

My father valued his tools. Back in his day he was a slide-rule totting mathematician by vocation and a hammer-swinging carpenter by avocation. He loved his tools. He kept track of them, used them for their specific function, and returned them to their designated place. Nothing made a job go better than having the right tool. My dad took special pride in his wood turning lathe. A lathe is to a furniture-maker what a potter's wheel is to the potter. With practice my father became skilled in turning out matching table legs. Of all his tools this is the one that reminds me most of the Psalms. A block of wood, locked in place, rotating at variable speeds, powered by an electric motor. The craftsman's blade carving the wood into the desired shape. The Psalms are the right tool for shaping our spirituality and giving substance to our communion with God. They are *soul-carving tools*, to use Gregory of Nyssa's metaphor. Each psalm is its own unique instrument, "and these instruments are not alike in shape," but all share the common purpose of "carving our souls to the divine likeness."<sup>1</sup> We have plenty of tools for doing and getting, but as Eugene Peterson insists, we need "the primary technology of the Psalms, essential tools for being and becoming human."<sup>2</sup>

The Psalms are instrumental in the care of souls. John Calvin entitled the Psalms, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul," because there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious of that is not represented in the Psalms.<sup>3</sup> Like an MRI, the Psalms are diagnostic. They see deep into the soul, mirror imaging our true condition, whether good or bad: "Though you probe my heart, though you examine me at night and test me, you will find that I have planned no evil; my mouth has not transgressed" (Ps 17:3). Like a surgeon's scalpel they can cut to the bone in order to heal: "Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again" (Ps 71:20). The Psalms render the soul transparent to God and ourselves. "The self is in sound health and free from despair," wrote Kierkegaard, "only when, precisely by having been in despair, it is grounded transparently in God."<sup>4</sup>

The Psalms are the necessary soul-carving tool in an age of distraction. They require deep thought and sustained commitment. They stand for everything our multi-tasking, distracted, buffered selves has been wired to resist. They are the essential spiritual discipline for overcoming our indifference to communion with God. They call us out of our small worlds into the large world of God's making and redeeming. If we give them a chance, the Psalms will resonate with our souls. They are essential tools for Christian spirituality, but the learning curve can be steep.

*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*

<sup>1</sup> Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 164-165.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, *Answering God*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4: xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 163.

*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.*

Asaph and his sons were worship leaders from the tribe of Levi during the reigns of David and Solomon. Asaph was the chief musician in charge of musical accompaniment when they brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chron.6:39; 15:17; 16:5). In addition to being a conductor and instrumentalist, he was a poet credited with twelve psalms (50, 73-83). “The style of Asaph is distinctive, forceful, and spiritual. He is referred to as a prophet and poet” (2 Chron. 29:30; Neh.12:46).”<sup>5</sup> Although Asaph led the people in worship when the ark was brought into Jerusalem (1 Chron 15:16-19; 16:4-7, 37) and when the temple was dedicated under Solomon, most of his hymns focus on difficult times.

*A Crisis of Faith*

*Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.  
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.  
For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*  
Psalm 73:1-3

Asaph finds himself in a deep dilemma – a full blown crisis of faith. His creedal sounding statement rolls off his tongue: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” He has said these words in worship a thousand times before. He can say them in his sleep. But now this basic confession produces within him stomach churning conflict. “Surely God is good to Israel” is in danger of becoming an empty cliché for a troubled soul. His feelings are in turmoil. Feelings pose a real danger when it comes to worshiping God, because “feelings lie. Feelings deceive. Feelings seduce.” Eugene Peterson claims, “Feelings are the scourge of prayer. To pray by feelings is to be at the mercy of glands and weather and digestion. And there is no mercy in any of them.”<sup>6</sup> Feelings are totally unreliable guides for true worship.

Asaph is disillusioned. He was ordained to lead a people in worship who did not know how to worship, nor did they care to learn. Their heart was not in it and their daily lives opposed it. His conflict was not over liturgical form or musical genre or aesthetics, but over what it meant to worship God. Asaph believed that real worship, that is, worshiping God in spirit and in truth, was meant to produce the fruit of justice and righteousness. Asaph believed that the human response to a personal saving encounter with the living God was intuitively simple and inherently sacrificial. But when he looked around that was not what he experienced. His creed was being challenged by his life experience.

Unless worship calls us “deeper into God’s heart and deeper into the world for which Christ died” it is not very good worship. It may be safe and everybody in the congregation may be

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<sup>5</sup> Feinberg, “Asaph,” 345.

<sup>6</sup> Peterson, *Answering God*, 87.

happy, but God, who is the primary audience of our worship, is not pleased. Religious people are capable of going to great lengths to perform high-powered worship services, but if they neglect the widow and the orphan, take advantage of the poor, and turn a blind eye to the needy, their worship is a sham. Mark Labberton writes, “That is the crux of the crisis. I and other Christians I know have been busy tithing the dill and cumin of worship forms while avoiding what Jesus calls the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy and faith.”<sup>7</sup>

Worship can be dangerous *negatively* when we make it about ourselves, rather than about God; when we essentially lie about God and make our “worship” a platform for showcasing our talents or our passions. When worship doesn’t change us or the world we serve, it is dangerous in a debilitating way. “Millions of American Christians spend hours in worship and yet lead lifestyles indistinguishable in priorities, values and practices from those in the broader culture.”<sup>8</sup> Worship is dangerous *positively* when we encounter the living triune God; when it isn’t safe, comfortable or convenient; when it opens us up to the word of God and lays us out in surrender to the will of God. Worship changes the way we see God, ourselves and the world—dramatically so!

“But as for me. . .” Honesty prevails in Asaph’s crisis of faith. He paints a picture. He’s in danger of slip, sliding away (like the Paul Simon song). He cannot go through the motions. He envies the arrogant because of their prosperity. Evil begets evil. Asaph cannot in good conscience rise in front of his people and lead them in worship. The evil around him is getting to him. He is tempted to internalize the aspirations of those around him. Evil triggers evil: bitterness, self-righteousness, envy. We fall prey to the world’s strategies for success. We envy the wealthy and powerful and aim for similar achievements at the expense of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We lust after money, sex, and power and continue to show up for worship and sing hymns.

Asaph confronts his doubts in the best way possible, through prayer. Someone has said, “unbelief does not doubt, faith doubts.”<sup>9</sup> “The questions asked in this psalm are still asked today: Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the wicked prosper? Why doesn’t God remove the wicked from the earth? Why does he look on as though he is unwilling or unable to deal with them way they deserve? How is the Lord good to the godly?”<sup>10</sup>

### *The Beautiful Side of Evil*

*They have no struggle;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.  
They are free from common human burdens;  
they are not plagued by human ills.  
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.*

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<sup>7</sup> Labberton, *Called*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:555.

<sup>10</sup> Okorocho, *Psalms*, 678.

*From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
their evil imaginations have no limits.  
They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.  
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.  
Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.  
They say, "How would God know?  
Does the Most High know anything?"  
This is what the wicked are like—  
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.*  
Psalm 73:4-12

Asaph is in ethical shock. He is not troubled by the pimp or prostitute. Ordinary thieves, drug pushers, thugs, common criminals, and the like are not the ones provoking his envy. He's looking at the beautiful people, athletic, intelligent, photogenic, and enviable. He is asking himself, "Why am I writing psalms when I could be building a palace?" He's eying the elite, the affluent upper east side of a sophisticated culture. What makes these people what they are? They have pride! They believe in themselves. They radiate their own special self-assertive, self-aggrandizing style. They are all dressed up in ego-power. Their vitality is in their vanity. They cloth themselves in the violence that sheds no blood, but destroys lives. They are armed with deception and dishonesty. Occasionally good will and kind gestures are part of their deception.

They believe in no-fault morality and insist on making up the rules as they go. They redefine morality to suit their tastes and whims. Lying is advertising; manipulation is public relations; infidelity is flexibility; cheating is evening the odds; immorality is an alternative lifestyle; fornication is nothing more than a handshake. "Their mouths lay claim to heaven," Asaph writes, "and their tongues take possession of the earth." Talk is everything: flattery, scoffing, threatening, bullying, cursing, sneering, malicious sarcasm, and cynical disregard for the truth. And amazingly, people drink in their dogma of success. They have long since written God off. "They say, 'How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?'" They have exchanged the living God for their version of therapeutic deism. Asaph concludes, "This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth."

Ironically, it may have been Solomon and his lavish lifestyle and moral compromise that provoked Asaph's spiritual struggle. Under Solomon the character of worship changed, from the relative simplicity of David's time to the elaborate splendor of Solomon's temple. The success of the kingdom was becoming its weakness. Solomon made 500 shields out of solid gold and a magnificent throne "covered with ivory and overlaid with fine gold" (1 Kings 10:16-19). He imported 12,000 horses and a zoo of apes and baboons from Africa. He married Pharaoh's daughter and built a new palace for her because the palace of David had at one time housed the ark of the Lord. He felt uncomfortable bringing a foreign wife into his father's palace (1 Kings 11:2). He reportedly had 1,000 wives and concubines. To please them he built shrines to

Ashtoreth, Molech and Chemosh. One can only imagine the difficulty Asaph and his sons must have experienced in leading worship in this pagan pluralistic atmosphere. Solomon's behavior alone may account for Asaph's crisis of faith.

### *Moral Pain*

*Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  
and have washed my hands in innocence.  
All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.*

Psalm 73:13-14

For Asaph the arc of devotion began with confession, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart," and then descended into confusion due to distraction and envy. At this point in the psalm he has hit the murky bottom of despair. Asaph's critique is both valid and dangerous. He is aware of the tension between authentic worship and the world's strategies of success. He is honest with himself and he is sensitive to moral pain. He discerns how the evil around him, the arrogance, callousness, and injustice is producing evil within him, envy, cynicism, and despair. It is good for Asaph to bring these dark feelings out into the open. His critique of the beautiful side of evil needs to be heard. Honesty is required at every point along the arc of devotion. But Asaph's spiritual despair is also dangerous. He feels like a fool for refusing to go along with the ways of the world. "I've been stupid to play by the rules; what has it gotten me? A long run of bad luck, that's what – a slap in the face every time I walk out the door" (Ps 73:13-14 The Message).

We may need to be more honest and allow Asaph's dilemma to surface in our conversations and discussions. I imagine that many have felt either empty or naive for following God's way. At some point we say to ourselves, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. . ." Asaph's feelings are complex and confused. He senses the loss of community. He feels alone and insignificant. He feels the futility and frustration of his longstanding efforts toward faithfulness. He is tempted buy into the world's quick fixes: fame, wealth, and power. It is at the low point of the arc of devotion that one contemplates alternative paths to significance and self-worth. Impulsive choices are an obvious threat: an affair, extravagant purchases, a distancing between friends, a hardening of one's heart toward worship and others.

### *The Turn Around*

*If I had spoken out like that,  
I would have betrayed your children.  
When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.  
Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.  
How suddenly are they destroyed,*

*completely swept away by terrors!  
They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.*  
Psalm 73:15-20

Asaph's first line of defense against falling away is his loyalty to the people of God. Relationships proved to be a protective buffer. If he said what was on his mind, "Obedience is pointless," or "Faithfulness makes me feel like a fool," he would have betrayed the fellowship of believers. This is sobering because many of us have been raised in our hyper individualistic culture. Many Christians feel isolated, disconnected, anonymous, and out of close fellowship with other Christians. In the western church this first line of defense is often weak if not non-existent. The author of Hebrews understood the importance of Christian solidarity. He exhorted believers, ". . . *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart . . .*" "*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. . .*" "*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching*" (Hebrews 10:22-25).

Asaph's solidarity with the believing community may keep him faithful, but that doesn't change how he feels. He holds his tongue, but his heart is in turmoil.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately whether or not we betray "this generation of God's people" depends on our relationship with God. Not letting others down only works for so long. Asaph admits, "When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." Asaph's decisive move from "destructive doubt" to "reassuring faith" is made in the sanctuary of God.<sup>12</sup> In worship, Asaph regained perspective. He discovered the importance of faith over feelings. "Worship is an act which develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God which is expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured."<sup>13</sup>

Asaph's vision of the beautiful side of evil was broken in worship. In the sanctuary he discovers the divine perspective. With a renewed focus on the Lord "he was able to put everything in perspective."<sup>14</sup> In the sanctuary he understood the human condition in the light of God's judgment.<sup>15</sup> Asaph gained a powerful new perspective. He had stated his despair emphatically, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure . . ." but now he states his confidence in the judgment of God, "Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin." Asaph was

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<sup>11</sup> Okorochoa, *Psalms*, 679. Nigerian pastor Cyril Okorochoa, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, Nigeria, writes: "It is the mark of Christian maturity to use one's tongue wisely, to encourage rather than discourage others (Prov 12:18). While it is healthy to share our burdens openly with others for prayer and counsel, we must be careful not to discourage others with an attitude of grumbling and complaining, especially if we are in a leadership position or have others to look up to us. Yet there is great blessing in the gift of friends with whom leaders, who are often lonely people, care bare their hearts and experience God's holy refreshing (see Malachi 3:16)."

<sup>12</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:561.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

<sup>15</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 143. Reardon writes: ". . . One of the more characteristic features of the modern world is its growing inability to presume that the moral order, including the social order, is rooted in the metaphysical order. . . . Relatively few people in today's culture seem any longer to presuppose that they live in a moral universe where the differences between right and wrong, justice and injustice, are fixed in the composition of reality."

graphic in his depiction of evil (73:3-11), but now he is graphic in his description of judgment. They will be destroyed suddenly, completely swept away. They will vanish like a dream. The wicked are like a nightmare that is over when you wake up. “When you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.”

Solidarity with the people of God was Asaph’s first line of defense, but worship in the sanctuary revived his understanding of life’s meaning and destiny. He regained God’s perspective on true values and moral consequences. Finally, self-examination and repentance restored his personal relationship with God. Instead of being disappointed and disillusioned with God, he became disappointed and disillusioned with himself. The root problem wasn’t in God’s moral order nor was it found in the wicked he envied. The problem was in his heart and soul.

### *The Strength of My Heart*

*When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.  
Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.*

Psalm 73:21-28

Asaph never acted on his envy, but he was greatly disturbed and it ate away at his soul. He never joined the ranks of the wicked or engaged in their self-indulgence. He never participated in their violent and malicious ways – never bullied and oppressed anyone. But he had thought about it. He saw how his heart had been twisted by the prosperity of the wicked. The tension between Asaph’s vocational calling and his deep feelings of humiliation could only be resolved through repentance. “When my heart was grieved,” Asaph confesses, “and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.” His self-description is reminiscent of the patriarch Job, who became convinced that he “must hand the whole matter over completely to God more trustingly, less fretfully.”<sup>16</sup> Like Job, Asaph is humbled by God, not humiliated. He does not cower before God, he bows. God’s presence is not intimidating; it’s inviting; it’s not repulsive; it’s redemptive. When Job says, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Job*, 287

you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6), he is not incriminating himself. He is admitting that he has been woefully ignorant of God’s ways. He has misjudged God and drawn wrong conclusions. That is why in the awesome presence of God, Asaph, like Job, is both delighted and ashamed at the same time! He feels like a brute beast – a dumb ox, but whatever foolishness or awkwardness he feels is overwhelmed by the fellowship he experiences. Chastened, but cherished. Asaph has been learning obedience by the things that he suffered (Heb 5:8).

The arc of devotion climaxes with Asaph’s almost lyrical description of his relationship with Yahweh. The loving bond between them is now more intimate, informed, and enduring. Asaph has gone from distraction and disillusionment to discernment and devotion. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” Matthew Henry writes, “There is scarcely a verse in all the psalms more expressive than this of the pious and devout affections of a soul to God; here it soars up towards him, follows hard after him, and yet, at the same time, has an entire satisfaction and complacency in him.”<sup>17</sup> This is the Old Testament equivalent to the apostle Paul’s verse, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21) and again, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 5:20).

Asaph concludes where he began, “But as for me . . .” (Ps 73:2, 28). Only this time, instead of falling away, he’s holding God close. “But as for me, it is good to be near God.” He has come full circle. Now he can say with confidence, “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” As Oliver Wendell Holmes famously said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Asaph has reached the simplicity on the other side of complexity and he is grateful, “I will tell of all your deeds.”

