takes the psalmist only a few poetic lines to recall the many blessings the people of God experienced on the wilderness journey from Sinai to Zion. David’s narrational mural is an array of images telling the story of God’s victory: manna from heaven, oases in the desert, battlefield victories, and showers of blessings. The reflections invoke the sweep of God’s victorious salvation history. Kidner describes these verses as “a tumble of swift images and excited snatches of description.”²⁹⁹ Echoes of Deborah’s song can be heard in these lines (Judges 5:24) as kings flee and armies retreat. Peace prevails, measured by the spoils of war and pictures of tranquility. The enemy is on the run and the shepherd falls asleep in the sheep pen. The dove, a symbol of peace, is clothed with a new day’s sunshine of silver and gold.

When David associates the Almighty’s (Shadday) defeat of the kings with “snow” on Mount Zalmon, he may have in mind a striking “contrast of defeated armies and snow on the mountain with the victors basking peacefully in the sunshine.”³⁰⁰ Goldingay suggests that the astonishing victory is compared to the extreme rarity of snow in the hill country of Shechem.³⁰¹ However, in keeping with echoes from the Book of Judges, this obscure reference may recall Abimelek’s genocidal attack against the people of Shechem, when he and his men went up Mount Zalmon and cut down branches. They piled the timber against the tower and set it on fire killing about a

²⁹⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 240.

³⁰⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:474.

³⁰¹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:322.

thousand people who had taken refuge inside (Judges 9:46-49). The psalmist's reference to snow may be to the white ash that fell like snow on Mount Zalmon, a symbol of devastating defeat embedded in the imagination of Israel.

The paradox of God's sovereignty is drawn out in several ways. God's victory is effortless. When God arises his enemies scatter in defeat without a fight. The beneficiaries of his triumph are the "least of these" – orphans and widows. Women, not warriors, celebrate the spoils of war. Even the geography of victory is ironic. Instead of choosing the majestic mountains of Bashan in the north for his sanctuary, God chooses the seemingly insignificant hill of Zion in the south to dwell forever. But make no mistake God ascends from Sinai to Zion in the company of his angelic hosts numbering thousands upon thousands upon thousands.

Psalm 68 has a grip on our praying imagination because the apostle Paul used this text to explain the impact of Christ's ascension (Eph 4:7-11). The Israelites in the wilderness were a type pointing forward to the church of Christ. Psalm 68 rehearses the blessings of God when the Israelites were released from captivity. In the wilderness, God forged a new community, giving the Israelites protection, provision and most importantly, his word. The psalmist celebrates God's relational gifts: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing. . ." (Ps 68:5-6). God also gave his people material gifts, "You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance. Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, God, you provided for the poor" (Ps 68:9-10). But the most important gift God gave his people was his word. The psalmist declares, "The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it" (Ps 68:11). To say that God rules and reigns from Mount Sinai is to say that God's Word rules and reigns. Originally, the gifts alluded to in the psalm referred to the spoils of war, but Paul carried over the meaning of the psalm and applied it to the victory of Christ and the gifts given by Christ.

The reason Paul used this particular psalm may have been its liturgical association with Pentecost, the Jewish feast celebrating the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. The original meaning of Pentecost had now been eclipsed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. For Paul the greater significance of Psalm 68 went beyond Moses coming down from Sinai with the law to the ascended Christ giving spiritual gifts to his body. Paul's emphasis on descent and ascent, fits with the incarnation and ascension of Christ (Acts 2:33) and parallels the humiliation and exaltation of Christ described in Philippians 2. The reference to "many captives" refers to Christ's power over "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:10; see 1:21; 6:12).

Paul's interpretation and application of Psalm 68 illustrates the importance of reading the Old Testament in line with the redemptive trajectory of Christ and the Church. Instead of speaking to God as the psalmist does ("You ascended on high, you took many captives; you received gifts from people. . ."), Paul speaks of Christ ("When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." Eph 4:8). And instead of God receiving the spoils of war, Christ gives gifts in the form of ministers of the word, "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12). If we expect a word for word correspondence between David and Paul these changes are significant and alter the literal meaning. But the apostle is able to make these changes freely

because the conquest of the promised land is a type of Christ's incarnation, ascension and the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit. The apostolic hermeneutic carries us beyond the historical-grammatical method and leads us to the true meaning and fulfillment of Psalm 68.

The King's Processional

*Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior,
who daily bears our burdens.
Our God is a God who saves;
from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.
Surely God will crush the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crowns of those who go on in their sins.
The Lord says, "I will bring them from Bashan;
I will bring them from the depths of the sea,
that your feet may wade in the blood of your foes,
while the tongues of your dogs have their share."
Your procession, God, has come into view,
the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary.
In front are the singers, after them the musicians;
with them are the young women playing the timbrels.
Praise God in the great congregation;
praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel.
There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them,
there the great throng of Judah's princes,
and there the princes of Zebulun and Naphtali.
Summon your power, God;
show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.
Because of your temple at Jerusalem
kings will bring you gifts.
Rebuke the beast among the reeds,
the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations.
Humbled, may the beast bring bars of silver.
Scatter the nations who delight in war.
Envoys will come from Egypt;
Cush will submit herself to God.
Sing to God, you kingdoms of earth,
sing praise to the Lord,
to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens,
who thunders with mighty voice.
Proclaim the power of God,
whose majesty is over Israel,
whose power is in the heavens.
You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary;
the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.
Praise be to God!*

Psalm 68:19-35

The paradox of God's salvation continues. The glory of God is found shockingly in his commitment to daily bear our burdens. Who ever heard of a god like this God? He is like no other king; like no other hero. We expect the Lord to be praised by his subjects who serve him for his power and his might, but it is he who serves his subjects. Blessed be the Lord, our Savior, "who daily bears our burdens." The Lord saves us. "From the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death." He routs the enemy, no matter how vigorous or virulent they may be, and triumphs over them. His enemies run, but they can't hide. The Lord gathers them for judgment from the heights of Mount Bashan and from the depths of the sea. Enemies are featured throughout the psalm. They scatter and flee. They vanish like a puff of smoke and melt like a blob of wax. They burn up. They are reduced to ash. The Lord is committed to the end of evil and the psalmist spares the niceties. He closes with a gory picture of bloody battlefield boots being licked by dogs. Psalm 68 is an inspirational precursor to our interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Christians who study the Psalms acquire an understanding of the images and types that are key to understanding the images used by the apostle John to describe the victory of the Lamb and the horror of judgment. The Psalms are more like the Book of Revelation than we may have realized.