Psalms 73 lies at the heart of the Psalms centered between the profound truth of Psalm 1 and the all out praise of Psalm 150.<sup>18</sup> Spiritual maturity requires that we experience Asaph’s arc of devotion. The journey from Eden’s fellowship with God to Christ’s rule and reign in the New Jerusalem goes through Calvary.<sup>19</sup> Asaph’s turning point came in the sanctuary (Ps 73:17). Our turning point is the cross of Christ. This is why the apostle Paul was resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). This is the critical truth that turns everything around. We say with Asaph, “God is the strength of my heart” and we set apart Christ as Lord of our hearts (1 Peter 3:15).

The apostles seem to echo the psalms at every turn, which makes me wonder if the apostle Paul did not have Asaph’s lament in mind when he wrote his powerful defense of the bodily resurrection. Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 15, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. . . . The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the

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<sup>17</sup> Henry, *Psalms*, 307.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 11. Wilcock writes, “The glories of Psalm 73:24-26, and Psalm 150, and Job 42, and the last two chapters of Revelation, are the glories of Paradise, and Paradise is not Eden. You can get there only by way of Psalm 73:17, which in the New Testament terms is the encounter with God in Christ at Calvary.”

victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul adds an exhortation that echoes Asaph’s lament. Remember what the psalmist said at his lowest point, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence” (Ps 73:13). Was this line in Paul’s mind prompting him to write a pastoral conclusion? “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

The narrative back story for Psalm 74 is most likely the Babylonian invasion of Israel in 587/6 B.C. when the army of Nebuchadnezzar burned the city of Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, and carried anyone or anything of material value back to Babylon. Thousands of Israel's leaders, soldiers, artisans and skilled craftsmen, were taken to Babylon in the first wave of exiles (Jer 52:28; 2 Kings 24:8-17). The devastation was so extreme that recovery was hardly imaginable (Lam 2:1-22; Jer 52:1-30). This powerful communal lament is attributed to the musical tradition of Asaph whose distinctive poetic style is bold, emotionally raw, and penetrating. It is the spiritual equivalent to being caught in a freezing rain storm, soaked to the bone and pelted by hail. This kind of worship is not for the faint-hearted nominal believer, but it is essential for all who follow the Lord Jesus.

The psalmist gives us the words to describe “the extremities of human experience” that we are bound to face.<sup>20</sup> We might like to purge these sorrows from our version of the Christian life, but that is impossible. True faith always suffers. Spurgeon wrote, “This history of the suffering church is always edifying; when we see how the faithful trusted and wrestled with their God in times of dire distress, we are thereby taught how to behave ourselves under similar circumstances; we learn moreover, that when fiery trial befalls us, no strange thing happened unto us, we are following the trail of the host of God.”<sup>21</sup>

The rage against worship invoked by Babylon is not limited to the sixth century B.C. It is consistent with the violence and terror experienced by believers around the world and by believers in the west who run counter to the prevailing world view. The many forms of violence go beyond the physical to psychological, emotional, and spiritual trauma.

The structure of Psalm 74 is straightforward. The first half describes the utter devastation of everything to do with worship wrought by an enemy zealous to obliterate everything associated with God's Name (Ps 74:1-11). The second half of the psalm appeals to the Lord of the universe whose sovereign power overrules the chaos of nature and who has established his covenant with his people. The psalmist makes a case for the defense of God's defenseless people and for the vindication of God's cause over the fools, foes, adversaries, and enemies that mock and revile his Name (Ps 74:12-23). Against the backdrop of human devastation, the psalmist focuses on what the crisis means for worship. Every aspect of the psalm is intensely God-centered. Everything from destruction to deliverance is under the sovereign will of God. Nothing happens apart from God, and God is the one to address, but God is not to blame for the ruins. Israel's enemies are responsible for waging war against worship and they will be held accountable.

Lining up Psalm 74 with the persecuted global church is frightfully easy. The burning and desecration of Christian places of worship is a real threat from Syria to Selma. Churches are soft targets for racists, Communists, and Islamic terrorist. Christians living in 70 AD when Rome

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<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Spurgeon, “Psalm 74,” *Treasury of David*.

conquered Jerusalem had a psalm to pray as Christians do today living in North Korea, Iraq, Syria, China, and Northern Nigeria. Even if we are inclined to turn away from the stark reality of evil confronted in this psalm we must determine to embrace its sober message and turn to God our King. Psalm 74 is a spiritual formation tool, equipping us with the mental models necessary to focus our attention when all hell breaks loose.

*Rage against Worship*

*O God, why have you rejected us forever?  
Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?  
Remember the nation you purchased long ago,  
the people of your inheritance, whom you redeemed –  
Mount Zion, where you dwelt.  
Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins,  
all this destruction the enemy has brought on this sanctuary.*

*Your foes roared in the place where you met with us;  
they set up their standards as signs.  
They behaved like men wielding axes  
to cut through a thicket of trees.  
They smashed all the carved paneling  
with their axes and hatchets.  
They burned your sanctuary to the ground;  
they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.  
They said in their hearts, “We will crush them completely!”  
They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.*

*We were given no signs from God; no prophets are left,  
and none of us knows how long this will be.  
How long will the enemy mock you, God?  
Will the foe revile your name forever?  
Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?  
Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!*

Psalm 74:1-11

Faith, not doubt, prompts two heart wrenching questions to open the psalm and three at the end to close the first half of the psalm. Faith, not doubt, addresses God personally, and identifies the worshipers as “the sheep of your pasture.” Skeptics and cynics do not address God this way, but believers do. They may be discouraged, even despairing; disoriented, even disgusted; but their devotion to God is real and resilient. When faith is tested and all reason seems to fail, it is faith, not doubt, that asks why. Even in the throes of despair, faith, not doubt, will not let go of the divine reality. The psalmist turns to God in an act of faith. He foreshadows Peter’s conviction when he spoke on behalf of the disciples, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68).

Despite the “forever” impact of God’s rejection, Psalm 74’s communal lament is cried in good faith. The psalmist feels like God has walked off and is never coming back. The scene before his eyes must have been post-apocalyptic. The utter devastation goes on forever as far as the eye can see. The psalmist pleads with the Lord to turn around and come back to “the endless ruins.”

Faith, not doubt, focuses on the destruction of the sanctuary and the dishonor of God. Surely whole villages and towns, along with farms and crops, and herds of cattle were destroyed. The Babylonian conquest meant that men, women, and children were brutally raped, killed, imprisoned, and enslaved. Nevertheless, the psalmist remains focused exclusively on the temple. His passion is centered on the house of God and is consistent with David’s plea, “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling” (Ps 27:4-5). The disaster is wholly understood in the light of its impact on worship and the honor of God, and not on the personal suffering of the people of God.

In the first year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign over Babylon, Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah that for twenty-three years he had spoken the word of the Lord “again and again,” but they had not listened (Jer 25:3). His warning was as clear as it could be: “Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the Lord gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever. Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you. But you did not listen to me” (Jer 25:5-7).

Reading Psalm 74 against the backdrop of Jeremiah’s prophecy (Jeremiah 25:8-13) is to wonder why the psalmist did not allude to the sins of Israel nor stress the need for repentance. Surely it is their rejection of God and his ways that precipitated God’s rejection of them. But the psalmist says nothing about their culpability and guilt. Instead of discussing sin and repentance, the psalmist equates Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest with God’s judgment. It is God who is ultimately responsible for the terrible devastation and the Babylonian army is his instrument of judgment. God has weaponized the enemy.

The time for national confession and repentance is in the past. The sinful nation of Israel has been sentenced and judged. This is why the focus is neither on Israel’s sins nor Babylon’s conquest. What matters now is how long God’s rejection will last. The key word is “forever.” “O God, why have you rejected us *forever*?” The poignancy of the psalm lies in what feels like a never-ending separation – a permanent estrangement. It is into this state of suffering and anguish that the psalmist pleads for God to end his smoldering anger, to acknowledge the sheep of his pasture, to remember his inheritance, to embrace his redeemed and chosen people, and to dwell again on Mount Zion. The psalmist weaves into his communal lament a rich theology of grace that we must not miss in the midst of the suffering. It is right there from the beginning of the psalm.

In the Asaph tradition, the psalmist pictures evil, not in the abstract, but in the vivid detail of an

on-the-scene observer who witnesses a mob roaring into the temple, desecrating the sanctuary with pagan graffiti and hacking away with axes and hatchets the beautiful cedar paneling with carved open flowers as if it were firewood (1 Kings 6:16-19). They smashed the cherubim, stripped the gold, and then lit the Holy of Holies on fire to burn Solomon's temple to the ground. "We will crush them completely," was their cry!"

The psalmist's focus is not on Israel's suffering, but on God's honor. "They defiled the dwelling place of your Name" (Ps 74:7). His cry is not for the nation but for the Name, "How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will they revile your name forever?" (Ps 74:10). The psalmist knows that the destiny of the nation lies in the devotion to the Name. There is no salvation apart from the name of God and this truth remains unchanged, "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). Only in God is there any hope for salvation, causing the psalmist to cry out, "Why don't you do something? How long are you going to sit there with your hands folded in your lap?" (Ps 74:11, The Message).

Our praying imagination links Psalm 74 to the apostle John's apocalyptic picture of the suffering saints. When the fifth seal is broken an extraordinary prayer meeting is revealed (Rev 6:9-11). The saints who have gone before, who have been "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (Rev 6:9), are praying for salvation. The saints who can identify with Psalm 74 are those who have suffered for their faith in Christ. Prayer is the link that ties us to the Lord of history. Prayer expresses our shared anticipation of Christ's salvation and judgment and our shared community with those who have gone before.

*Rise Up, O God, my King*

*But God is my King from long ago;  
he brings salvation on the earth.  
It was you who split open the sea by your power;  
you broke the heads of the monsters in the waters.  
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan  
and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.  
It was you who opened the springs and streams;  
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.  
The day is yours, and yours also the night;  
you established the sun and moon.  
It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth;  
you made both summer and winter.*

*Remember how the enemy has mocked you, Lord,  
how foolish people have reviled your name.  
Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts;  
do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever.  
Have regard for your covenant,  
because haunts of violence fill the dark places of the land.*

*Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace;  
may the poor and needy praise your name.  
Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;  
remember how fools mock you all day long.  
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,  
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually.*  
Psalm 74:12-23

Psalm 74, like Psalm 73, makes a decisive shift from lament to confession and from despair to hope. The tale of destruction in the first half of the psalm is matched by a history of God's deliverances. Calvin explains "the simple and natural meaning" of this strategic pivot, "God has wrought on behalf of the chosen people many deliverances, which were as open and manifest as if they had been exhibited in a conspicuous theatre."<sup>22</sup> Who is King Nebuchadnezzar compared to God who reigns in sovereign majesty and how does the power of the Babylonian army compare to God's power over the universe? The psalmist reviews "the overwhelming power of God" to tame the chaos of nature and to form the nation of Israel, freeing it from Egyptian bondage. The psalmist appears to have deliberately merged creation and election in language reminiscent of both in order to refute ancient Babylonian and Canaanite myths. He declares in unmistakable ways that the Lord is sovereign over creation and history.<sup>23</sup>

In the midst of political, philosophical, and spiritual wreckage the psalmist extols the truth of who God is and what God has done. In worship, he reverses the dishonor shown to God and remembers who dried up the Red Sea and split the rock in the wilderness bringing forth water.<sup>24</sup> The psalmist credits God with the foundational realities that shape life and history: "You own the day, you own the night; you put stars and sun in place. You laid out the four corners of earth, shaped the seasons of summer and winter" (Ps 74:16-17, *The Message*). The psalmist is our worship leader fighting for perspective in the midst of the ruins. He goes back to these fundamental truths and the basic story of God's power to create and redeem. He gives us words to articulate the positive realities hidden in the darkness of evil. He is not reminding God of who he is and what he has done as if God has forgotten. No, his direct address is not for God's benefit but for ours: "You split the sea. . . You broke the heads of the monster. . . You crushed the heads of Leviathan. . . You opened up springs and steams. . . You dried up the ever-flowing rivers. . . Day is yours. . . Night is yours. . . You set the boundaries of the earth. . . You made summer and winter." He is telling the truth about God and in the act of worship we the people of God are reminded of the fundamental truths that shape our existence and give us hope even when it seems that all is lost.

By continuing to address God directly, "Remember how the enemy has mocked you, Lord" (Ps 74:18) and "Remember how fools mock you all day long" (Ps 74:22), the psalmist makes his appeal on the basis of God's honor. He pleads with God, "Have regard for your covenant" (Ps 74:20). "Rise up, O God, and defend your cause" (Ps 74:22). The psalmist's primary appeal for

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Psalm 74*, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:586-587.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

God to act rests in his sovereignty rather than in his people's suffering. Nevertheless he prays on behalf of "the sheep of your pasture" (Ps 74:1), "the nation you purchased long ago" (Ps 74:2), and pleads with the Lord, "Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts; do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever." The striking image of the dove endangered by wild beasts underscores the vulnerability, fragility, and weakness of the people of God. We cannot save ourselves. We were never meant to. The Church made up of beatitude-based believers will never impress the world as anything other than poor and needy. Christians do not belong to the elite. They don't leverage institutional power and shape society. This is not because "they don't believe enough, or try hard enough, or care enough, or think Christianly enough, or have the right worldview."<sup>25</sup> Faithfulness to Christ runs contrary to the dominant culture and the benefit of understanding this truth encourages humility, cultivates realism, reduces anxiety, removes false guilt, builds resilience, and encourages prayerful dependence. Futility and cynicism are countered by a realistic appraisal of the power of evil and our dependence upon the Lord.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) despised the biblical description of the believer as a lamb or a dove. He argued that hope in anything other than the will to power is an illusion. If Nietzsche read Psalm 74 he would extol the philosophy of the wild beast and the power of the oppressor. For him there is only the strong man and his will to power. Nietzsche argued that Christianity used the myth of love to foster an illusion. Humanity was falsely educated to believe in something other than the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery. Nietzsche applied the law of the jungle to the human beast. No one weeps when the lion tears apart its prey and no one should weep when the noble dominate the weak.

The "forever" factor played into the deep discouragement of the psalmist. He feared that somehow God's rejection would be forever, that the ruins would be everlasting, and that the Lord would forget the lives of his afflicted people forever. At the center of the psalm he laments, "We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be" (Ps 74:9). It is understandable that in the wake of the Babylonian invasion and conquest that the psalmist would feel this way. The prophets are silent and there is no sign of future vindication. Nevertheless Nebuchadnezzar's triumph does not mark the Lord's failure. The Lord's sovereign plan is being worked out "in a manner far more complex, thorough, and slow" than the psalmist can imagine.<sup>26</sup> The trajectory of salvation history leads downward to the manger. God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation. Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. We remember the first Exodus when the Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led through the wilderness by Moses and Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, lead us to the epic stories of Kings Saul and David. Here, Israel is at its height. David's son Solomon begins the descent.

The kingdom is divided between Jeroboam's Israel in the north and Rehoboam's Judah in the south. Against a litany of bad kings, Elijah and Elisha keep Israel's history alive. From there the story-line belongs to the prophets. It is hard to keep 16 prophets straight. Their ministry, from

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<sup>25</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 15.

Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah tried to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah. God judges his people and sends them into exile. The Babylonian captivity runs for 70 years. Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. This is where Nehemiah and Ezra come in as well.

The first Exodus was powerful. God's ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, all add up to a spectacular defining moment. But the second Exodus from Babylon was nothing by comparison to the first. Israel trekked back to their homeland as refugees. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days of Solomon's temple cried, because they knew the difference between the glory of the past and the reality of the present. Malachi's cry for faithfulness is the last word in this downward trajectory, followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded by the descent of the people of God.

All the work that went into post-exilic Israel was God's way of building a cradle for his ultimate revelation. God restored the Jewish people, the Jerusalem temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem, in order to cradle the Incarnate One. And even though everything was on a smaller scale than the first Exodus and Solomon's temple and even though there was more struggle and less excitement, anticipation grew. There was no room for pride of country and race among a people humbled by God and looking for his mercy and justice. The Promised Land may be less promising than in the days of Moses, but the Promised One is coming and God is at work. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12).

Psalm 75 is a response to Psalm 74 in several key ways. The negative “forever” reference in Psalm 74 is eclipsed by the psalmist’s positive declaration of praise to the God of Jacob – praise that lasts *forever* (Ps 75:9). In Psalm 75 God responds in the first person (Ps 75:2, 3, 4, 10) to the communal lament of Psalm 74. Instead of using the second person, “you” and “yours,” for God, the psalmist quotes God directly, saying, “I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge with equity” and “it is I who hold its pillars firm,” and “I will cut off the horns of all the wicked.” The psalmist feels God’s nearness, not his distance, because he is confident that the Lord will act, knowing that God has set the time for judgment and salvation.

The sequence of Psalms 73-75 may link Asaph’s worship tradition with Israel’s history of internal apostasy (Ps 73), followed by the Babylonian conquest (Ps 74), and climaxing in God’s judgment of Israel’s oppressors (Ps 75). Psalm 73 describes the failure of the people of God to maintain even a semblance of faithfulness. The true worshiper struggles against a growing tide of popular religiosity and fights through to faithfulness, concluding, “But as for me, it is good to be near God.” (Ps 73:28). Psalm 74 describes the total destruction of the temple, recounts the eternal sovereignty of God, and ends by pleading with God to remember his people and defend his cause. The personal and communal laments of Psalms 73 and 74 give way to praise and the assurance of God’s vindication in Psalm 75. The themes of the nearness of God and the certainty of divine judgment are celebrated.

### *The Nearness of God*

*We praise you, God,  
we praise you, for your Name is near;  
people tell of your wonderful deeds.*

Psalm 75:1

The psalm opens with a burst of praise against the backdrop of personal pain and communal lament. With minimal words the psalmist introduces a sharp reversal of discouragement. The mood of desperation is swept aside and in its place, praise and thanksgiving for God’s nearness and wondrous deeds. All he needs to say is “your Name is near” to eclipse the darkness. The name of God represents who God is and what God has done. In a name it represents everything about God. For today’s worshipers the nearness of the Name is best understood in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus is God’s autobiography to the world.<sup>27</sup> The only God to be known is the one true and living God revealed in Jesus Christ. God’s very own self-representation is manifest through Incarnation, Mission, Passion, Ascension, Intercession, and the coming Consummation. When Jesus says, “I have revealed your name,” he echoes his previous line, “I have glorified you” (John 17:4). Jesus has made God visible, his message clear, and his name known. We cannot know God apart from Jesus. The Bible is emphatic on this truth: “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23).

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<sup>27</sup> Bruner, *John*, 967

Jesus refers to the Name six times in his high priestly prayer in John 17. The Name stands for the *personal* revelation of God, his character and his actions. The *Name* sums up everything about the person and work of the triune God. It is more testimony than the whole of doctrinal tradition and more personal narrative than all the wisdom of creedal confession. It is about *who* rather than *what*. Jesus said to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. . . .Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. . .” (John 14:9-11).

The personal nature of the *Name* reminds us that Jesus’ legacy is not “a body of teaching preserved in a book – like the Qur’an. He does not leave behind an ideal or a program. He leaves behind a community – the Church.”<sup>28</sup> The story – the long story – behind the *Name* goes back to Exodus, when Moses asked God’s name. How could Moses be God’s representative to the people and not know the name of God? God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14). By revealing himself in this way, God empowered Moses *personally* to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Similarly, the Son’s revelation of the Name, “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well,” empowers Christ’s disciples to be sent out on their mission.<sup>29</sup>

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 revelation of God, 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, 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, definable, specific and singular than we can fully grasp--more than we can completely comprehend, not less! If we consider our own personhood distinctive and unique, how could God, the very Author of Life, and the Maker of the Universe, be any 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..."(Exod 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, 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

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<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 228.

<sup>29</sup> Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 66-69.

Savior, not a cultural religion, nor 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!<sup>30</sup> We cannot celebrate the wondrous deeds of God without telling about the one who has made God known in the most personal way possible. God has drawn near in person.

*The Sovereignty of God*

*You say, "I choose the appointed time;  
it is I who judge with equity.  
When the earth and all its people quake,  
it is I who hold its pillars firm.  
To the arrogant I say, "Boast no more,"  
and to the wicked, "Do not lift up your horns.  
Do not lift up your horns against heaven;  
do not speak so defiantly."*

Psalm 75:2-5

By referring to God as Elohim the psalmist may be emphasizing the universal truth and testimony of God's sovereignty. God's set time for judgment and salvation is not peculiar to the people of God, but universally applicable for all people everywhere. The psalmist quotes God's direct address to everyone not just to the people of God. Four first-person "I" statements emphatically declare that God is sovereign over the timing of judgment, the administration of justice, the moral order of the universe, and the bravado of the wicked.

The "set time" of judgment has never been in doubt but the day and hour remains a mystery. Jesus said, "But about that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come" (Mark 13:32-33). Even "when the earth and all its people quake," God is in control of the physical universe and the social and political structures of the human race.<sup>31</sup> The earth is in its God-ordained orbit and "he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). The apostles attributed this sovereignty to the Son through whom God made the universe, "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:2-3).

The psalmist quotes God's staccato commands to the arrogant and the wicked *verbatim*. The image of the ram's "horn" stands for strength and power (Deut 33:17; 1 Sam 2:1, 10) and stiff-necked arrogance symbolizes smart aleck resistance. But with God nothing is left to chance. His commands are emphatic. There is no ambiguity in "Boast no more!" There is no doubt in God's "do not's": "Do not lift up your horns against heaven; do not speak so defiantly" (Ps 75:5). The voice of God renders the wicked power brokers powerless. Psalm 75 echoes Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:1-10) against the arrogant talk of the wicked and foreshadows Mary's song of deliverance (Luke 1:46-55). God brings down the wicked and exalts the poor.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>31</sup> Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 15.

*The Just Judgment of God*

*No one from the east or the west  
or from the desert can exalt themselves.  
It is God who judges:  
He brings one down, the exalts another.  
In the hand of the Lord is a cup,  
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;  
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth  
drink it down to its very dregs.*

*[But] As for me, I will declare this forever;  
I will sing praise to the God of Jacob,  
who says, "I will cut off the horns of all the wicked,  
but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up."*

Psalm 75:6-10

Israel's kings tried to establish alliances with surrounding nations for protection and security. Since Babylon is the enemy from the north, Israel may very well be tempted to look east, west, and south for help.<sup>32</sup> The psalmist, like the prophets, counseled against these alliances. Israel's only hope must be in the Lord alone. Humble dependence upon God was essential for their deliverance. Jesus' Beatitudes echo this theme. We cannot save ourselves. Blessed are those who know they are poor and needy and who see themselves as completely dependent upon the Lord for their salvation. Any effort toward self-salvation exposes the myth of self-sufficiency. The implication being that we are quick to measure our lives by what we achieve rather than what we receive from the Lord. We prefer our own means and methods to the mercy of God and the state of grace.

The psalmist reminds us that God alone saves and judges: "He brings one down, he exalts another" (Ps 75:7). The cup of wrath symbolizes God's judgment against the arrogant and wicked who refuse to turn to God for mercy. The metaphor of the cup of judgment is used throughout Scripture (Isaiah 51:17; Jeremiah 25:15-38; 49:12; 51:7; Rev 16:19; 18:6). In the end, Babylon the Great, the biblical symbol for all cultures and peoples that are antithetical to the kingdom of God are given "the cup filled with the wine of the fury of [God's] wrath" (Rev 16:19).

The end of evil will not come about through legal reform or advances in education or a thriving global economy or international efforts for world peace. Evil will only come to an end in God's final judgment. The will to power and the weapons of this world will not achieve the end of evil. With that said, the Christian is called to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world, not because of the promise of reform, but because of the promise of salvation. The world needs help. Jesus intended for his followers to penetrate their culture the way salt was rubbed into meat to prevent it from going bad. Jesus does not say, "You are the sugar of the earth" or "You are the

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<sup>32</sup> See. Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:603; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:340.

honey of the world.” German theologian Helmut Thielicke speaks of the biting quality of true Christian witness: There is a natural temptation for Christians “to sweeten and sugar the bitterness of life with an all too easy conception of a loving God.”<sup>33</sup> Jesus expected his followers to be an essential preservative in a culture bent on evil. We enter into this mission for the good of the world, knowing that the evil of the world will not end until God’s wrath is poured out.<sup>34</sup>

The Asaph tradition characteristically casts a large vision that is applied personally (Ps 73:28; 74:12; 75:9). Psalm 75 concludes decisively: “But as for me, I will declare this forever; I will sing praise to the God of Jacob” (Ps 75:9). The hopeless fear of rejection forever (Ps 74:1, 19) is overcome in the psalmist’s personal declaration to praise the God of Jacob forever. The emphatic “I” statements of God (Ps 75:2, 4) inspire the psalmist’s “I” statements. He is empowered to say, “I will declare. . . I will sing praise,” because God is sovereign over judgment and salvation: “I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up” (Ps 75:10). The psalmist’s emphatic “I” statements point forward to the apostle Paul’s “I” statement: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect” (1 Cor 15:10).

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<sup>33</sup> Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 224.

Psalm 76 explores the historical precedent for eschatological hope. It links God's renown in Judah with the universal judgment of God at the end of time. God's ability to defend Jerusalem against vicious and valiant warriors by means of a mere rebuke is a precursor to the finality of his wrath against mankind. Such power inspires God's people to praise and motivates the kings of neighboring lands to submit reverently and to humbly "bring gifts to the One to be feared" (Ps 76:11).

The Asaph tradition keeps the big picture of God's story before us. The total destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army (Psalm 74) is a marked exception to God's protection of Israel made necessary by her flagrant apostasy (Psalm 73). The psalmist sees the just judgment of Israel as a precedent for God's universal judgment and calls on God to remember his people and vindicate his name (Psalm 75). Psalm 76 celebrates the victory of that historical judgment as proof of God's ultimate power and justice and looks forward to the time when God will break "the spirit of rulers" and the kings of the earth will submit (Ps 76:12).

When Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) he signaled a new dimension to salvation history that exchanged ethnicity and local geography for the global church. The great commission and Pentecost ushered in the Gentile mission and a new perspective on the universal impact of the gospel. "What neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed [explicitly] was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church."<sup>35</sup> This is why Paul said, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body. . ." (Eph 1:22). The scope of salvation is well beyond the personal salvation of the individual, as important as that is. The church encompasses "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (1:23). God's plan is "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (1:10).

The true Jew was no longer a matter of race and ritual. As the apostle Paul explained, "No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rom 2:9). The true children of Abraham received Christ, who was not only the Messiah to the Jews, but the Savior of the world. They proclaimed the gospel to Jew and Gentile inclusively. "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26-29). Jesus prayed Psalm 76 in a radically new way and Christians today follow his lead. The Lion of Judah has become the Savior of the world.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Stott, *God's New Society*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 356. Commenting on the true Jew, Augustine writes: "They then are more truly Jews, who have been made Christians out of Jews: the rest of the Jews, who in Christ have not believed, have deserved to lose even the very name. The true Judea, then, is the Church of Christ, believing in that King, who hath come out of the tribe of Judah through the Virgin Mary; believing in Him of whom the Apostle [spoke], 'Be thou mindful that Jesus Christ hath risen from the dead, of the

*God's Rebuke*

*God is renowned in Judah;  
in Israel his name is great.  
His tent is in Salem,  
his dwelling place in Zion.  
There he broke the flashing arrows,  
the shields and the swords, the weapons of war.  
You are radiant with light,  
more majestic than mountains rich with game.  
The valiant lie plundered,  
they sleep their last sleep;  
not one of the warriors  
can lift his hands.  
At your rebuke, God of Jacob,  
both horse and chariot lie still.*

Psalm 76:1-6

For the psalmist to say that God is renowned in Judah is likely to solicit a “no big deal” from the late modern skeptic. Secular history examines “the great civilizations of Assyria and Egypt, of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, but Israel (if it figures at all) will hardly be more than a blip on the mental horizon.” Bray continues, “To write the history of antiquity putting Israel at the center is rather like writing the history of Europe from the standpoint of Luxembourg, a country that is geographically central but otherwise insignificant.”<sup>37</sup> Salvation history departs from the world’s criteria of greatness and focuses on God’s strategy of redemption. God chose a small, insignificant people through whom to bless all people. He pitched his metaphoric tent in the arid land of Palestine, in a town named Salem, which meant “peace” (Genesis 14:18). This shocking particularity narrows salvation’s means down to a specificity that seems incredible, yet perfectly consistent with everything else about creation and redemption.

“Out of enormous space a very small portion is occupied by matter at all. Of all the stars, perhaps very few, perhaps only one, have planets. Of the planets in our own system probably only one supports organic life. In the transmission of organic life, countless seeds and spermatozoa are emitted: some few are selected for the distinction of fertility. Among species only one is rational. Within that species only a few attain excellence of beauty, strength, or intelligence.”<sup>38</sup>

Divine selection is based on mercy, not merit. Covenant love is extended to the smallest and the weakest, not the best and brightest (Deuteronomy 7:7-9). “The ‘chosen’ people are chosen not for their own sake (certainly not for their own honor or pleasure) but for the sake of the unchosen. Abraham is told that ‘in his seed’ (the chosen nation) ‘all nations will be blest.’ That nation has been chosen to bear a heavy burden. Their sufferings are great: but, as Isaiah recognized, their

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seed of David, after my Gospel’ (2 Tim 2:8). For of Judah is David, and out of David is the Lord Jesus Christ.”

<sup>37</sup> Bray, *God is Love*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 121.

sufferings heal others.”<sup>39</sup>

The descent of God into human history reaches its climax in the incarnation. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We can hardly imagine the the shocking truth of the incarnation – the “vastness of God confined in the womb of a maid” (Clarkson). In God’s redemptive strategy, Jesus was “born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law” (Galatians 4:4-5). His lowly birth in Bethlehem symbolizes the shock of God’s descent into human history. The humility of God “dwelling in the land of Zion” is transcended by an even greater humility. The Incarnate One, Jesus Christ, “Who, being in very nature God. . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-7).

The word the psalmist used to describe God’s “abode” or “dwelling-place” in Zion may refer to a dense thicket or lion’s lair (Amos 3:4; Jeremiah 25:38), implying that Zion is home to the Lion of the tribe of Judah.<sup>40</sup> The connotation introduces the power of God to protect and guard his people against the state-of-art weapons of war. The Israelite foot soldier feared a squadron of horse driven chariots. Today we fear a suitcase size nuclear smart bomb. But no matter how ingenious the weapons of war may be they are no match for God’s thunderbolts and pathogens. The God of Jacob is able to stop an army in its tracks and render the powerful powerless with a simple rebuke (Isaiah 37:36; 2 Kings 19:35). The image of God fighting for his people finds its ultimate redemptive trajectory in God’s defeat of sin and death. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said, “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). And in the face of danger the apostle Paul said, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Cor 2:14).

### *God’s Wrath*

*It is you alone who are to be feared.  
Who can stand before you when you are angry?  
From heaven you pronounced judgment,  
and the land feared and was quiet –  
when you, God, rose up to judge,  
to save all the afflicted of the land.  
Surely your wrath against mankind brings you praise,  
and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.  
Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them;  
let all the neighboring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared.  
He breaks the spirit of rulers;  
he is feared by the kings of the earth.  
Psalm 76:7-12*

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>40</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:615; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:344.

The psalmist moves from God's historic protection of Israel to God's ultimate eschatological fulfillment. "The action is no longer localized, or past, or defensive. God is foreseen striking the final blow against evil everywhere, as Judge."<sup>41</sup> Far from being an embarrassment, the wrath of God is cause for praise. God's wrath does not mean "the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God's love, the manifestation of his will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts his counsels of love."<sup>42</sup> The wicked are condemned; the righteous vindicated. The psalmist's rhetorical question to God, "Who can stand before you when you are angry?" is echoed by the prophet Malachi in his prophecy of the Lord's second coming (Malachi 3:2). It is also vividly described in the opening of the sixth seal in the apostle John's apocalypse (Revelation 6:12-17). John elaborates on the meaning of Psalm 76 as he captures the finality of the end. The sixth seal moves from the chaos of evil to the coming cataclysmic undoing of everything that opposes God. The reality of judgment reassures believers that justice will prevail. Evil will only come to an end in God's final judgment.