The eschatological dynamic is clear. The procession of God the King lies in the future. If the catalysts for this psalm lie in Israel's past, such as when the ark of the Lord led the march through the wilderness or when King David danced with all his might as the ark ascended to its resting place on Mount Zion, this episode in salvation history is yet to take place. It will come at the end of the age and what a joyous occasion it will be. Singers, musicians, and dancers will lead the way in a triumphal procession of all the people of God. The psalmist references symbols of power – evil power; "the beast among the reeds" stands for Egypt, and the bulls refer to the leaders of nations who delight in power. They along with their people (calves) lust after tribute (silver) and war. The major powers of the time, Egypt and Ethiopia (Cush) will have no other recourse but to submit to God.

The paradox of divine strength and human weakness runs through this psalm until it crescendos at the end with a riveting focus on the awesome power of God. The kingdoms of the earth are summoned to sing praise to the Lord, who rides the heavens like a surfer rides the waves of the sea. The apostle John's vision of Christ in Revelation echoes David's praise for the Lord whose mighty voice thunders, whose majesty is over all, and who "gives power and strength to his people." In the end everything is and will be praise. "Praise be to God!"

Christians pray Psalms 68 and 69 back-to-back in a way that King David never imagined. The eschatological vision of Psalm 68 depends upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The glorious march to Zion, celebrated in Psalm 68, becomes an ordeal of suffering in Psalm 69. Jesus saw himself in this psalm (Ps 69:4; John 15:25) and the apostles saw Jesus (Ps 69:9; John 2:17; Rom 15:3). The Savior of the world is ridiculed, mocked, scorned, and despised. He is estranged, rejected, abused, and condemned. The incarnate one – the very embodiment of God’s love and power – is heartbroken and hated beyond all measure because of his passion for the house of God and the people of God. On the cross Jesus received the symbols of his tormenters’ scorn, gall and vinegar. This did not escape the notice of the apostles who found in this reference a vivid prophecy of the messiah (Ps 69:21; Matt 27:34; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29).

In the Spirit, David prayed knowingly for himself and providentially for the Son of David. To deny Psalm 69’s messianic character because the psalmist did not intentionally prophesy a suffering messiah contradicts the apostolic interpretation of Psalm 69. This psalm filled Jesus’ praying imagination as the Father led him to the cross and then afterwards it gave the disciples a vivid prophetic description of the cross. We pray the psalm today as a guide to the cruciform life we are called to live in Christ. We know that the march to Zion runs through “the miry depths” and “deep waters.” When a passion for Christ takes hold we should not be surprised when we are hated without reason.

Praying Our Pain

*Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.
Those who hate me without reason
outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause,
those who seek to destroy me.
I am forced to restore
what I did not steal.
You, God know my folly;
my guilt is not hidden from you.
Lord, the Lord Almighty,
may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me;*

*God of Israel,
may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me.
For I endure scorn for your sake,
and shame covers my face.
I am a foreigner to my own family,
a stranger to my own mother's children;
for zeal for your house consumes me,
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.
When I weep and fast,
I must endure scorn;
when I put on sackcloth,
people make sport of me.
Those who sit at the gate mock me,
and I am the song of drunkards.*

Psalm 69:1-12

The psalmist leads by example, teaching us to transpose our pain into prayer. It is not only therapeutic, it is redemptive, to give poetic, verbal, and written form to our deep-feelings. Prayer is not the “spiritual” thing to do; it is the sensible, practical thing to do. We are often tempted to bury our troubles and pretend they’re not there. We try to escape the flood through distraction and denial, but the more we try, the more we feel engulfed and swept away. We seem to conclude that our problems are beyond the scope of God’s comfort and solution. We turn to psychologists and physicians *before* turning to the Lord in prayer. Well-trained professional care-givers are a gift from God, but we should begin with prayer. We tacitly assume that modern life has eclipsed the provision of the Lord and that we are on our own. This is not true, however, and our neglect of prayer has been at the expense of our physical, emotional, and mental health.³⁰² Praise God for counselors, therapists, psychiatrists and physicians, but real prayer is the prelude to help and healing.

The psalmist’s array of images is not meant to describe a literal historical situation. His painting of desperation is impressionistic. He allows the images to merge into one complete picture of danger, despair, and depression. He is overwhelmed – up to his neck in flood waters. It is as if he is drowning in sorrow, swept away in confusion, and pulled under by hate. He is lost at sea and dying of thirst. His sun-scorched eyes search the horizon for God, but to no avail. He is besieged by legions of enemies who hate him for no just cause and no good reason. In the court of public opinion he is found guilty on trumped up charges and condemned.

The persecution is so intense that he is desperate to keep his relationship with God unhindered. “God, you know every sin I’ve committed; my life’s a wide-open book before you” (Ps 69:5 The Message). Implicit in this plea is the power of forgiveness remembered and reaffirmed. Yet, the nagging feeling of letting God down and bringing shame on the people of God persists. He is conscious of his weakness and frailty, but confident that the reason for his suffering is due to his faithfulness. The psalmist acknowledges an emotion that is experienced by Christ’s followers

³⁰² Webster, *Soulcraft*, 14.

much more often than it is addressed. To be estranged from family members and siblings and to be alienated from colleagues and neighbors because of Christ can lead to self-doubt and a sense of guilt where there is no real guilt. We can suffer a “guilty conscience” for doing the right thing. This is the strange thing about obedience and faithfulness; you can feel bad for doing what God wants you to do. The psalmist humbly turns to God for reassurance in the midst of these feelings.