The purpose of God's wrath is salvation, "to save all the afflicted ["meek," "humble"] of the land" (Ps 76:9). The scope of God's justice is not limited to the land of Israel, but extends to the whole world. Kidner writes, "His little kingdom of verses 1-3 was His bridgehead, never His boundary. This was as wide as the earth, and His objective the salvation of 'all poor men and humble'" (Ps 76:9b).<sup>43</sup> Human anger and wrath is like fuel for the fire of God's purifying wrath. God uses and consumes everything that is used against him. The psalmist pictures God taking the wrath of mankind and belting it around his waist, arming himself for battle with the evil of man. The image implies that man brings down upon himself the judgment of his own evil ways. Spurgeon captures the truth of the psalm: "Let men and devils rage as they may, they cannot do otherwise than subserve the divine purposes. The remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain. Malice is tethered and cannot break its bounds. The fire which cannot be utilised shall be damped. Some read it "thou shalt gird," as if the Lord girded on the wrath of man as a sword to be used for his own designs, and certainly men of the world are often a sword in the hand of God, to scourge others. The verse clearly teaches that even the most rampant evil is under the control of the Lord, and will in the end be overruled for his praise."<sup>44</sup>

In the meantime, while we wait for God's final judgment and the end of evil, the psalmist counsels obedience – deep obedience and sacrificial gifts to "the One to be feared" (Ps 76:11). We are encouraged to submit to the One who has the power to break "the spirit of rulers." The psalmist's universal warning to "the neighboring lands" and "the kings of the earth" corresponds to the warning given in Psalm 2: "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling" (Ps 2:10-11; see Rev 19:11-16).

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<sup>41</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 275.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *Ephesians*, 231-232.

<sup>43</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 275.

<sup>44</sup> Spurgeon, "Psalm 76," *Treasury of David*.

Psalm 77 has the characteristics we have come to associate with the Asaph tradition. The poet expresses raw emotion and deep anguish over intense suffering. The psalmist feels this suffering is unjust, undeserved, and out-of-character with God's promises. He feels utterly rejected and abandoned by God. It is as if everything he ever believed about God, his promises, his unfailing love, and his compassion, have vanished into thin air *forever* (Ps 74:1, 10, 19). But then the poet makes a sudden transition that raises in sharp relief the miraculous history of God's redemptive intervention and salvation. These quick transitions are part of the Asaph style (Ps 73:15; 74:12; 75:9). The psalmist remembers the Exodus miracle and the power of God over the forces of nature. Great grief is transformed into the genuine hope of salvation history.

If the underlying historical crisis is the Babylonian captivity, as described in Psalm 74, we can see how sincere and faithful believers who have not "lost their foothold," "envied the arrogant," and "clothed themselves in violence" (Ps 73:2,3,6) could feel deep anguish and righteous sorrow as they experience the total destruction of Jerusalem. Psalm 77 stands in the faithful tradition of Asaph and Jeremiah. It wrestles with the harsh realities of becoming collateral damage in God's judgment of Israel. Faithful, innocent people suffered along with evildoers and idolaters. The vicarious experience of abandonment foreshadows the vicarious suffering of Christ, when "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).

### *A Grief Observed*

*I cried out to God for help;  
I cried out to God to hear me.  
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;  
at night I stretched out untiring hands,  
and I would not be comforted.  
I remembered you, God, and I groaned;  
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.  
You kept my eyes from closing;  
I was too troubled to speak.  
I thought about the former days,  
the years long ago;  
I remembered my songs in the night.  
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:  
Will the Lord reject forever?  
Will he never show his favor again?  
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?  
Has his promise failed for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be merciful?  
Has he in anger withheld his compassion? (Selah)*

Psalm 77:1-9

There is no hint of repentance, suggesting that the psalmist does not believe he has brought this distress upon himself. He is caught up in consequences not of his making, actions provoked by others for which he is not responsible. Nevertheless he suffers. He is distraught, exhausted, and conflicted. He questions God's favor, which he cannot find. He doubts God's unfailing love, which has vanished forever. He longs for God's mercy, but what he feels is God's anger. "No one ever told me," wrote C. S. Lewis, "that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing."<sup>45</sup>

First person singular pronouns heighten the poignancy of the psalmist's plea, but his lament is thoroughly God-centered. With every ounce of energy and in every waking moment, he cries out to God for help. Instead of escape, he seeks the Lord in his distress. "I cried. . . I sought. . . I stretched out untiring hands. . . I remembered. . . I groaned. . . I meditated, but all of his effort is to no avail. Doubt surges, comfort eludes him and his soul grows faint. He cannot sleep; he cannot speak. Every memory of God's blessing only causes him pain. He remembers his songs in the night, but now they seem like a cruel joke, because he feels rejected, forgotten, abandoned. Nevertheless, the lament is radically God-centric.

The psalmist gives free reign to his doubt and pain. He asks six heart-wrenching rhetorical questions, beginning with, "Will the Lord reject forever?" and ending with, "Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Implicit in these questions is the fact that the Lord, and no one else, is the psalmist's principal source for communion, favor, love, promise, mercy, and compassion. Second, the absence of these vital provisions means the absence of life itself. For the psalmist and the people of God this is the most graphic way to describe their dire situation. Third, he prays expecting God to answer him and prove that God has not forgotten his people. The questions may be "a not-so-subtle prod for God to demonstrate his favor, love, grace, and compassion here and now."<sup>46</sup>

The psalmist did not choose this suffering and he was not responsible for what was happening to him. But the crisis presented him with a choice. He could reject God and indulge in self-pity. Or he could try to escape and drown out his sorrow in some form of addiction. Theologian Jerry Sittser suffered the loss of his wife, daughter, and mother in a terrible car crash caused by a drunk driver. Sittser came to see that choice is key. "We can run from the darkness or enter into the darkness and face the pain of loss. . . We can return evil for evil, or we can overcome evil with good. It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. These choices are never easy."<sup>47</sup> The psalmist exercises his choice by bringing his lament to God with everything he has. All of his doubts and fears, all of his despair and anger, are brought raw into the presence of God through prayer. Devotion to God becomes the means by which loss is vented, examined, and offered up to God.

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<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:636.

<sup>47</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 46.

The first half of the psalm ends on a question. The psalmist's life is up in the air, held in suspension between doubt and devotion. "And grief still feels like fear," wrote Lewis. "Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling."<sup>48</sup> We have no way of knowing how long these questions filled the psalmist's mind or how long his memories of God's blessing caused more torment than comfort. It is fair to say that the psalm edits the narrative of hours of waiting and longing – the blank space that cannot be put in words. "Loss creates a barren present, as if one were sailing on a vast sea of nothingness." Jerry Sittser continues, "Those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and for a future for which they hope."<sup>49</sup>

### *A Grief Transcended*

*Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:  
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.  
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;  
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.  
I will consider all your works  
and meditate on all your mighty deeds."  
Your ways, God, are holy.  
What god is as great as our God?  
You are the God who performs miracles;  
you display your power among the peoples.  
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. (Selah)*

*The waters saw you, God,  
the waters saw you and writhed;  
the very depths were convulsed.  
The clouds poured down water,  
the heavens resounded with thunder;  
your arrows flashed back and forth.  
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,  
your lightning lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and quaked.  
Your path led through the sea,  
your way through the mighty waters,  
though your footprints were not seen.  
You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

Psalm 77:10-20

The turning point in the psalm comes suddenly and unexpectedly without reference to outside wisdom or a change in the situation. The language is terse and linguists have wrestled with the

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<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 66.

psalmist's intended meaning.<sup>50</sup> The NIV anticipates the verbs that follow, "I will remember," "I will consider. . .and meditate," by adding the phrase, "Then I thought. . ." This signals a remarkable shift from doubt and despair to the first inklings of confidence and hope. Spurgeon clarifies the terse poetry of Psalm 77:10 and draws out the meaning of this critical pivot: "Here a good deal is supplied by our translators, and they make the sense to be that the psalmist would console himself by remembering the goodness of God to himself and others of his people in times gone by: but the original seems to consist only of the words, 'the years of the right hand of the most High,' and to express the idea that his long continued affliction, reaching through several years, was allotted to him by the Sovereign Lord of all. It is well when a consideration of the divine goodness and greatness silences all complaining, and creates a childlike acquiescence."<sup>51</sup>

"Feelings, and feelings, and feelings," remarked Lewis. "Let me try thinking instead."<sup>52</sup> The psalmist endeavored to remember the Lord's great acts of deliverance so as to build his confidence.<sup>53</sup> Instead of comparing his immediate troubles with previous personal blessings, he aimed for the big picture of God's miraculous acts of salvation. He exchanged the long-range view for the short-range view. Augustine characterized the psalmist's change as "leaping over himself" to contemplate the works of God's mercy.<sup>54</sup> Instead of succumbing to his dark and depressed feelings, he is ready now to "remember the deeds of the Lord" (Ps 77:11). Augustine describes the psalmist: "Now behold him roaming among the works of the Lord."<sup>55</sup>

The timing of this pivot from raw feelings of lament to remembering the Lord's mercy may depend on our capacity to receive from the Lord more than the Lord's openness to our pain. Lewis writes, "I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hope to hear."<sup>56</sup>

It is only when we begin to realize that our anger and self-pity do not define reality that we begin to be open to "remembering," and "meditating" on the big picture of God's mercy. Jerry Sittser writes, "The feeling self is not the center of reality. God is the center of reality. To surrender to God, however contrary to our emotions, will lead to liberation from self and will open us to a world that is much bigger and grander than we are."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> There is considerable translation debate over verse 10. The ESV reads, "Then I said, 'I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'" The 1662 Prayer Book version reads, "And I said, 'It is mine own infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most Highest.'"

<sup>51</sup> Spurgeon, "Psalm 77," *Treasury of David*.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:637.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *Psalm 77*, 363.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 54.

<sup>57</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 101.

The whole demeanor of the psalmist changes.<sup>58</sup> Kidner observes, “By the end of the psalm the pervasive “I” has disappeared and the objective facts of the faith have captured all his attention and all of ours.”<sup>59</sup> Before he cried and groaned all through the night and refused comfort and sleep, but now he calmly ponders the mighty deeds of the Lord. The depth of his despair is matched and transcended by his unrestrained reveling in God’s miraculous acts of redemption. He declares to God for all to hear, “Your ways, God, are holy” (Ps 77:13). The shift from personal pain and sorrow to the shared hope of salvation is remarkable: “With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph” (Ps 77:15).

The psalmist returns to the song of Moses and Miriam for inspiration (Exodus 15:1-18). He paraphrases and embellishes the Exodus text. “Poetic freedom heightens and personalizes the drama. . . .But it is a true picture of God’s sway over nature.”<sup>60</sup> To pray this psalm today is to remember the miraculous power of the Incarnate One who rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” (Mark 4:39). The psalmist is mindful that Yahweh is the Lord of History and that the essential fact of human existence is not oppression and revolution, but atonement and salvation. The Book of Exodus bears witness to God’s strategy for redemption. We see God’s saving action running like a thin red line through human history. As civilizations and empires come and ago, Israel’s exodus may not show up as even a blip on history’s time line, but what God did for Israel is what he seeks to do for all people. The Passover and the blood of the lamb are not referenced explicitly but they stand behind everything that is said and point forward to the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ.

The redemptive power of God is expressed in images of thunder, lightning, whirlwind and earthquake. By noting the absence of God’s footprints the psalmist, without meaning to, causes Christians to think of the Incarnate One. Jesus literally walked this earth. He left actual footprints and John the Baptist claimed he wasn’t worthy to even untie his sandals (John 1:27). Ross concludes, “Whereas the psalmist recalled the greatest act of salvation in Israel’s history, the exodus, Christians recall a greater salvation provided for them in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Deliverance for all suffering and death is thereby assured; but until that happens, we are to follow Jesus’ example and seek to use our suffering to help others (1 Pet 2:19).”<sup>61</sup>

The psalm’s abrupt ending is consistent with Asaph’s literary style. The brief mention of Moses and Aaron’s shepherding leadership over the flock of Israel serves as a fitting segue to Psalm 78 and its historical review of God’s mercy and Israel’s stubborn failure to trust in Yahweh. The prophet Habakkuk may have drawn on Psalm 77 in his description of Exodus redemption and God’s deliverance. Franz Delitzsch concluded, “Where our Psalm leaves off, Habakkuk, chapter

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<sup>58</sup> Boice, *Psalms*, vol 2:638. Boice notes, “As we go through the psalm, one thing to pay special attention to is the pronouns. In the NIV, in the first six verses of the psalm there are eighteen occurrences of the first person singular pronoun (I or me), and six references to God by name, title, and pronoun. In the last eight verses (vv13-20) there are twenty-one mentions of God and no personal references at all.”

<sup>59</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 277.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>61</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:640.

3, goes on, taking it up from the point of continuation.”<sup>62</sup> James Boice concludes that the prophet’s statement, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab 2:4), would be a fitting end for Psalm 77.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:349. Delitzsch argued that Psalm 77 was dependent on Habakkuk rather than the other way around. He claimed to have proven in his commentary on Habakkuk (1843) “that the mutual relationship is one that is deeply grounded in the prophetic type of Habakkuk, and that the Psalm is heard to re-echo in Habakkuk, not Habakkuk in the language of the psalmist.”

<sup>63</sup> Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2:643.

Asaph's sermon uses the five hundred year history of Israel from the Exodus to King David as evidence for the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh and the hardhearted, stubborn rebelliousness of Israel.<sup>64</sup> Leave it to Asaph to boldly tell the not-so-pretty tale of a people who willfully put God to the test. We picture this psalm preached at the city gate or the village center as a grave warning to the people of God not to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. This is not a patriotic sermon given to inspire proud feelings for the historic heroes of the past. As Israel's worship leader, Asaph joins the ranks of the prophets in leveling a scathing rebuke of a people who refuse to remember the Lord's unforgettable and miraculous acts of redemption. "Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power – the day he redeemed them from the oppressor" (Ps 78:41-42).

This sequence of psalms began with Asaph's personal struggle with apostasy (Psalm 73), followed by a communal lament over the total devastation of the Jerusalem temple (Psalm 74). Psalm 75 stresses the nearness of God's faithfulness and the certainty of his judgment and vindication. Psalm 76 continues that theme by celebrating the victory of God's power and justice in a final judgment that will break "the spirit of rulers" and the kings of the earth will submit to him forever (Ps 76:12). Psalm 77 captures the personal struggle of faithful souls who to no fault of their own are caught up in God's judgment. They make their appeal to the Most High and remember the deeds of the Lord. Psalm 78 picks up on the theme of remembering and chronicles Israel's history of woeful and willful forgetting in the face of God's unforgettable acts of redemption.

The thrust of Asaph's sermon is that believers do not want to repeat this sad history of disloyalty, faithlessness, rebellion, unbelief, hypocrisy, duplicity, disobedience, and idolatry that was played out by the Israelites, first in the wilderness and then in the Promised land (Ps 78:8, 17, 22, 36, 56, 58). The apostles drew on Psalms 78 and 95 to emphasize this same concern for Christ's followers. The apostle Paul wrote in reference to Israel's rebellious history, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Cor 10:11-12; see Hebrews 3:1-4:11).

This psalm is unique in that it tells an epic story in two overlapping parts. Part one is the story of the Exodus and Israel's wilderness rebellion (Ps 78:9-40). Part two repeats the story of the Exodus, with an emphasis on the plagues, followed by Israel's apostasy in the Promised land (Ps 78:41-72). Both parts end with a description of Israel's rebellious ancestors as a warning to all believers. Through it all God remains faithful, leading and providing for his people. Asaph introduces his sermon-psalm by explaining his pastoral and prophetic pedagogy. He intends to warn believers against falling away, even as he seeks to encourage faithfulness (Ps 78:1-8).

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<sup>64</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 881. "Narrative or storytelling psalms aim to instruct Israel from its sacred history." Waltke identifies the following psalms in this category: Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136.

*Wisdom's Legacy*

*My people, hear my teaching;  
listen to the words of my mouth,  
I will open my mouth with a parable;  
I will utter hidden things, things from of old –  
things we have heard and known,  
things our ancestors have told us.  
We will not hide them from their descendants;  
we will tell the next generation  
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,  
his power, and the wonders he has done.  
He decreed statutes for Jacob  
and established the law in Israel,  
which he commanded our ancestors  
to teach their children,  
so the next generation would know them,  
even the children yet to be born,  
and they in turn would tell their children.  
Then they would put their trust in God  
and would not forget his deeds  
but would keep his commands.  
They would not be like their ancestors –  
a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
whose hearts are not loyal to God,  
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*

Psalm 78:1-8

Psalm 78 begins with a personal plea. Right from verse one the impassioned tone of a caring prophet is set. “My people,” implies solidarity and endearment; “My teaching,” implies ownership and investment; “My mouth,” implies integrity and relationship. The double emphasis on reception is stressed with two key verbs: hear and listen. The introduction calls for attention without any claim of authority other than the shared solidarity of “my people” and the sincerity of personal integrity. This is the basis for Christian communication shared by pastors, prophets, parents and friends. All we can do is invite a hearing based on the Word of God. We open our mouths and the Spirit of God fills us with his message.

Asaph introduces his epic as a parable wrapped in history. This may impress us as a strange convergence of genres. We are not in the habit of linking history, seasoned with times and places, with the literary genre of parable, which we tend to associate with creative stories designed to tell the truth slant. The word “parable” is made up of “para” which means “alongside of” and “ballein” which means “to throw.” What Asaph seeks to do in his epic is to set up a comparison between history and meaning. History as simply a collection of dates and events yields little insight, but when those facts interface with God’s revelation – the hidden things – world-changing, salvation-shaping meaning is communicated. This is why “parable” or Hebrew

“mashal” has come to mean “wisdom.” The plural form of “mashal” entitles the Book of Proverbs. The comparison of life and revelation yields life-transforming meaning.<sup>65</sup> So, alongside the miscellaneous ins and outs of history, Asaph tells the “the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord” (Ps 78:4). He presents the “decreed statutes for Jacob” and testifies to the established law of God. He is not breaking new news. Asaph is not revealing anything new that the people of God did not already know. But it is precisely these unforgettable actions and commands of God that Israel’s ancestors had rejected and forgotten along the way because they were a “stubborn and rebellious generation” (Ps 78:8). His purpose for writing was to remind the people of God to be faithful and obedient to the steadfast covenant love of the Lord.

Asaph’s wisdom strategy meant putting life and meaning, history and revelation, in tension in order to emphasize the believer’s true response to the faithfulness of God. His method, life and meaning in juxtaposition, is related to Jesus communicational strategy. Matthew says that Jesus “did not say anything” to the people “without using a parable,” adding, “So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world’” (Matthew 13:34-35; see Psalm 78:2, LXX?). Both Jesus and Asaph “make the past hold up a mirror to the present” in order to reveal the truth of salvation history.<sup>66</sup>

#### *Wilderness Warning*

*The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows,  
turned back on the day of battle;  
they did not keep God’s covenant  
and refused to live by his law.  
They forgot what he had done,  
the wonders he has shown them.  
He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors  
in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.  
He divided the sea and led them through;  
he made the water stand up like a wall.  
He guided them with the cloud by day  
and with light from the fire all night.  
He split the rocks in the wilderness  
and gave them water as abundant as the seas.  
he brought streams out of a rocky crag  
and made water flow down like rivers.  
But they continued to sin against him,  
rebellious in the wilderness against the Most High.*

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<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 227-228. Calvin concludes that the reference to using parables “denotes grave and striking sentences, such as adages, or proverbs, and apophthegms.” Calvin implies a degree of sophistication and eloquence lies behind this effort: “The inspired penman affirms that it is his purpose to utter only striking sentences and notable sayings.” This misinterpretation of the term distorts his understanding of Christ’s reason for speaking in parables. Calvin writes, “Christ’s object in doing so, was to prove that he was a distinguished prophet of God, and that thus he might be received with greater reverence. Since he then resembled a prophet because he preached sublime mysteries in a style of language above the common kind, that which the sacred writer here affirms concerning himself, is with propriety transferred to him.”

<sup>66</sup> Kidner, *Psalms* 73-150, 281.

*They willfully put God to the test  
by demanding the food they craved.  
They spoke against God;  
they said, "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?  
True, he struck the rock, and water gushed out,  
streams flowed abundantly,  
but can he also give us bread?  
Can he supply meat for his people?"  
When the Lord heard them, he was furious;  
his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel,  
for they did not believe in God  
or trust in his deliverance.  
Yet he gave a command to the skies above  
and opened the doors of the heavens;  
he rained down manna for the people to eat,  
he gave them the grain of heaven.  
Human beings ate the bread of angels;  
he sent them all the food they could eat.  
He let loose the east wind from the heavens  
and by his power made the south wind blow.  
He rained meat down on them like dust,  
birds like sand on the seashore.  
He made them come down inside their camp,  
all around their tents.  
They ate till they were gorged –  
he had given them what they craved.  
But before they turned from what they craved,  
even while the food was still in their mouths,  
God anger rose against them;  
he put to death the sturdiest among them,  
cutting down the young men of Israel.  
In spite of all this, they kept on sinning;  
In spite of his wonders, they did not believe.  
So he ended their days in futility  
and their years in terror.  
Whenever God slew them, they would seek him:  
they eagerly turned to him again.  
They remembered that God was their Rock,  
that God Most High was their Redeemer.  
But they would flatter him with their mouths,  
lying to him with their tongues;  
their hearts were not loyal to him,  
they were not faithful to his covenant.  
Yet he was merciful;*

*he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them.  
Time after time he restrained his anger  
and did not stir up his full wrath.  
He remembered that they were but flesh,  
a passing breeze that does not return.  
How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness  
and grieved him in the wasteland!*  
Psalm 78:9-40

A reference to Ephraim begins and ends Asaph's epic review of Israel's history from the Exodus to David (Ps 78:9, 67). Ephraim was one of the twelve Jewish tribes named after the younger of the two sons born to Joseph (Gen 41:50-52). Against his father Joseph's objections Ephraim received from the hand of his grandfather Jacob a greater blessing than his older brother Manasseh. Ephraim's prominence grew because Joshua, Moses' successor, was an Ephraimite, and the Tabernacle was erected in Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim. The ark of the covenant remained there until the incident alluded to by Asaph when the Ephraimites were defeated in battle by the Philistines and the ark of God was captured (1 Sam 4:1-11). Asaph discloses the "hidden" reason for Ephraim's defeat. "They did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law" (Ps 78:10).

Asaph's theme throughout his account is God's great faithfulness even when Israel proves faithless. But Asaph is also honest with the sad and unnecessary consequences for willful disobedience and sinful craving. Ephraim was exhibit A, a tragic causality of spiritual negligence and rebellion. "They forgot what he had done, and the wonders he had shown them" (Ps 78:11). Asaph implies that God "abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh" (Ps 78:60), "rejected the tents of Joseph," and "did not choose the tribe of Ephraim" (Ps 78:67), because the Ephraimites were found faithless. This is how Asaph begins and ends the psalm in order to emphasize the high cost of disobedience and idolatry.

Asaph describes the Exodus twice (Ps 78:12-13; 43-53). The purpose of this parallel description was to emphasize the power of God to overcome the preeminent super power of the day. The people of God witnessed first hand the power of God to overrule Egypt in the land of Zoan.<sup>67</sup> They saw the miracles: the great escape, the divided sea, the cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. Up until the cross of the crucified Messiah and the empty tomb of the risen Christ the Exodus was the epicenter of God's redemptive mercy. However, the power of God to redeem, lead, and provide was not enough for the Israelites. "They willfully put God to the test by demanding what they craved" (Ps 78:18; see Exodus 16:1-17:7; Numbers 11:4-32; 14:22). The problem was not that they needed food and water. God knew their need. The problem was their ingratitude and unbelief.<sup>68</sup> When Jesus fed the more than five thousand, the people invoked this very same wilderness experience to make Jesus prove himself. They said, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (John 6:31; see Exodus 16:4; Psalm 78:24-25). They had already eaten their full, but that wasn't enough.

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<sup>67</sup> Zoan is identified with Raamses, the capital city that the Israelites helped build (Exod 1:11).

<sup>68</sup> Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2:647.

They wanted more. Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32-33). The physical need for nourishment was never in question, but Jesus pointed to a deeper need, the need for the bread of life. But like the Israelites the people grumbled and complained and ridiculed the notion that Jesus was the bread of life that comes down from heaven.

The people’s inexcusable ingratitude and their insatiable hunger for more and more infuriated the Lord and “his fire broke out against Jacob” (Ps 78:21). We might reasonably conclude that this “fire” was a vivid metaphor but Numbers describes an actual “fire from the Lord that burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp” (Numbers 11:1-3). But even this fire did not quell their craving for quail. They wanted meat so bad that God gave them meat, literally tons of meat. He used a strong east wind to drive in-land tens of thousands of low-flying quail from the sea. The greed of the people knew no bounds and they consumed the meat like there was no tomorrow. Moses tells us that “while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague” (Num 11:33). Kidner writes, “The swift judgment of [God] (Ps 78:30-31) shows not that God acted prematurely but that this behavior was symptomatic, this attitude contagious and this moment crucial.”<sup>69</sup>

As much as we might like to think that Asaph’s description of persistent sin, shallow repentance, hollow confession, and pseudo-faithfulness applies only to the Israelites in the wilderness, we have to admit that what he says is sadly true of many professing believers today. Asaph draws out the dramatic irony of the situation. The people “kept on sinning” (Ps 78:32) whether God judged them for their sin or miraculously did wonders for their benefit. The results were frustratingly similar. Even when they truly remembered “that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer,” they persisted in ostentatious sacrilege and ethical duplicity (Ps 78:35-37). Yet, in spite of everything, God remained merciful; “he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them” (Ps 78:38). We should not minimize the tragic cost of disobedience and faithlessness that many suffered because of God’s just judgment, but as Asaph emphasized God’s mercy far exceeded his righteous judgment. The apostle Paul makes a similar point when he quotes a trustworthy saying in the early church: “If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

### *Idolatry in the Promised Land*

*Again and again they put God to the test;  
they vexed the Holy One of Israel.  
They did not remember his power –  
the day he redeemed them from the oppressor,  
the day he displayed his signs in Egypt,  
his wonders in the region of Zoan.  
He turned their river into blood;*

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<sup>69</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 283.

*they could not drink from their streams.  
He sent swarms of flies that devoured them,  
and frogs that devastated them.  
He gave their crops to the grasshopper,  
their produce to the locust.  
He destroyed their vines with hail  
and their sycamore-figs with sleet.  
He gave over their cattle to the hail,  
their livestock to bolts of lightning.  
He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath,  
indignation and hostility – a band of destroying angels.  
He prepared a path for his anger;  
he did not spare them from death  
but gave them over to the plague.  
He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt,  
the firstfruits of manhood in the tents of Ham.  
But he brought his people out like a flock;  
he led them like sheep through the wilderness.  
He guided them safely, so they were unafraid,  
but the sea engulfed their enemies.  
And so they brought them to the border of his holy land,  
to the hill country his right hand had taken.  
He drove out nations before them  
and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance;  
he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes.*

*But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High;  
they did not keep his statutes.  
Like their ancestors they were disloyal and faithless,  
as unreliable as a faulty bow.  
They angered him with their high places;  
they aroused his jealousy with their idols.  
When God heard them, he was furious;  
he rejected Israel completely.  
He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,  
the tent he had set up among humans.  
He sent the ark of his might into captivity,  
his splendor into the hands of the enemy.  
He gave his people over to the sword;  
he was furious with his inheritance.  
Fire consumed their young men,  
and their young women had no wedding songs;  
their priests were put to the sword,  
and their widows could not weep.*

*Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,  
as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine.  
He beat back his enemies;  
he put them to everlasting shame.  
Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,  
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;  
but he chose the tribe of Judah,  
Mount Zion, which he loved.  
He built his sanctuary like the heights,  
like the earth that he established forever.  
He chose David his servant  
and took him from the sheep pens;  
from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd  
of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance.  
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;  
with skillful hands he led them.*

Psalm 78:41-72

Asaph recalls the many times the Israelites “put God to the test” and “vexed the Holy One of Israel” (Ps 78:41; Num 14:22). He found their willful incapacity to remember God’s redemptive power inexplicable. How could they forget the unforgettable? Once again Asaph remembers the epicenter of God’s redemptive power: the Exodus. He recalls the wonders that freed Israel from her oppressor by sending plagues of blood, flies, frogs, locusts, hail, and lightning. God unleashed “a band of destroying angels” and “struck down all the firstborn of Egypt” (Ps 78:49, 51). The ten plagues exposed the emptiness of evil and the weakness of the Egyptian superpower. God worked wonders “to purge the Hebrew minds of all envious admiration of evil, to systematically demolish every god-illusion or god-pretension that evil uses to exercise power over men and women.”<sup>70</sup> God exercised his sovereignty. He overcame Egypt, guided Israel safely through the wilderness, and drove out the nations of Canaan. But in spite of what God did, Israel rebelled. They put God to the test and became disobedient, disloyal, and idolatrous. Israel was no better in promised land than they were in the wilderness.

Once again, Asaph focuses on Ephraim as a symbol of Israel’s apostasy. Their idolatry infuriated God and led to their defeat at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4-5). Disaster followed disaster. God abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh and so many young men died in battle that young women had no one to marry. Even the priests were massacred and their widows were too weary to weep. But then, inexplicably, God steps up to defend his people. The abrupt reversal is characteristic of Asaph’s style. As Kidner remarks, “By this point in the psalm such a development is utterly unexpected, and shows the steadfast love of God in the most robust and unsentimental colors.”<sup>71</sup> The Lord is likened to a warrior who is aroused suddenly from his wine induced sleep. He is ready to do battle and he “beats back his enemies” and puts them to “everlasting shame” (Ps 78:66). The sovereign Lord rejects the descendants of Joseph and the

<sup>70</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 162.

<sup>71</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 285.

tribe of Ephraim and chooses instead the tribe of Judah. Mount Zion becomes his sanctuary and David his chosen servant (1 Sam 16). He gives the people a new beginning and new leadership. Like Abraham and Moses before him, David does not merit this selection. God takes him from the fields and puts him on the throne. “One day he was caring for the ewes and their lambs, the next day God had him shepherding Jacob, his people Israel, his prize possession” (Ps 78:71, The Message). The psalm ends on a positive note of good news and hope. By God’s grace, a man after God’s own heart has been appointed to rule his people (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). Psalm 78 tracks salvation history from the Exodus to David’s reign bearing witness to God’s great faithfulness even when his people are faithless. Asaph calls us to remember the unforgettable grace and mercy of God.