Like our Lord, we want to embrace the alienation that comes from the gospel. We want to “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 Pet 2:12). If we follow Jesus’ path to the cross we can expect to receive his treatment. It is scandalous that the one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion. What kind of world do we live in that sentences holy and compassionate men and women to die? Jesus exposed the obvious fact that the political and religious authorities are not always on the side of righteousness. Greed, pride, and hate often control the power brokers of society. Jesus became a victim for the sake of righteousness. It was impossible for anyone living in the first century to gloss over the practical social consequences of following Jesus. It should be equally impossible in the twenty-first century.³⁰³

If it’s not zeal for the Lord’s house that consumes us, but some other kind of zeal, we will be like the people who scorn the psalmist and oppress the just. Instead of identifying with the psalmist we will be like the antagonists in this psalm who insult, mock, and ridicule the righteous. When Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out the sheep and cattle and money changers, his disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:17; Ps 69:9). But it was more than a single line that linked Jesus to this psalm. The whole description fits. Jesus “came unto his own, but his own received him not” (John 1:11). He was a foreigner in his own family (Ps 69:8). He prayed the way the psalmist prayed: “the insults of those who insult you fall on me” (Ps 69:9). The apostle Peter spoke of Christ’s followers being “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pet 1:8) but this deep resilient joy more often than not coincides with the world’s contempt. It is only as the psalmist transposes his pain and fear into prayer that he is able to move toward praise.

God-dependent Prayer

*But I pray to you, Lord,
in the time of your favor;
in your great love, O God,
answer me with your sure salvation.
Rescue me from the mire,
do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me,
from the deep waters.
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me
or the depths swallow me up
or the pit close its mouth over me.*

³⁰³ Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 161.

*Answer me, Lord, out of the goodness of your love;
in your great mercy turn to me.
Do not hide your face from your servant;
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.
Come near and rescue me;
deliver me because of my foes.*

Psalm 69:13-18

The psalmist pleads: “answer me,” “rescue me,” “do not let me sink,” “deliver me,” “answer me, Lord,” “turn to me,” “do not hide your face,” “answer me quickly,” “come near and rescue me,” “deliver me.” He piles up his staccato pleas into a single petition reiterated ten times for impact. Everything requested is based on the Lord’s character and saving action. The psalmist turns to God because of his loving favor, his great love, his sure salvation, the goodness of his love, and his great mercy. At the heart of the psalm is an urgent plea for salvation from the only one who is able to save him. Until we pray this way ourselves and enter into the pathos of this prayer we cling to some vestige of self-salvation. We are still reliant on a form of self-justification, either religious or secular, to secure the self, to save the soul. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. To pray this way is to embrace Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount beatitudes. Until we declare spiritual bankruptcy and throw ourselves on the mercy of God, we will never know the saving power of the Savior. We are caught in a rip current of sin and death and the most natural thing in the world is to call for help.

Psalm 69 is not only our psalm, a sinner’s psalm (aren’t they all!), but it is also the Savior’s psalm. What Jesus experienced in Gethsemane is echoed in this psalm. Patrick Reardon writes, “In Psalm 69 we are given a vision into the very heart of Christ in the circumstances of His Passion.”³⁰⁴ The psalm expresses what Jesus felt in the garden: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus offering up “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb 5:7).

Praying against Evil

*You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;
all my enemies are before you.
Scorn has broken my heart
and has left me helpless;
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,
for comforters, but I found none.
They put gall in my food
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.
May the table set before them become a snare;
may it become retribution and a trap.
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever.*

³⁰⁴ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 135.

*Pour out your wrath on them;
 let your fierce anger overtake them.
 May their place be deserted;
 let there be no one to dwell in their tents.
 For they persecute those you wound
 and talk about the pain of those you hurt.
 Charge them with crime upon crime;
 do not let them share in your salvation.
 May they be blotted out of the book of life
 and not be listed with the righteous.*

Psalm 69:19-28

It is hard to imagine the psalmist being able to add to his description of suffering but he does. He paints a picture of desperation. He is mired in mud, engulfed by a flood, rejected by family, and mocked by drunks, but the worst is yet to come. Soul pain is always more acute than physical pain. Three words eclipse the earlier description of mud and mire. He has been scorned, disgraced, and shamed. “There are few wounds as deep as those expressed in the words reproach, shame, dishonor.”³⁰⁵ The psalmist goes so far as to say, “scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless.” Along with the apostles we rightly identify the “gall” and the “vinegar” with Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29). But the whole description applies to Jesus and may describe his lowest point.

The one in whom fellowship with 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.³⁰⁶ When Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he gathered up all the lamentations of God's people and shouted them from the cross in a loud voice. 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 unendurable.”³⁰⁷

On the cross Jesus was “scorned, disgraced, and shamed,” for our sakes. 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. Spurgeon writes, “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

³⁰⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 247.

³⁰⁶ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 150.

³⁰⁷ Spurgeon, *Christ's Words from the Cross*, 53.

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.”³⁰⁸

It is crucial for Christ’s followers to frame the psalmist’s imprecations against evil (Ps 69:22-28) in the light of Christ’s suffering. In the Spirit, the psalmist leads us down a path that ends at the foot of the cross. So much so, that after the reference to bitter gall and sour vinegar, we expect a plea along the lines of “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).³⁰⁹ Such a plea sounds more consistent with Jesus’ command to his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. But instead, the psalmist unloads a searing indictment against those who deserve God’s judgment. He contrasts his impressionistic painting of desperation (Ps 69:1-15) with an impressionistic description of judgment. Table fellowship becomes an occasion for betrayal and entrapment. Physical health is lost to blindness and seizures. Instead of invoking God’s blessing, the psalmist calls God to pour out his wrath. He wants the oppressors’ whole neighborhood wiped out and all their names erased from the book of life.

It is not wrong to want the end of evil and the judgment of the wicked. We forget that 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.). 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 offers 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). Jesus was explicit on the theme of judgment. “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).