The psalmist is outraged. Dead bodies lie in the street and there is no one left to bury the dead. Blood runs in the street like water. Jerusalem is reduced to rubble and neighboring nations heap scorn on God's inheritance. It is hard to imagine a more devastating picture of human loss and destruction. The raw emotion of Psalm 79 fits the Asaph tradition and the reality of extreme suffering. It fulfills its canonical purpose by causing worshipers to put words to unspeakable anguish. The human soul and the collective spirit of God's people are pushed past fear and hate to prayer. Our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria and North Korea can identify with this psalm. Their persecution and suffering has not been brought on by disobedience and idolatry, but they, like the psalmist, suffer brutal political violence and indescribable atrocities. As discouraging as this psalm may be and as much as we might wish it away, it is an essential resource for the suffering people of God. Only such a prayer, in the Spirit of God, can answer the intense anger and hatred generated by such evil. "We might think this is 'un-Christian,' for it tells of anger and a desire for revenge, but we too have had those feelings."<sup>72</sup>

Psalm 79's focus on extreme suffering and loss of life is a fitting companion to Psalm 74's description of the utter destruction and desecration of the Jerusalem temple. Since both Psalms appear to be responding to the Babylonian conquest of Israel, why were these two psalms not placed together? What is the purpose of the intervening psalms? Is the sequence of Psalms 75-78) important? Following the destruction of the sanctuary (Ps 74), Psalm 75 reassures the worshiper of the nearness of God and his set time for righteous judgment. Psalm 76 moves from the just vindication of Israel to God's ultimate eschatological fulfillment. Like Psalm 73, Psalm 77 wrestles with the tragedy of Jerusalem's fall from the perspective of the person who remains faithful. He struggles for the long-range view of God's mighty salvation and takes comfort in the fact that the Lord led his flock "by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps 77:20). Even though Psalm 78 ends on a positive note, stressing the integrity of David's heart, the thrust of the psalm records the long and tragic history of hard-hearted rebellion, idolatry and apostasy. This brings us back to the reality of the Babylonian captivity and the fall of Jerusalem, only this time it is not the temple that is in view (Ps 74) as much as the people (Ps 79).

### *How Long?*

*O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;  
they have defiled your holy temple,  
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.  
They have left the dead bodies of your servants  
as food for the birds of the sky,  
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.  
They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem,  
and there is no one to bury the dead.  
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,  
of scorn and derision to those around us.*

<sup>72</sup> Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 629.

*How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?  
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?  
Psalm 79:1-5*

Believers pray this psalm today holding the persecuted church in their hearts. We are mindful of the heavy cost many pay for following Jesus Christ. The Babylonian captivity prompted psalms and prophecies that serve the church today. Israel suffered because of their hard-hearted rebellion and apostasy (Ps 73, 78), but the persecuted church suffers for their witness and obedience. The believer who prays today is like the psalmist or the prophet who remains faithful in spite of the idolatry and unbelief that surrounds them. These Asaph style prayers resonate with the perspective of the prophets. They represent the faithful remnant who suffer the consequences of national apostasy and the judgment of God even though they have made the Sovereign Lord their refuge (Ps 73:28). They are like innocent civilians who become collateral damage in a war they didn't ask for or deserve. Calvin wrote, "The most eminent of the servants of God may be put to a cruel and ignominious death – a punishment which we know is often executed upon murderers, and other despisers of God; but still the death of the saints does not cease to be precious in his sight: and when he has suffered them to be unrighteously persecuted in the flesh, he shows, by taken vengeance on their enemies, how dear they are to him."<sup>73</sup>

Even when the early church was not suffering severe state-sponsored persecution, they saw themselves in the psalmist's description of cultural alienation. What was true for the people of God, "We are objects of contempt to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us" (Ps 79:4), could have easily been written by the apostles. Peter encouraged faithfulness in spite of false accusations and unjust suffering (1 Peter 2:12, 19). He wrote, "Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened" (1 Pet 3:14). He called Christ's followers to keep a clear conscience, "so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:16).

The psalmist's question, "How long, Lord?" must have resonated with the apostle John, because it is the pivotal question of the heavenly martyrs' prayer meeting. When the fifth seal is broken we hear the cry of martyrs, whose "untimely deaths on earth are from God's perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven."<sup>74</sup> The fifth seal reveals an extraordinary prayer meeting. The saints who have gone before, have been "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." In line with Psalm 79 they humbly confess their need for God's grace and zealously pray for the salvation and judgment of God.<sup>75</sup>

The faithful saints cry out to the "Sovereign Lord, holy and true," asking how long the wild horses of judgment and persecution will be allowed to run wild? The answer comes back, "until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed." We are sobered by the fact that time is measured, not in conversions, but in martyrdoms. "God's patience is costly not simply for God, but for the innocent."<sup>76</sup> These are the saints who suffered Taliban atrocities in Afghanistan and the crackdown against Christians in

<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 284.

<sup>74</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 157.

<sup>75</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 137-139.

<sup>76</sup> Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 299-300.

Iraq. Some of these martyrs are from Nigeria, slain by the ruthless Boko Haram. Many are victims from North Korea's brutal persecution. Under the altar there are new converts from Sri Lanka, who were targeted and killed by radical Buddhists. Some of the praying saints are from Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are Egyptian and Syrian believers who praying, "How long?"

Prayer is the link that ties us to the Lord of history.<sup>77</sup> Prayer expresses our shared anticipation of Christ's second coming and our shared community with those who have gone before. Their longing becomes our longing. Their hope our hope. They are not dead and buried, but alive and waiting! We may place a premium on personal security, but the fifth seal offers the perspective of the martyrs. Their voice cries out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" In the company of the saints who have gone before we confront real life and feel the weight of glory. John's Spirit-inspired vision calls for courage, endurance and perseverance. When the peace and power of Christ are available, why settle for the survival tactics of the world? Christians believe that there is real hope in a world that is constantly trying to adapt to hopelessness.

#### *Plea for God's Response*

*Pour out your wrath on the nations  
that do not acknowledge you,  
on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name;  
for they have devoured Jacob  
and devastated his homeland.  
Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;  
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,  
for we are in desperate need.  
Help us, God our Savior,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us and forgive our sins  
for your name's sake.  
Why should the nations say,  
"Where is their God?"  
Before our eyes, make known among the nations  
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.  
May the groans of the prisoners come before you;  
with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.  
Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times  
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.  
Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,  
will praise you forever;  
from generation to generation  
we will proclaim your praise.*

Psalm 79:6-13

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<sup>77</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 138-139.

The question, “How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?” bridges the two halves of the psalm. The psalmist shifts the focus of the psalm from catastrophe – the tragic fall of Jerusalem due to Israel’s apostasy – to God’s just judgment of the nations responsible for oppressing Israel. Like a father God has disciplined Israel, but now the psalmist calls on God as Israel’s Savior and Defender, “Pour out your wrath on the nations” (Ps 79:6). The psalmist identifies these nations to the Lord as kingdoms “that do not call on your name.” They have “devoured Jacob,” “devastated” the land of Israel, shed the blood of “your servants,” and have “hurled” contempt at the Lord.

In the midst of all this tragedy and vented pain, the psalmist pleads for forgiveness, but he does so in such a way as to corroborate the perspective that these Asaph psalms are composed by a faithful remnant. He prays the way Asaph did in Psalm 73 and the way the prophet Jeremiah prayed (Jer 10:23-25). No sincere believer would ever claim not to need forgiveness. All of us, and especially the most faithful and mature believers among us embrace the need to pray: “Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name’s sake” (Ps 79:9). This is the reason every Christian worship service includes a prayer of confession, not because someone may have sinned, but because we all need to confess our sins and pray for forgiveness. With that said, we can safely assume that the psalmist distances himself, along with all those who share his conviction and practice, from the disobedience, idolatry, and apostasy that brought down God’s judgment on Jerusalem through the agency of Nebuchadnezzar and his army (2 Kings 25). He boldly prays, “Do not hold against us the sins of past generations; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need” (Ps 79:8). The prayer itself indicates that the reason no longer exists for God to distance himself from his people. It is this truth that prompts the psalmist to ask rhetorically, “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” (Ps 79:10).

Asaph and the worship pastors who followed in his tradition, may not have comprehended Christ’s radical love for our enemies. The ultimate Son of David called his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44) and the apostles called all disciples to follow in Christ’s footsteps to the cross (1 Peter 2:21). Even so, we continue to embrace the message of God’s just judgment and we affirm with the psalmist the reality of God’s final judgment. We join the psalmist in praying, “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord” (Ps 79:12). Even as we acknowledge with the apostle that the Lord is patient, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The apostle John’s fifth apocalyptic seal is a call to honor the eighth beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for there is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). The saints who have gone before are praying the psalms just like we are. Their prayers are reminiscent of Asaph’s prayer, “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!” (Ps 79:10). They cry out, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” The saints respond, “The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is in his heavenly throne. He observes humanity; his eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the

wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright people will see his face” (Ps 11:3-7).

The psalm ends on a note of praise, an easily overlooked characteristic of the Asaph tradition, given the psalmist’s raw emotion and blunt descriptions of disaster, but perfectly consistent with the big picture of God’s salvation and judgment. Each of the psalms in this sequence praise God for his guidance and look forward to God’s eschatological fulfillment. For Asaph the arc of devotion ends with praise to God for the guidance that reaches into eternity: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you take me into glory” (Ps 73:24).

Psalms 74 and 75 are brought to a similar conclusion with Asaph stating his conviction: “But as for me, I will declare this forever; I will sing praise to the God of Jacob. . .” (Ps 75:9). Psalms 76 emphasizes God’s righteous judgment: “He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth” (Ps 76:12) and Psalm 77 concludes, “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps 77:20).

Psalm 78 continues the theme of shepherding. God calls David “to be the shepherd of his people Jacob” and the psalmist concludes, “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (Ps 78:70-72). So, it is significant that Psalm 79 ends on this theme of God’s everlasting shepherding: “Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise” (Ps 79:13). This brings us to a climax and a fulfillment that points forward to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep and who has sheep that are not of this pen (John 10:11, 16).

Christians may be tempted to skip over this psalm and conclude that it is a national lament over the collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. The psalm pleads to the Lord for the restoration of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. It may have been written when Shalmaneser king of Assyria was either about to or had already conquered the northern kingdom in Samaria and deported the Israelites. The Book of Kings spells out in blunt detail Israel's history of apostasy and idolatry and gives ultimate responsibility to the Lord for Israel's defeat and exile. "Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence" (2 Kings 17:20).

Psalm 80 is a gospel parable that sees Israel's tragic history as type that points forward to God's redemptive fulfillment of his covenant promises. When interpreted within the sequence of Asaph psalms it inspires the believer to see the full spectrum of salvation history. Psalm 78 introduces the importance of parable and offers an interpretative rationale for how the psalms should be used: "I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old – things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us" (Ps 78:2-3). What was said in the past, in the Spirit, has importance for us today, because it points to Christ.

The psalmist pleads with God to reverse the disaster that has come upon the northern kingdom. As we have seen, Ephraim stands as a type representing willful unbelief and hardened resistance against God (Ps 78:9,67). In geopolitical terms, God never did reverse the judgment of Ephraim, at least not in the way the psalmist hoped. There was no restoration of the northern kingdom and there never will be, apart from a global gospel and a new definition of the true Jew. Only in Christ is the plea of the psalmist answered and the promise of the one new man fulfilled.

To pray this psalm with Jesus is to open up the meaning of the psalm for the church today. The psalm is filled with gospel allusions, including Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), his description of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), his parable of the vineyard owner who sent his son (Matthew 21:33-46), and his upper room discourse on the vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). These gospel allusions are embedded in Psalm 80 and inspire the believer's praying imagination.

*Save Us!*

*Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock.  
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,  
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Awaken your might;  
come and save us.  
Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.*

## Psalm 80:1-3

Psalm 80 opens with the same shepherding theme that concludes Psalms 77, 78, and 79. This theme not only links the psalms together but builds expectancy. Israel is God's flock, "the sheep of his pasture" and the Lord is their Shepherd (Ps 23:1). But this Shepherd is unlike any other. He sits "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps 80:1). He is superior in rank and more powerful than the most powerful angels. The light of his glory emanates from a transcendent, cosmic throne that rules over all (Ezekiel 1:19-24). Human and divine images merge into one as the psalmist calls for the Lord to "pay attention" and bring his power to bear on a desperate situation. "Stir up your power," the psalmist pleads, and "come to our salvation."<sup>78</sup>

If the apostles were asked how this appeal was answered, they would not hesitate to say the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. The work of redemption took much longer than expected and the promise was not fulfilled as some imagined, nationalistically and geographically. But it was fulfilled cosmically, in a way that befit the one "enthroned between the cherubim." The author of Hebrews makes a strong case for the superiority of the Son over the angels when he writes, "So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs" (Heb 1:4) and "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come. . ." (Heb 2:5). Hebrews describes Jesus as "that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20) and First Peter as "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:4).

The refrain with variations on the Lord's title concludes each stanza (Ps 80:3, 7, 19). The psalmist draws on Aaron's blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) and repeats three times for emphasis an earnest longing for the friendship and kindness of God. We hear this blessing today and acknowledge that "in Christ the blessing of God is made personal in the shining face: 'And his face was like the sun shining in full strength.' God in Christ is warmth and sunlight."<sup>79</sup>

*How Long?*

*How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.  
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,  
and our enemies mock us.  
Restore us, God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.*

Psalm 80:4-7

Instead of responding to the warmth of God's smile, the tear streaked, ash smudged faces of God's people reflect deep sorrow and hopelessness. The prayers of the people provoke God's burning wrath rather than his glorious blessing. The solidarity of sin marks all the people of

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<sup>78</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:691.

<sup>79</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 38.

Israel for judgment. They suffer the consequences of past sins so that even the faithful who pray earnestly cannot escape the divine necessity of corporate judgment. It is in the midst of this kind of tragedy, the result of years of cultural rebellion, disobedience, idolatry, and apostasy, that the psalmist cries out, “How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder?” We don’t like this kind of solidarity, but on this side of eternity the faithful remnant often suffer right along with idolaters and abusers.

Evil is bound to impact our lives. We are fools to think that our Christianity is not shaped by the autonomous, western self, who is typically self-centered, self-indulgent and materialistic. We know how difficult it is to shun the obsessions of our high places: food, sex, sports, entertainment, appearance, adventure, technology, control, money and success. The list of idols in our late modern pantheon is long. And the moment a brave Christian dares to break away from the spirit of the age, she invites derision from her neighbors and colleagues. This stanza is not about other people living at another time, it is about us as well. It is not an historical artifact subject to a scholar’s analysis and cataloging. It is our life and experience that is addressed in this psalm. And some of us are on a diet of tears because we prioritize work over worship and meaningless entertainment over wisdom. We are drinking from a “bucket of salty tears” because we are eating, working, and indulging ourselves to death, We are constantly giving ourselves grace – permission to do what is antithetical to the gospel, without ever even thinking about the costly grace of Christ. What did Bonhoeffer say? “When Jesus calls a man he bids him come and die.” That sounds like something Asaph might have said if he lived today.

### *The Vine and the Son*

*You transplanted a vine from Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
You cleared the ground for it,  
and it took root and filled the land.  
The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches.  
Its branches reached as far as the Sea,  
its shoots as far as the River.  
Why have you broken down its walls  
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?  
Boars from the forest ravage it,  
and insects from the fields feed on it.  
Return to us, God Almighty!  
Look down from heaven and see!  
Watch over this vine,  
the root your right hand has planted,  
the son you have raised up for yourself.*

Psalm 80:8-15

The psalmist uses the Exodus, the epicenter of salvation history, to introduce an extended allegory comparing Israel to a vine. God “transplanted a vine from Egypt” and “drove out the

nations” of Canaan. Miraculously, the vine took root and grew so abundantly that it covered the mountains and the mighty cedars. The vine spread out over the land. It reached from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the river of Euphrates in the east. The allegory traces the tremendous expansion of the kingdom under David and Solomon’s rule. But then, the blessing of God comes to an abrupt end. The psalmist confronts God, the gardener, with an accusatory lament, “Why have you broken down the walls?” The unprotected vine represents a defenseless Israel that is ravaged by humans, wild boars, and insects.

The vine was the iconic symbol of Israel, used by the prophets to indict Israel. Hosea charged that even though God made Israel fruitful she persisted in worshiping other gods (Hos 10:1-2). Isaiah declared, “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel.” On a fertile hillside, Yahweh planted only the choice vines and did everything possible to care for his crop, but his vine only produced bad fruit (Isa 2:1-7). Jeremiah accused this “choice vine” of becoming “a corrupt, wild vine” (Jer 2:21). Ezekiel likened Israel to a useless vine and lamented that wood from a vine was good for nothing but to be burned (Ezek 15:1-5).

The prophet Isaiah develops the vineyard allegory as a lovesong, “My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside,” but the song quickly turns tragic and the people of Judah are asked to bear witness (Isa 5:1-7). God did everything he could to assure a fruitful vineyard, but instead of good grapes there were only bad grapes. Isaiah uses the psalmist’s allegory as a preface to his message of “woe” (Isa 5:8-30). The decision to take away the protective wall of hedges is God’s and in no time the beautiful vineyard becomes a wasteland of briars and thorns.