The startling truth that brings this messianic psalm into Christian worship is the correspondence between the psalmist’s description of judgment and Jesus’ experience of the wrath of God. Judas turned table fellowship into a snare and used friendship to trap Jesus. Bloodied, beaten, scourged, and crucified, Jesus experienced extreme physical abuse and torture. The wrath of God was poured out on him. He was abandoned by God. His name was blotted out. Jesus was charged with humanity’s crimes. The psalmist’s imprecations become descriptive of the judgment that Jesus faced on our behalf.

This puts Psalm 69 in a new light. “David’s anger was fanned by his zeal for justice, which the Old Testament largely exists to keep before us; but Christ came to crown justice with atonement.”³¹⁰ Isaiah’s prophecy echoes the redemptive meaning of Christ’s sacrifice: “Surely he

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 53-54.

³⁰⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 248.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

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).

Praying our Praise

*But as for me, afflicted and in pain –
may your salvation, God, protect me.
I will praise God’s name in song
and glorify him with thanksgiving.
This will please the Lord more than an ox,
more than a bull with its horns and hooves.
The poor will see and be glad –
you who seek God, may your hearts live!
The Lord hears the needy
and does not despise his captive people.
Let heaven and earth praise him,
the seas and all that move in them,
for God will save Zion
and rebuild the cities of Judah.
Then people will settle there and possess it;
the children of his servants will inherit it,
and those who love his name will dwell there.*

Psalm 69:29-36

The psalm ends with a hymn of thanksgiving. The individuality implicit in the phrase “but as for me” evolves into a great company of worshipers. The poor, the needy, and the captive will “praise God’s name in song.” The need persists – the psalmist is afflicted and in pain – but the darkness of his lament lifts as the light of the Lord’s salvation and protection dawns. If the praise of God’s people eclipses the sacrifices of oxen and bulls, how much more will the sacrifice of Christ eclipse the sacrificial system. The people of God’s own choosing, the poor, will see and be glad. The Lord is receptive and responsive and loving to the needy. He does not despise; he entreats. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The encircling company of worshipers expands to include heaven and earth, “the seas and all that move in them.” Praise goes universal. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps 150:6). The psalm closes with a vision of God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven – the vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Zion is saved. The cities of Judah rebuilt. And the inhabitants of the land are those who “love his name.”

Book II concludes with a three psalm finale. Psalm 70 brings the “save-me” psalms to a quick and decisive climax. Psalm 71 follows with the joyful prayer of a resilient saint who expresses lifelong confidence in the Lord. Psalm 72 is a royal psalm dedicated to Solomon’s reign with a prophetic vision of the coming Messiah, the ideal king, who will rule and reign over the global Kingdom of God.

Psalm 70 brings the worshiper back to a theme that has dominated Book II. The human condition is fallen and broken. We are in danger from every conceivable angle, from our own sinful nature to a vast array of enemies who are ready to pounce. The cry, “save me!” has run through Book II as a dominate theme. It is fitting then that a quick spontaneous cry for help should bring these deliverance psalms to a climax.

Save Me

*Hasten, O God, to save me;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.*
Psalm 70:1

The plea for help remains even after great psalms of hope and salvation. David has given us an exhilarating sense of the grand sweep of redemption and creation (Ps 65) and a compelling invitation to join all the earth in shouting praises and singing hymns to God for his awesome deeds (Ps 66). David unites the blessing of God and the mission of God in a redemptive trajectory that encompasses all the nations (Ps 67) and leads us in a rousing crescendo of praise (Ps 68). Psalm 69 is a vivid reminder that the glorious march to Zion goes by way of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 70 is an almost word for word repetition of Psalm 40:13-17. It is apparent that the psalmist was convinced that this “hurry up, help me” prayer of utter dependence on the mercy of God was necessary near the end of Book I and II. The psalm brings the followers of Christ back to the daily need for deliverance, but it does so in the light of Christ’s ascension, great commission, and atoning sacrifice. As we pray through the psalms the meaning of salvation grows and deepens.

Patrick Reardon emphasizes that “there are no circumstances in life when it is not supremely proper to pray: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me.’ This prayer. . . should never be absent from our lips.”³¹¹ Drawing from the early church, Reardon lists the exceptional features of this short psalm. “It contains an invocation of God in the face of any crisis, the humility of a devout confession, the watchfulness of concern and constant fear, a consciousness of one’s own frailty, the assurance of being heard, and confidence in a protection that is always present and at hand, for whoever calls unceasingly on his protector is sure that he is always present. It contains a burning love and charity, an awareness of traps, and fear of

³¹¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 137.

enemies.”³¹²

Saving Help

*May those 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!”
turn back because of their 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!”*

Psalm 70:2-4

The psalmist is in the company of enemies and saints. There are those who seek his life and desire his ruin and there are those who seek God and long for God’s saving help. The psalmist turns to God to thwart the purposes of those who seek his ruin. He does not calculate his own resources to wage war against those who want to destroy him. His prayer is neither vengeful nor vindictive. He pleads with God that all the hate that is coming at him would boomerang back on his enemies. The crux of the prayer request is that the evil and shame that his enemies have plotted and planned for him would fall back on them.

The psalmist is not alone and his plea is not just for himself. He remembers his friends who join him in looking to God for salvation.³¹³ He is in the company of God’s people and he wants them to see the greatness of the Lord. God’s justice brings joy to all who seek God and his righteousness inspires devotion. “People who love the Lord’s salvation are those who watch and pray for it.”³¹⁴ In spite of the enemy’s threats the righteous rejoice and say, “The Lord is great!”

Urgency

*But as for me, I am poor and needy;
come quickly to me, O God.
You are my help and my deliverer;
Lord, do not delay.*

Psalm 70:5

There is a hint at the end of the psalm that in spite of his right thinking about the judgment of evil and the company of the saints he still feels very vulnerable and desperate for God’s action. The “but as for me” implies “But I’ve lost it. I’m wasted. God – quickly, quickly! Quick to my side, quick to my rescue! God, don’t lose a minute” (Ps 70:5, *The Message*). As we remarked earlier on Psalm 40, David fostered no illusion of grandeur. “Yet I am poor and needy,” is a worthy

³¹² Ibid., 138.

³¹³ Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 676.