In spite of Israel’s willful rebellion, the psalmist cries out, “Return to us, God Almighty!” But on what grounds should God return to a people who have consistently rejected him and gone their own way? Clearly, there is nothing they have done to merit the blessing of God’s merciful return. Knowing this, the psalmist introduces what he hopes is a persuasive reason that lies outside the actions of the people. “Watch over this vine,” he pleads. Why? Because you planted it. The vineyard belongs to you. But then he breaks out of the allegory as only a poet can do and likens Israel to “the son you have raised up for yourself” (Ps 80:15). His appeal rests not on the merit of the people but on the mercy of God. The redemptive meaning of these images belongs to God’s inspired revelation and they point forward to the Incarnate One, the Son of God. Jesus himself makes the messianic connection and encourages us to follow his lead.

### *The Son of Man*

*Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;  
at your rebuke your people perish.  
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,  
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.  
Then we will not turn away from you;  
revive us, and we will call on your name.  
Restore us, Lord God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.*

## Psalm 80:16-19

When Jesus left the upper room with his disciples they may have passed by the Temple on their way to the Kidron Valley and Gethsemane. Above the temple gate in stone relief were golden vines with grape clusters as big as a man. The evening shadows may have obscured the image, but Jesus' metaphor of vine and the branches (John 15:1-17) invoked deep biblical roots. The indictment of the prophets and the hope of the psalmist is answered in the one who says, "I am the true vine." This is the seventh and final "I am" saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John.<sup>80</sup> Jesus used descriptive images like the vine to develop a messianic self-portrait free from nationalistic and political triumph. The comparison is straight-forward, Israel is the false vine, destined for judgment. Jesus is the true vine, Israel's only hope. The prophets used the image of the vine to indict Israel, but the psalmist takes the image further as a sign of hope. Jesus develops that theme of hope in himself. Jesus invites us – his followers – to be rooted and grounded in him, to be at home with him. Only in him, the Lord's right hand man, the Son of Man whom the Lord raised up for himself, will we find redemption. Only in him, will the Abrahamic covenant and the Aaronic blessing be fulfilled. The psalmist cries out, "Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved." And the apostle declares, "Salvation is found in one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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<sup>80</sup>*"I am the bread of life" (6:35); "I am the light of the world" (8:12); "I am the gate of the sheep" (10:7); "I am the good shepherd" (10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6).*

The psalmist's theme is once again "the Exodus from Egyptian servitude" and the wilderness sojourn.<sup>81</sup> Only this time, the psalm begins and ends on a note of festive joy. The intensity of the previous psalms gives way here to a respite of joy, a sober reminder, and a promise of God's protection and provision. The Asaph tradition grasps the life-transforming impact of the worship liturgy. We are not formed by information alone, but by the rhythms of grace and habits of the soul that shape daily life and the seasons of our lives. The command to obey the voice of God is embedded in resounding worship and in the preached remembrance of God's merciful deliverance.

Psalm 81 has been associated with the fall festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, coming five days after the Day of Atonement. The people of God were instructed "to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each year." The Lord commanded the Israelites to "live in temporary shelters for seven days. . .so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 23:40-43). The festival was designed to celebrate three great blessings: the "ingathering" of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest (Exod 34:22), the Lord's saving redemption signified in an elaborate sacrificial liturgy for each of the seven days (Num 29:12-40), and the prophetic expectation that God will fulfill all of his promises. Through Moses the Lord commanded the people: "Be joyful at your festival – you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows who live in your towns" (Deut 16:14). This inclusive family celebration of the people of God included daily sacrifices and a special emphasis on the public reading of the law of God in the hearing of everyone (Deut 31:9-13). The prophet Zechariah envisioned a climactic eschatological Festival of Tabernacles that gathered the peoples of the earth to worship the King, the Lord Almighty (Zech 14:16-17).

### *Call to Worship*

*Sing for joy to God our strength;  
shout aloud to the God of Jacob!  
Begin the music, strike the timbrel,  
play the melodious harp and lyre.  
Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon,  
and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival;  
this is a decree for Israel,  
an ordinance of God of Jacob.  
When God went out against Egypt,  
he established it a statute for Joseph.*

Psalm 81:1-5

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<sup>81</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 159.

The sound of the shofar (ram's horn) gathers the great assemble of the people of God for worship (Lev 23:23). Exuberant, jubilant praise is the first order of worship. The procession begins with a dance. "Strike the timbrel" signals lively music set to a rhythmic beat. The shaking and striking of the tambourine is joined by stringed instruments, which are more like a guitar than a modern day harp. Music and dance set a celebratory tone for this command performance instituted by God himself when the Israelites were redeemed from Egyptian bondage. This expression of bold, bodily, expressive worship is not left to human discretion but is done in earnest, in love, by divine command. Loving God takes practice, much like a musical instrument, and the more we do it the better we get at it and the more we love it.

Worshippers are embodied image bearers of God and when they sing, dance, and play musical instruments, they use more than their minds; they engage their whole being – from their adrenaline pumping hearts to their toe-tapping feet. Jamie Smith reminds us that we are more than thinking beings and even more than believing beings. We are loving beings. We are defined by who or what we love.<sup>82</sup> We are embodied agents of desire or love, and when we enter into worship – body, mind, and soul, we show that love takes practice in worship practices.

Psalms 81 begins with a "just-do-it" imperative, "Sing for joy to God our strength." This command was not meant to force us against our will or to violate our emotions by dictating how we should feel. The decree, "Shout aloud to the God of Jacob!" is a revelatory blessing countering the idolatry of everything else. The New Testament "makes no statute about feasts or fasts" because there is no need to.<sup>83</sup> The apostle Paul called these cultural liturgies and special days "a shadow of the things to come; the reality, however is found in Christ" (Col 2:16; Rom 14:5). The will of God and human desire converge in the new creation. "The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor 5:17). The Lord puts his will in our minds and writes it on our hearts (Jer 31:33) and we bind ourselves to the Lord and his everlasting promise (Jer 50:5).

The worship liturgies of the people of God in the Old Testament are transposed in fresh and freeing ways in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews exhorted brothers and sisters in Christ to draw near to God in the full assurance that faith brings in order to hold unswervingly to the hope they professed in Christ and to consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. He challenged them not to give up meeting together (Heb 10:19-25). The inspiration for worship is found in the filling of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling of the Word of Christ with no separation between the Spirit and the Word. We are challenged to embrace liturgies that let the peace of Christ rule and let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Liturgies that involve teaching and admonishing one another "with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" in gratitude to the Lord (Col 3:15-16).

### *Call to Remember*

*I heard an unknown voice say:  
"I removed the burden from their shoulders;  
their hands were set free from the basket.*

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 37-52.

<sup>83</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 293.

*In your distress you called and I rescued you,  
 I answered you out of a thundercloud;  
 I tested you at the waters of Meribah.  
 Hear me, my people, and I will warn you –  
 if you would only listen to me, Israel!  
 You shall have no foreign god among you;  
 you shall not worship any god other than me.  
 I am the Lord your God,  
 who brought you up out of Egypt.  
 Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.*  
 Psalm 81:5c-10

The psalmist turns preacher, a prophetic preacher, who faithfully declares the Word of God. He does not control the voice of God. Like the apostle John who turned around to see the voice that was speaking to him and saw someone like a son of man, the psalmist is neither vague nor generic, but rather humble and submissive (Rev 1:12-13). Neither the psalmist nor the apostle can exhaust the mystery. They cannot contain, control, package, or manipulate the voice. All they can do is humbly convey the message.

The psalmist deftly sketches the history of redemption by painting a picture of slave labor set free. The burden has been lifted from their shoulders and the endless, mindless, back-breaking labor of lifting heavy baskets has ceased. Yahweh is their savior: “I removed the burden. . . I rescued you. . . I answered you. . . I tested you.” The substance of the redemptive message is straightforward, the Lord heard their distress cry and saved them. But now the Lord insists, “Hear me, my people, and I will warn you – if you would only listen to me, Israel!” (Ps 81:8; see Deut 6:4). Salvation is not a point in time but a whole new way of living.

Only the first command needs to be preached, “I am the Lord your God. . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:6-7) to include all the commands. Yet the force of the message is not the costly demand of obedience as much as God’s gracious bounty freely given to those who hear and obey.<sup>84</sup> The climax of the preached word is all grace, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it” (Ps 81:10). The analogy to eating and being satisfied covers a range of meaning from daily manna to daily dependence on the will and word of God. The psalmist alludes to Moses’ warning: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God. . . Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day” (Deut 8:10-11).

The analogy of opening our mouth and consuming the physical and spiritual bread of life runs through Scripture. As a biblical object lesson, manna symbolizes God’s complete provision. God meets our physical needs and our spiritual needs. From the temporal to the eternal, God’s provision is complete. It covers the range of God’s blessing from the Israelites’ daily bread in the wilderness to the gift of salvation through our crucified and risen Lord. Every time we break

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 295.

bread together we remember that it is God who strengthens our bodies and souls. There is an inseparable connection between the manna in the wilderness, our daily bread, and the bread of the Eucharist. When the Lord gave the Israelites manna and insisted that they keep a portion of it in the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony (Ex 16:33; Heb 9:4), he created a biblical image that pointed forward to the Bread of Life. Jesus summed it up this way: “Our forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:58). Therefore whenever we “eat this bread and drink this cup, [we] proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). We remember Christ’s broken body, his sacrifice for our sin and his provision for our eternal salvation. God’s provision is complete in Christ and meets all of our needs body, mind and soul. “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33).

### *Call to Obey*

*“But my people would not listen to me;  
Israel would not submit to me.  
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts  
to follow their own devices.  
If my people would only listen to me,  
if Israel would only follow my ways,  
how quickly I would subdue their enemies  
and turn my hand against their foes!  
Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,  
and their punishment would last forever.  
But you would be fed with the finest of wheat;  
with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”*  
Psalm 81:11-16

The negative example of the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness was not only used by the psalmist in his generation, but by the apostles in the early church. Patrick Reardon observes, “Israel’s infidelity . . . remains the Bible’s perpetual admonition to the Church.”<sup>85</sup> The author of Hebrews sums it up, “For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who believed” (Heb 4:2). The apostle makes a similar case when he writes to the believers at Corinth, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Cor 10:11-12).

Jesus’ repeated emphasis on love made real in obedience may surprise some believers who believe that the emphasis should be more on grace than works.<sup>86</sup> Some Christians have a habit of pitting works righteousness against the work of righteousness. They think that since Christ paid it all nothing much is expected of them. Life goes along merrily with all of its worldly distractions and pursuits until death happens or Christ comes again. Grace is their spiritual life insurance policy. From Sunday to Sunday preachers assuage the guilty consciences of their worldly

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<sup>85</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 160.

<sup>86</sup> Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 51-52.

believers by quoting Romans as their signature benediction, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). They send believers into the world armed with grace as an excuse to pursue their selfish dreams without the dire warning that “if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away” or the clear prohibition, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 5:29; 6:24).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer exposed this cheap grace mentality as the deadly enemy of the church.<sup>87</sup> He insisted that the New Testament marries the call to obedience and the gift of grace. To believe is to obey and to obey is to believe. Belief without obedience is cheap grace and obedience without belief is works righteousness.<sup>88</sup> “Grace is costly,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘you were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”<sup>89</sup> “Costly grace and sacrificial obedience are woven into the tapestry of God’s love for us. One cannot be separated from the other without destroying the whole tapestry.”<sup>90</sup>

Psalms 81 concludes hopefully “with a strong reminder of God’s grace and resource.”<sup>91</sup> Renewal is a very real possibility. All the people of God must do is hear and obey. The prerequisite for God’s gracious protection and provision is simple and straightforward: “If my people would *only* listen to me, if Israel would *only* follow my ways . . .” (Ps 81:13). Goodness is not nearly as complicated as we make it out to be. Simple obedience invites God’s quick response and enduring salvation. Enemies will cringe and judgment will be final and lasting. The psalmist draws on the Song of Moses (Deut 32:13) to emphasize the miracle of God’s grace. God can bring sweet honey from rocks and even raise up the children of Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9).

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<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 74.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>90</sup> Jim Eschenbrenner, personal correspondence, used with permission.

<sup>91</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 296.

Psalm 82 declares that in the end there is no contest between the will of God and the will to power – God wins. Ultimately, God’s justice will prevail against every form of injustice and oppression – human and demonic. But in the meantime “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). Psalm 82 in the Asaph tradition offers a big picture vision of the just judgment of God.

The ambiguity over the identity of the “gods” may be viewed positively. Instead of having to choose between the wicked officials of Israel or the rulers of other nations or demonic evil rulers and angels, the psalmist lumps them all together. The continuum of multiple evil sources makes sense with respect to the psalm and the political reality that confronts the world. The human and demonic will to power is set over and against the will of God. The weak and the fatherless, the poor and the oppressed, suffer injustice and oppression, even as the wicked are favored and empowered. In our analysis of the complexity of evil it does little good to isolate either the human or demonic elements. Evil forms an inclusive whole that is anti-God and anti-Christ.

*The Great Assembly*

*God presides in the great assembly;  
 he renders judgment among the “gods”;  
 “How long will you defend the unjust  
 and show partiality to the wicked?  
 Defend the weak and the fatherless;  
 uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.  
 Rescue the weak and needy;  
 deliver them from the hand of the wicked.  
 The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing.  
 They walk about in darkness;  
 all the foundations of the earth are shaken.*

Psalm 82:1-5

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) mocked the notion that there was a God presiding over the great assembly. He despised salvation and judgment and claimed hope in anything other than the will to power was an illusion. Nietzsche drove skepticism and cynicism to its fatal and nihilistic conclusion. He had the courage of his convictions, even if those convictions drove him mad. He argued that humanity was falsely educated to believe in something other than the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery.<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche contended, “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”<sup>93</sup> Belief in God was an illusion created to avoid a deep down unteachable, unyielding spiritual fate that “life itself is the will to power.”<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” sec. 56, 258.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., sec. 23, 221.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., sec. 13, 211.

“The cardinal instinct of an organic being,” Nietzsche argued, was self-preservation. All talk of motive, purpose, freedom, and morality is meaningless. If men were true to their animal instincts they would reverence superior rank and the hardness of heart born of unfavorable circumstances. “Egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul.”<sup>95</sup> And “the noble soul [only] has reverence for itself.”<sup>96</sup> 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.”<sup>97</sup> For Nietzsche 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 wanted a megaphone to shout from the housetops, “There is no God. There is no Incarnate One.” There is only the human being who “will have to be an incarnate will to power.” The person who “will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant.”<sup>98</sup>

Even if Nietzsche had shouted in the psalmist’s ear, the psalmist would not have flinched. The fool can say in his heart or cry from the roof top that there is no God, but that does not change the fact. The psalmist declares, “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the ‘gods’.” It is God who questions the “gods,” and not the other way around. God is not in question. Man is. Thus it is against all reason and compassion, that the will to power seeks to overrule the will of God. The gods violate the moral order and do the unthinkable. They defend the unjust, favor the wicked, and oppress the poor. These gods are narcissistic. They lay claim to heaven and earth and strut around like masters of the universe. Earlier in the psalms, Asaph described them this way: “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression” (Ps 73:4-8).

The moral order is inscribed on the human conscience and written in the heart (Rom 2:15). God’s requirements are as simple as they are beautiful: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). What could be more obvious: “Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:4)? But the “gods” rebel and usurp God’s moral authority. They exchange the will of God for the will to power. They undermine justice and deprive the people of their freedom. God renders his verdict against Israel’s corrupt judges and their demonic allies. All forms of authority that attack the justice and righteousness of God, whether human or demonic, are condemned. “The ‘gods’ know nothing,” declares the Lord. “They understand nothing.” They are walking around in the dark and the foundations of the earth are shaking.

### *The Death Sentence*

*“I said, ‘You are ‘gods’;  
you are all sons of the Most High.’*

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., sec. 265, 405.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., sec.287, 418.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., sec. 260, 395.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., sec. 259, 393.