³¹⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:508.

refrain of 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. Jesus begins where David leaves off, “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 applied David’s phrase, “I am poor and needy” to himself. “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.” Augustine used the phrase, “I am poor and needy,” to describe the Christian life. “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.”³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 127-128.

The psalm sequence at the end of Book II forms a triptych. The first panel is ordinary time. Psalm 70 is an all day, every day prayer, a quick plea for God's immediate help. It is an in-the-moment prayer, applicable in any and all circumstances. The second panel is a lifetime prayer that covers all the days of our lives from infancy to old age. Psalms 70 and 71 share certain themes: dependence on the Lord's protection and provision, the need for deliverance from the hand of the wicked, and a plea, "Do not be far from me, my God; come quickly, God, to help me" (Ps 71:12). The third panel takes in salvation history. Psalm 72 is a messianic royal psalm. It covers the grand sweep and ultimate fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. These three "save me" psalms look at salvation from three different vantage points: the immediate daily grind, a lifetime of struggle and perseverance, and the eschatological fulfillment of God's promised salvation.

My Rock

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me;
turn your ear to me and save me.
Be my rock of refuge,
to which I can always go;
give the command to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.*

Psalm 71:1-4

The originality of this psalm comes in the creative weave of themes drawn from other psalms.³¹⁶ The beauty of this mosaic prayer is how it integrates personal lament and God's faithfulness over a lifetime of continuous trust. Through it all the psalmist has learned to trust in God. From the day he was born and into old age the psalmist has turned to God for deliverance. This long obedience in the same direction has depended entirely on the Lord's faithfulness. It is a fitting psalm for the end of Book II because it gathers up these major themes of danger and deliverance, trial and testimony, worry and witness, into a psalm that works as well for the individual as it does for the people of God. There is no superscription for this psalm, but its close affinity with Psalm 70 and its thematic dependence on psalms attributed to David suggests a deep connection with David. If David wrote this psalm he did so with the people of God in mind – he did it for us.

In David's mind the Lord's faithfulness is best understood and experienced in concrete images. The metaphors, "rock," "refuge," and "fortress," along with "turn your ear to me," give a vivid sense of the psalmist's plea and the Lord's deliverance. Images of stability and security are

³¹⁶ Ps 71:1-3 (Ps 31:1-3); Ps 71:5-6 (Ps 22:9-10); Ps 71:12-13 (Ps 35:22; 40:13-14; 22:11; 38:21-22; 35:4. 26; 109:22).

contrasted with the psalmist's vulnerability. The hand of the wicked is right there ready to grasp him. The need for deliverance is always acute and never taken for granted. Yet, God is always faithful and faithful forever. The psalmist can *always* go to "my rock of refuge" (Ps 71:3). He will *always* praise the Sovereign Lord (Ps 71:6) and declare his splendor *always* (Ps 71:8). He will "*always* have hope" (Ps 71:14a) and add to his praise *always* (Ps 71b). "All day long" is the psalmist's pledge to *always* testify to God's saving ways (Ps 71:15) and to always "tell of your righteous acts all day long" (Ps 71:24). The entire psalm pledges continuous and comprehensive praise for God's constant and complete faithfulness.

The implications of this "all-ness" in the context of faithfulness and praise are extraordinary. To enter into the spirit of this psalm is to embrace the all-encompassing reality of "always" – always trusting, always praising. This is necessary to know the health and wholeness of relying completely on the Lord, our rock and our refuge. This is the *all* that must not be evaded but embraced by all who desire to please God, because God's holy claim rests equally on all.³¹⁷ This is the all-ness celebrated in Jesus' parable of the hidden treasure: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matthew 13:44).

In Christ, this the *all* that believes that Jesus accomplished *all* on the Cross. And this is the "all" that says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10). This is the *all* of covenant love (as opposed to a contractual obligation) that is grandly inclusive of *all* we are and will be. This is an *all*-encompassing, timeless commitment. "As long as our lives should last" is the bottom line of a costly vow that carries us *all* the way to Eternity. This is the *all* that knows no limits. "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven," but this is the one thing for *all* time and the one thing upon which everything else depends for time and eternity. King David expressed his heartfelt longing when he said, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord *all the days of my life*, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Ps 27:4). This is the *all* that gives light to our vision of God. Without it we are in darkness, but with it everything is brought into the light.

My Hope

*For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth.
From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother's womb.
I will ever praise you.
I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendor all day long.
Do not cast me away when I am old;*

³¹⁷ Webster, *Soundtrack of the Soul*, 90-93.

*do not forsake me when my strength is gone.
 For my enemies speak against me;
 those who wait to kill me conspire together.
 They say, "God has forsaken him;
 pursue him and seize him,
 for no one will rescue him."
 Do not be far from me, my God;
 come quickly, God, to help me.
 May my accusers perish in shame;
 may those who want to harm me
 be covered with scorn and disgrace.*
 Psalm 71:5-13

The psalmist is riveted to reality. There is nothing here that is naive or “pie-in-the-sky.” It is all down to earth from birth to death. He sees the span of his years from start to finish under the providence of the Sovereign Lord. A lifetime of trust has validated his confidence, focused his hope, and served as “a public example to people.”³¹⁸ By the grace of God his life has been a sign to many that the Lord is his strong refuge. For all his enemy talk, the psalmist has been what Christ wants us to be “salt and light” in a fallen and ruined world. The people of God are called “to exert a double influence by arresting decay and a positive influence by bringing light into darkness.”³¹⁹

Along these same lines, the apostle Paul saw himself as a real sign to many. He didn’t need to commend himself to others, since the validity of his testimony was evident among people impacted by the gospel. “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts.” Like the psalmist, his confidence did not come from himself but from God. “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Cor 3:1-5). Given the testimony of trust and praise lived out by the people of God Spurgeon wondered why “so much unbelief remains” in the world.³²⁰

The psalmist acknowledges what many of us who have reached old age realize. As our energy wanes and our physical strength declines we feel increasingly expendable. I used to have more energy than I had time; now I have more time than I have energy. A younger and more dynamic generation is ready for the old person to move out of the way, especially in a society that values youth over experience and appearance over maturity. David pleads with God, “Do not cast me away . . . do not forsake me when my strength is gone” (Ps 71:9). Augustine adds his own unique pastoral commentary. He essentially says, “Bring it on! Go ahead let your strength fail, in order that you may abide in the strength of God and learn to say with the apostle, ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12:10).” But don’t forget, Augustine insisted, God “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young

³¹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:520.

³¹⁹ Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 64.

³²⁰ Spurgeon, “Psalm 71,” *Treasury of David*.

men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (Isa 40:29-31).³²¹

In addition to the threat of old age, David is under siege by enemies who are watching and waiting for the right time to attack him. They seek not only to cause him bodily harm, but to impugn his faith in God. They are quick to leverage his suffering as proof that God has forsaken him. Apparently his enemies identified themselves with the people of God and they used god-talk to condemn David. In their twisted logic they ironically claimed God’s favor in trashing David’s faithfulness to God. The Pharisees did much the same to Jesus, waiting and watching for the right time to expose him as a fraud and condemn him for blasphemy.

David’s response is to seek the nearness of God and the immediacy of God’s help all the more earnestly. He leaves his difficult situation in God’s hands and prays that the shame and harm his accusers intended for him would be visited on them.

My Legacy

*As for me, I will always have hope;
I will praise you more and more.
My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds,
of your saving acts all day long –
though I know not how to relate them all.
I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign Lord;
I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone.
Since my youth, God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.
Even when I am old and gray,
do not forsake me, my God,
till I declare your power to the next generation,
your mighty acts to all who are to come.
Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,
you who have done great things.
Who is like you, God?
Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter,
you will restore my life again;
from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.
You will increase my honor
and comfort me once more.*

Psalm 71:14-21

With a bold, “but as for me,” the tone of the psalm changes abruptly. A lifetime of resilient faith, confident hope, and continuous praise is not about to disappear. The psalmist rededicates his

³²¹ Augustine, *Psalm 71*, 318.

efforts to tell of God's righteous actions and saving deeds. To this high calling he will never tire, no matter how old he becomes. Nor will he ever exhaust all the good things that can be said about what God has done. He doubles down on his resolve to be faithful to the end. The psalmist articulates here what the apostles will emphasize: life is not a sprint it's a marathon and it's not over until it's over. Faithfulness to the end affirms faith from the beginning. And the end in faithfulness to the end may be a long way off, but it is the only end worth pursuing.

Psalm 71 gives us the long view of faithfulness. "Today we emphasize the New Birth," writes Peter Gillquist, "the ancients emphasized being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living; they spoke of the glories of the eternal kingdom" but today "the emphasis has shifted from the completion of the Christian life to the beginning of it."³²² David is teaching us "to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12). We were never meant to become less dependent upon the Lord; only more dependent. Life is never too long for the long obedience in the same direction. "As for mortals," writes the psalmist, "their days are like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (Ps 103:15). The apostle Paul's line sums up David's resilience this way: "I haven't arrived, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil 3:12).

David's long view puts the hardships of life in perspective and looks forward to resurrection life. Christians can hardly hear David say, "Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again," without thinking of Christ's promise of the resurrection. Perhaps David had a more immediate and temporal restoration of life and kingdom in view, but I'm not so sure. The expectation that David believed that death ends all is harder to imagine than believing that David envisioned everlasting life. Surely when the risen Messiah interpreted the Psalms for the disciples before his ascension he made clear the promise of the resurrection. "From the depths of the earth you will again bring me up," sounds like a person who is counting on the Lord's eternal reward.

My Song

*I will praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, my God;
I will sing praise to you with the lyre,
Holy One of Israel.
My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praise to you –
I whom you have delivered.
My tongue will tell of your righteous acts
all day long,
for those who wanted to harm me
have been put to shame and confusion.*

Psalm 71:22-24

³²² Gillquist, "A Marathon We Are Meant to Win," 22.

David ends on a note of high praise to God for his faithfulness from beginning to end. He is committed to proclamation and praise. Prose gives way to poetry and dialogue to doxology. Narrative becomes declarative in anthems of praise. Music is a gift from God that helps us take in the intelligible revelation of God. Worship is a matter of thinking and feeling. It is both intellectual and emotional, because it engages the mind and expresses the heart. Telling the truth about God and singing praises to God are two actions that belong together. When the church teaches with wisdom and sings with gratitude, our minds and our hearts are informed and inspired by the will and ways of God.³²³ The apostle Paul joins the psalmist in declaring the importance of musical praise when he writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

For all of Calvin’s insight into Psalm 71 he mistakenly imposed his bias against musical instrumentation in the church. David’s reference to the harp and lyre, or in our situation, guitar and violin, triggered an unfortunate misinterpretation of the apostle Paul’s admonition against speaking in an unknown tongue (1 Cor 14:13). “We are not, indeed, forbidden to use, in private musical instruments, but they are banished out of the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit, when Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:13, lays it down as an invariable rule, that we may praise God, and to pray to him only in a known tongue.”³²⁴ Thankfully, David and the apostles knew no such bias against musical expression. They saw the power of instruments to magnify the Lord and praise his name.

For those of us who are “old and gray” (Ps 71:18) singing and playing our praises to God takes on a profound significance. Just because we are old does not mean we haven’t a song in our heart and melody on our lips. The psalmist knows no such thing as expressionless praise nor silent faith. We open our mouths and tune our instruments to praise “your faithfulness, my God.” We have not given up on telling of “your righteous acts *all day long*.” We are designed for doxology from infancy to the end of our earthly existence. Praise shall always be on our lips, even though those people and things that want to harm us still persist (Ps 71:24). 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 goes,

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.

³²³ Webster, *The Living Word*, 103.

³²⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, vol.3:98.

By the grace of God David did everything in his power to pave the way for his son Solomon to become king. He secured Israel's borders, acquired plans and materials to build the temple, brought meaningful closure to his own rule (2 Sam 23:1-7), and he wrote this prayer for Solomon.³²⁵ Psalm 72 completes the three psalm sequence that concludes Book II. The third panel in this worship triptych is a royal psalm. The people of God are led to pray for the king, specifically that the king will be endowed with God's justice and God's righteousness. They pray that the king will champion the cause of the poor and needy, that his reign will endure like the sun and moon, and that he will be honored among the nations and known for his compassion. The king who is blessed by God values the lives of the weak and needy and will deliver them from death. He will rescue the oppressed and afflicted. Honor and prosperity are built on God's justice and righteousness. The king who is a blessing to the nations honors the Lord God, the God of Israel, "who alone does marvelous deeds" (Ps 72:18).

David's prayer for Solomon points beyond his son to the one who is greater than Solomon. T. S. Eliot called this connection, the *objective correlative*, that is to say, the person and work of Jesus is the ultimate focus of the Psalms.³²⁶ Christians are not dismissive of the first horizon of meaning, but a truly Jewish praying of the psalm is bound to see the Messiah in its petitions. Jesus, the Son of David, is essentially who and what the Psalms are about. Jesus said as much to disciples, when he said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Jesus is the true connection and correlation between petition and prophecy, promise and fulfillment. The idealism of Psalm 72 points beyond "the experience of any king in Israel's history but harmonizes with the prophecies of the anticipated glorious reign of the Messiah."³²⁷

Even the ambiguity of the tenses supports both petition and prophecy. In Hebrew the imperfect verb tense which is used throughout Psalm 72 can be translated either as a future action or a wished for action.³²⁸ The psalm can be both, a royal coronation psalm and/or a royal messianic psalm. The opening imperative, "O God, give the king your justice," is followed by a series of imperfections "which can be translated into English either as future tenses (predictions, 'he will') or as jussives [petitions] (prayers, 'may he')."³²⁹ David's prayer for his son Solomon and the Spirit's prophecy of the coming King of kings and Lord of lords are one in the same – a fitting testimony to the Incarnate One.

³²⁵ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 95. Greidanus writes, "The superscription "Of Solomon" or "For Solomon" signals the editor's hint to read the psalm against the background of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 1-10)." Ross, *Psalms*, 532. Ross writes, "The superscription attributes it to Solomon, although the translation of the superscription in Greek and Syriac versions interpret it as a prayer for Solomon, or a prayer where Solomon is the object."

³²⁶ Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus*, 31.

³²⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:533.

³²⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 131. Alter writes, "The prayer of the first two lines that God grant the king a sound sense of justice quickly glides, after a brief glance at nature, into a series of optatives attached to the king. The optatives, however become almost at once a predictive portrait of the utopian monarch. . ."

³²⁹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 96.

Once when debating the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus said that “the Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now someone greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). This gives us a good idea as to how Jesus prayed Psalm 72. He prayed it in line with how the prophets prayed the Psalm (Isaiah 11:4-5; 61:1-3; Zechariah 9:10).

God’s Justice

*Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.
May the mountains bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.
May he defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
may he crush the oppressor.
May he endure as long as the son,
as long as the moon, through all generations.
May he be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.
In his days may the righteous flourish
and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.*

Psalm 72:1-7

God is addressed at the beginning and at the end of this God-centered psalm yet the focus of the psalm is on the king. In Hebrew the psalm literally begins, “O God” (elohim) and finishes with, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who does marvelous deeds.” The relationship between God and king parallels the relationship between “the One enthroned in heaven” and “my son” in Psalm 2. These two royal-messianic psalms form an inclusio for Book I and Book II. Everything that is related to the king is of God; God’s justice, God’s righteousness, God’s people, God’s afflicted ones. Without God the king has nothing, is nothing. He has no purpose, no means, no people. Even the many references to nature and to the nations assume the superintending sovereign will of God. Psalm 72 is a prayer “that through God’s righteous king, God’s peaceable kingdom may spread to the ends of the earth.”³³⁰

The opening petition prays for the king to be endowed with justice and righteousness, but not just any brand of social justice, the prayer is for the king to execute God’s justice and God’s righteousness. The petition recalls Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, when he humbled himself before the Lord and asked for a “discerning heart” so that he might distinguish between right and wrong and govern the people of God with justice (1 Kings 3:7-9). “If the king is God’s representative, he must think like God.”³³¹ His moral authority depends upon implementing God’s justice and God’s righteousness. National security, political stability, economic prosperity,

³³⁰ Ibid., 107.

³³¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:536.

and human flourishing all depend upon the wisdom and justice of God. It is not difficult for Christians to see the correlation between David's petition and the apostle's exhortation in Romans 13. Paul appealed to believers to submit to the governing authorities because they were "God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). The biblical focus on social justice runs through the Law and the Prophets with a special emphasis on the vulnerable who are often denied justice by the powerful. The measure of a king and the validity of a government is determined by how well the poor and needy, the oppressed and afflicted, are defended and championed.

The call to justice is rooted in the Bible and came long before a king ruled over Israel. According to the word of the Lord the blessing of God's provision for the people of God was sufficient so that "there need be no poor people among you" (Deut 15:4). However, "if anyone is poor among you," the responsibility is clear, "do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need" (Deut 15:7). The people were responsible for one another. The needy were to be cared for generously, "without a grudging heart" and the Lord promised to bless the generosity of the people "in everything you put your hand to" (Deut 15:10). In God's economy there was sufficient supply to meet the need, but such were the troubles and trials of the human condition that the Lord concluded, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land" (Deut 15:11).

In keeping with Psalm 72 the prophets emphasized social justice on behalf of the poor and needy. Jeremiah declared the word of the Lord, "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor." Instead of defending the cause of the poor and needy, Jeremiah accused the wealthy and powerful of oppression and extortion (Jeremiah 22:13-17). David's prayer for Solomon sets the precedent for our prayers. Judging from Psalm 72 free enterprise capitalism and national security should not be a nation's number one priority. Unless the poor and needy are cared for we are no better than Israel's wicked kings. The prophet Amos railed against the complacent in Israel who loved their religious festivals and oppressed the poor. "Away with the noise of your songs!" shouted Amos. "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:23-24).

The psalmist's "beautiful picture of the barren mountains waving with an abundance of grain" depends on the king pursuing justice and righteousness.³³² Economic prosperity, social stability, and human flourishing are the fruit of seeking justice and not the other way around. Saving the children of the needy and crushing the oppressor are not endeavors undertaken after prosperity has been achieved. Wisdom, not wealth, empowers a just society. If social justice is perceived as an optional luxury made affordable by a prosperous economy, it will never happen.

Psalms 72 and 73 suggest that in spite of Solomon's prayer for wisdom, his administration was not known for justice and righteousness. David's prayer finds its fulfillment in the coming of Immanuel ("God with us") and Mary sang about Jesus, the Anointed One. The Son of the Most

³³² Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 111.

High will scatter the proud, bring down rulers, lift up the humble, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty (Luke 1:51-53). Jesus commenced his public ministry in Nazareth in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. He began by reading the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1,2). Typological fulfillment and messianic prophecy converged in the one who was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).³³³

Calvin warned against interpreting Psalm 72 “simply as a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ,” but he goes on to defend a typological interpretation of the psalm. Calvin argued that David the author of the psalm knew that the ultimate successor of the kingdom’s power and dominion was Christ. David and his posterity were “only a type or shadow” of the coming kingdom that was “far superior” to his rule and reign. The “everlasting dominion” of this coming kingdom would realize its “complete accomplishment in Christ.”³³⁴

God’s Kingdom

*May he rule from sea to sea
and from the River [the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.
May the desert tribes bow before him
and his enemies lick the dust.
May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.
May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.
For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.
He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.*

Psalm 72:8-14

The impact of the Anointed One’s just and righteous rule is described in three ways. Nature’s amazing productivity is evidence of God’s blessing. Even the mountains reap an abundant harvest because of the king’s just rule (Ps 72:3, 6,7, 16). Secondly, the king’s righteous reign

³³³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 100. Calvin’s insistence on the historical-grammatical method dissuaded him from a messianic interpretation of Psalm 72. Calvin writes, “Those who would interpret it simply as a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ, seem to put a construction upon the words which does violence to them; and then we must always beware of giving the Jews occasion of making an outcry, as if it were our purpose, sophistically, to apply to Christ those things which do not directly refer to him.” Two aspects of Calvin’s warning stand out: first, his criticism of those who interpret Psalm 72 “simply as prophecy” is something of a straw man argument against the redemptive-historical method; second, his concern over the Jewish outcry against a messianic interpretation may evidence his commendable sensitivity but his typological interpretation may prove equally distasteful to Jewish sensibilities.

³³⁴ Ibid.

endures forever. His name is as permanent as the sun and moon (Ps 72:5, 17). Thirdly, all the nations of the world will bow down and serve him. The global reach of the king's glorious judgment stretches from sea to sea. Universal homage is given to him from far flung nomadic tribes and desert tribes as well as western coastal nations and nations from the east. Finally, God's covenant promise to Abraham made long ago will be fulfilled through the reign of this righteous king and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3; Ps 72:17).

Once again the psalmist emphasizes that the hallmark of the king's rule is compassion for the needy and social justice. The king's power is used on behalf of the powerless (Ps 72:12-14). He delivers the needy, helps the afflicted, shows compassion to the weak, saves the needy from death, and rescues the oppressed. The lives of the poor and afflicted are precious in his sight.

Jesus fulfills this primary description of the righteous king. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3), he drew on the Old Testament understanding of the poor and needy, as those who turn to God in prayer, acknowledge their great need and seek his help. The Psalms shape the meaning of Jesus' Beatitude: "I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me....The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his captive people" (Psalm 69:29,32). The poor acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation.

God's Glory

*Long may he live!
May gold from Sheba be given him,
May people ever pray for him
and bless him all day long.
May grain abound throughout the land;
on the tops of the hills may it sway.
May the crops flourish like Lebanon
and thrive like the grass of the field.
May his name endure forever;
may it continue as long as the sun.
Then all the nations will be blessed through him,
and they will call him blessed.*

*Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.
Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen*

*This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.
Psalm 72:15-20*

The psalmist's description of global peace, human flourishing, and international reverence for the God of Israel is extraordinary and offers an eschatological climax to the deliverance psalms of Book II. We can hardly imagine the end of evil and the blessing of enduring shalom, but the New Testament takes the psalmist's images and metaphors and translates them into the redemptive-historical fulfillment accomplished in Jesus Christ. We hear echoes of Psalm 72 in Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:54-55; Ps 72:11), and in Zechariah's song (Luke 1:72-72; Ps 72:17), and in the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-2; Ps 72:11). Psalm 72 anticipates the dawning age of the Gentiles (John 12:20-23) and on Palm Sunday Jesus foreshadowed the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy quoted from Psalm 72, "He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech 9:10; Ps 72:8). Psalm 72 celebrates the "living hope" in "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade . . . that is ready to be revealed at the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5), when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Psalm 72 inspires and instructs the people of God to pray earnestly for the coming of Christ. Our prayer should be "Come, Lord Jesus, Come!" And in the meantime we pray for our rulers. We pray for the administration of God's social justice, that the priorities celebrated in this psalm would shape out political agenda. May we rescue the poor, help the children of the needy, and crush cruel tyrants (Ps 72:4, Message). As God's "chosen people" we are not meant to divide along ethnic, cultural, racial, social, gender, and generational lines. We are founded solely on Jesus Christ. This solidarity transcends sociological and psychological compatibility. It is the house of the Spirit, built by the Father on the cornerstone of the Son. This is not only a spiritual identity, but a political identity. The people of God are drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9). Christ's redemption destroys ethnic privilege and pride of race. No person, group, race, tribe, nation or nations has the right to feel morally superior to others. The identity, calling, solidarity, and significance of the people of God is not based on ethnicity, family, heritage, or merit, but on Christ's atoning once-and-for-all sacrifice.

Book II ends in doxology, a closing blessing to "the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds." The psalmist's "Amen and Amen," expresses a resounding "Yes and Yes and Yes" (Ps 72:19, The Message). Inspired by Psalm 72, Isaac Watts wrote,

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does its successive journeys run;
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

*People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song,
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His name.*

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