*But you will die like mere mortals;  
you will fall like every other ruler.”*  
Psalm 82:6-7

The living God is not intimidated by the human and demonic forces of evil. In the great assembly God “renders judgment” and sentences “all the sons of the Most High” to death. No matter how powerful and famous the “gods” may become they fall like mere mortals. The apostle John’s description of “the great supper of God” (Rev 19:11-21) is commentary on Psalm 2: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. “Let us break their chains,” they say, “and throw off their fetters.” The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps 2:1-6).

Jesus’ quote from Psalm 82 sheds light on its original meaning and on its meaning for us today. When Jesus claimed, “I and the Father are one,” his opponents picked up rocks to stone him. “I have shown you many good works from the Father,” Jesus said. “For which of these do you stone me?” His angry opponents replied, “We are not stoning you for any good work, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” Jesus’ line of defense was provocative. He essentially made a case for the divine endowment of all humanity. “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are ‘gods’”? (Ps 82:6). His statement echoes Psalm 8. When humanity is compared to the cosmos man is minuscule and insignificant, but paradoxically when we are compared to God our significance grows.

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4-5).

Peter Craigie writes, “Many of the earliest versions took the Hebrew word for ‘God’ or ‘gods’ to mean ‘angels’. . . The translation ‘angels’ may have been prompted by modesty, for it may have seemed rather extravagant to claim that mankind was only a little less than God. Nevertheless, the translation ‘God’ is almost certainly correct, and the words probably contain an allusion to the image of God in mankind within the created order.”<sup>99</sup> Elmer Martens writes, “If one were to imagine a scale of 1 to 10 with living creatures such as beasts as 1 and God as 10, then, so high is the writer’s estimation of humanity, he should have put him at 8 or 9. It is God, and not animals, who is man’s closest relative.”<sup>100</sup> Human significance is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. We are designated and endowed by God with privileges and responsibilities that we have not earned or merited. We are crowned with splendor and honor. We are not animals subject to the law of the jungle. We are God’s image-bearers mandated to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen.1:26). God blessed humanity and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the

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<sup>99</sup> Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 108,

<sup>100</sup> Martins, *God’s Design*, 202-3.

earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen.1:28).

Jesus takes this revealed truth and argues from the lesser to the greater. If God spoke of people as “gods” then Jesus reasons it is not wrong for him to say, “I am God’s Son.” Surely, the way Jesus used Psalm 82 to link the reference to the “gods” to himself must have struck the religious leaders as provocative. Dale Bruner sums it up well:

“Jesus is asking: If powerful persons are called ‘gods’ in the Psalm because of the Word of God coming to them, then what should we call the person most especially sent from God to them? Indeed, what should we call the Messiah when he comes? Doesn’t this absolutely unique emissary of God deserve the title ‘God’s Son’ as much as any earthly potentate? And doesn’t Scripture often call the Messiah “God’s Son”? (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. “If Scripture calls addressed mortals gods, please tell me an appropriate title for God’s addressing Messiah, his ambassador to the planet?”<sup>101</sup>

It is ironic that Jesus used Psalm 82, a psalm that singles out corrupt rulers who deserved to be judged, to defend his messianic identity. The “gods” are under indictment and destined to die like the mere mortals they are, but in Jesus, his sent one, God intervenes to reverse the course of judgment and provide for redemption. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). But the irony goes deeper. The bad religious leaders are in cahoots with Rome. They have compromised and colluded with the devil to stay in power. And Jesus condemns them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires” (John 8:44). Their only hope for redemption is in “the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world” (John 10:36). The verdict is clear: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18).

*Rise Up*

*Rise up, O God, judge the earth,  
for all the nations are your inheritance.*  
Psalm 82:8

The psalmist has the final word. He calls for God to rise up and set things right. The nations belong to God, not the devil (Luke 4:6), and the psalmist believes that “only when the Lord comes to judge will there be a kingdom where justice and righteousness prevail.”<sup>102</sup> But there is an amazing intervention. God determined that before he would rise up to judge, he would descend to deliver. C. S. Lewis describes the grand miracle of the Incarnate One this way: “In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity . . . But He goes down to come up again

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<sup>101</sup> Bruner, *John*, 646-647.

<sup>102</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:725.

and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.”<sup>103</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

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<sup>103</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 115.

Psalm 83 ends the Asaph sequence of psalms with the international perspective of the prophets and God's judgment of the nations. Worship leaders in the Asaph tradition have acknowledged Israel's apostasy. They have not been blind to Israel's disobedience and unbelief. But now the focus is on the world. The psalmist prays for God's name to be upheld and revered. Psalm 83's global vision calls for judgment against all the nations that threaten to annihilate the people of God. But this judgment is not for the sake of vengeance. Its purpose is redemptive, "that they will seek your name" (Ps 83:16).

Psalm 83 is an imprecatory psalm that begins by laying out an international conspiracy of intimidation, bullying, and plotting aimed at destroying the people of God.<sup>104</sup> This is followed by naming the nations who are involved and united in their shared hatred for Israel. The psalmist invokes the past and draws on history to establish a precedent for divine action against Israel's enemies. The psalms "ruling thought is of God's vindication rather than man's conversion."<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the psalmist does not lose sight of the possibility of transformation and prays that God's judgment will cause hardened enemies to "seek your name" and "know that you, whose name is the Lord – that you alone are the Most High over all the earth" (Ps 83:16, 18).

### *Naming the Enemy*

*O God, do not remain silent;  
do not turn a deaf ear,  
do not stand aloof, O God.  
See how your enemies growl,  
how your foes rear their heads.  
With cunning they conspire against your people;  
they plot against those you cherish.  
"Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation,  
so that Israel's name is remembered no more."  
With one mind they plot together;  
they form an alliance against you –  
the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,  
of Moab and the Hagrites,  
Byblos, Ammon and Amalek,  
Philistia, with the people of Tyre.  
Even Assyria has joined them  
to reinforce Lot's descendants.*

Psalm 83:1-8

The psalmist inspires believers in every age to turn to God when "enemies growl" and "foes rear their heads." God has promised to be with us always, even "to the very end of the age" (Matthew

<sup>104</sup> Other imprecatory Psalms include Pss 35, 58, 69, 109, 137.

<sup>105</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 302.

28:20). God invites us to bring our lament and our inward groans, knowing that “the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Rom 8:26). The Spirit who helps us in our weakness uses the Psalms as an instrument to guide our understanding and shape our perspectives. Praying the Psalms is one way “the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom 8:27). The saints who have gone before are pictured in The Revelation calling out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10).

The antidote to fear is prayer. When we call on God to pay attention to our plight we enter into the spiritual struggle with fresh awareness and deeper insight. Christ’s followers know that their hope is not found in the approval of the surrounding cultural elite and power brokers. We cannot afford to think and talk as if our identity is wrapped up in “Canaanite” politics or “Philistine” strategies. Psalm 83 reminds us that our hope is in God and the work of the gospel exclusively. The Christian before the world is like Jesus before Pilate and we need to hear his words over and over again to stay on mission: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).

Praying Psalm 83 helps to distance the believer from the pervasive ideologies that threaten to dominate the “big picture” of our lives. Sociologist James Davison Hunter challenges believers “to disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society.” He argues that the church has “uncritically assimilated to the dominant ways of life in a manner” that threatens to “compromise the fundamental integrity of its witness to the world.”<sup>106</sup> Psalm 83 reinforces the apostolic conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a counter-cultural movement that will remain a voice crying in the wilderness of an evil and broken culture. The people of God should not expect to be a controlling voice of culture, but they should aim to impress the world with Christ’s goodness.

The psalmist is not naive as to the cunning strategies and the behind-the-scenes plots that aim to destroy the people of God. Nor is he unaware of the members of this conspiracy. He names them, all ten of them. Ten being a symbolic number for completeness. In The Revelation the number ten and its multiples signify a complete quota of tribulation or power, such as “ten days” of persecution or an army numbering “twice ten thousand times ten thousand,” or a beast with “ten horns.”<sup>107</sup> At the top of the enemies’ list is long-time adversary Edom, Esau’s ancestors (Gen 36; Ps 137:7; Jer 49:7-22), followed by the descendants of Ishmael, the Ishmaelites (Gen 16:15, 16; 25:12-18). Moab and Ammon trace their family roots to Lot (Gen 19:36-38; Num 22-24). The Hagarites are thought to come from Hagar (1 Chron 5:10, 19, 20). Five more enemies are listed: Byblos (Gebal), Amalek, Philistia, Tyre and Assyria. “All of these people attacked Israel off and on through the centuries; and they all had the same intention – the annihilation of Israel.”<sup>108</sup> This psalm does not suggest that these ten nations were good friends. They were enemies of each other and in the eighth and seventh centuries Assyria dominated the region. But what it does suggest is

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<sup>106</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 184-185.

<sup>107</sup> Rev 2:10; 9:16; 12:3; 13:1; 17:7, 12, 16.

<sup>108</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:736.

that when the Assyrians conquered these nations they “reinforced Lot’s descendants,” in their historic quest for the annihilation of Israel.

*Calling Down Judgment*

*Do to them as you did to Midian,  
as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,  
who perished at Endor  
and became like dung on the ground.  
Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,  
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,  
who said, “Let us take possession  
of the pasture lands of God.”  
Make them like tumbleweed, my God,  
like chaff before the wind.  
As fire consumes the forest  
or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,  
so pursue them with the tempest  
and terrify them with your storm.  
Cover their faces with shame, Lord,  
so that they will seek your name.  
May they ever be ashamed and dismayed;  
may they perish in disgrace.  
Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord –  
that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.  
Psalm 83:9-18*

The psalmist establishes an historical precedent for God’s just judgment by recalling the victory of Gideon over Midian (Judges 6-8), and Deborah and Barak’s defeat of the Canaanite commander Sisera and king Jabin at the brook Kishon (Judges 4-5). He wants all Israel’s enemies to be defeated the way the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, were defeated (Judges 7:25). All those who plot to take possession of “the pasture lands of God” deserve to come to the same end as the kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, who were killed by Gideon himself (Judges 8:21). The psalmist uses a litany of wasteland images to describe the judgment of God. He prays to God to reduce his enemies to tumbleweed and windblown chaff, the remains of a ravaging forest fire and refuse bobbing in a tempest tossed sea.

Prayer is the psalmist’s defense against cunning enemies who seek to annihilate the people of God. God is the ultimate just judge who will right the wrongs and punish those who have hated Israel. But how does this psalm work today for believers who have been told by the Lord Jesus to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44). First, prayer is the place where believers can bring their anger and bitterness against evil to God. Prayer gives vent to the raw emotions of pain and suffering received at the hands of the wicked.

Second, Jesus spoke of hell often. He repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). Jesus stated it plainly, “There is a judge for those who reject me and do not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day” (John 12:48). Repent or perish was a refrain that ran through his ministry (Luke 13:2-5). Any generation that rejects the gospel is guilty of the blood of all the prophets (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus lashed out, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33). To be ashamed of Jesus and his gospel was to identify with an “adulterous and sinful generation” and to invite a reciprocal response: “the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:36-38; Luke 9:23-26). Jesus warned, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Third, like the psalmist, 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).

Fourth, the psalmist alludes to an emphasis that deserves to dominate the praying imagination of believers today. He prays, “Cover their faces with shame, Lord, *so that they will seek your name. . . Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord – that you alone are the Most High over all the earth*” (Ps 83:16). Nearly buried in the language of vindication and judgment is the hope of conversion.<sup>109</sup> The psalmist prays for the enemy “that when they see the power of God and realize the folly of their endeavor they will seek [desire] the name of the Lord . . . and pray to him for mercy.”<sup>110</sup> Beyond the desire for deliverance and judgment, is “the ultimate desire of the psalmist” that others – even the enemies of the people of God – “might come to know and obey the true God.”<sup>111</sup>

Augustine believed that the psalmist never would have prayed, “so that they will seek your name” (Ps 83:16), if he was not convinced that there were members of the “company of the enemies of God’s people” who would be granted to turn to God “before the last judgment.” For now everyone is mixed together, but some will repent and believe. They will “seek the name of the Lord.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 302. Calvin, *Psalms*, 349. Calvin disagrees with this hopeful prospect. He believes that the ungodly are “inflated with intolerable pride” and that it is impossible “to abate their pride until they are laid prostrate, confounded and shamefully disappointed. When he declares (v.16) that, as the result of this, ‘they will seek the name of God,’ he is not to be understood as speaking of their being brought to true repentance, or of their genuine conversion. . . .What is here meant is nothing more than a forced and slavish submission like that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.”

<sup>110</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:740.

<sup>111</sup> Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2:686.

<sup>112</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 399.

If the psalmist hinted at this redemptive hope, how much more should we, knowing that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom 5:8-10).

The prophetic intensity of the Asaph psalms yields to the longing for spiritual refreshment and renewal found in Psalms 84-85. These psalms are attributed to the Sons of Korah from the tribe of Levi (Pss 42-49, 84, 85, 87, 89). King David made the descendants of Kohath worship leaders “in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there” (1 Chron 6:22, 31, 38). Their calling as worship leaders and the evidence of these psalms proves that the Korah family history is a beautiful redemption story. In the wilderness the Korah clan rebelled against Moses and Aaron and suffered a devastating judgment (Num 16). The family was nearly wiped out but at least one of son survived and his descendants became temple worship leaders in Israel.

The psalmist expresses his heartfelt longing for the real presence of the living God. There is an ecstatic intensity about his language: “how lovely!” . . . “my soul yearns, even faints,” . . . “my heart and my flesh cry out.”<sup>113</sup> Ecological images of nesting birds and springs in the desert capture our imagination. Deep emotion and satisfaction is conveyed by communal praise invoked by God’s loving presence. Yahweh anoints his leaders and withholds no good thing from “those whose walk is blameless.” The psalmist’s soulful yearning is inspired not by ritual habit but by an abiding relationship with the Lord Almighty, his King and his God. While his pilgrimage is deeply personal, the psalmist shares his quest and enters into worship with “those whose strength” is in God. He is in the company of like-minded pilgrims who find their happiness and fulfillment in the presence of God.

We need some skill in reading the Psalms. Not just anyone can pick up the psalms and see what is going on. It takes a trained eye to see what is really there. We need a radiologist to read our X-ray and we need understanding to read the Psalms. A true intellectual grasp of the psalms only heightens their emotional intensity, spiritual richness and personal, practical application. This psalm is prayed by a person who has "decided to leave an ego-centered world and enter a God-centered world."<sup>114</sup>

*The House of the Lord*

*How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O Lord Almighty!  
My soul yearns, even faints  
for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh cry out  
for the living God.  
Even the sparrow has found a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may have her young—*

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<sup>113</sup> Spurgeon, “Psalm 84,” *Treasury of David*. Spurgeon writes, “This sacred ode is one of the choicest of the collection; it has a mild radiance about it, entitling it to be called The Pearl of Psalms. If the twenty-third be the most popular, the one-hundred- and-third the most joyful, the one-hundred-and-nineteenth the most deeply experimental, the fifty-first the most plaintive, this is one of the most sweet of the Psalms of peace.”

<sup>114</sup> Peterson, *Answering God*, 23.

*a place near your altar,  
O Lord Almighty, my King and my God.  
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;  
they are ever praising you.*

Psalm 84:1-5

The positive tenor of this psalm encourages today's believers to embrace their life together in the presence of God as a joyous privilege and wonderful blessing. The progressive revelation of God transposes the psalmist's "passion for the sanctuary" into the believer's passion for Christ. Everything the temple stood for is fulfilled in him. Jesus is "God's true temple" (John 2:21; Rev 21:22). "And because He is God's temple, God abides in Jesus. Jesus is the one place where we meet God, and we too abide in Jesus, being united to God in Him."<sup>115</sup> The psalmist's "language of love poetry" finds its true significance in Christ and in the Body of Christ (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).<sup>116</sup>

We are invited by Jesus to make our home in him, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4). The homemaking word (*meinai*) is used again when Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them" (John 6:56). Jesus used the word again when he said, "If you hold to my teaching (or, if you make your home in my Word), you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

When Jesus walked out of the temple for the last time, the old sacrificial, Levitical priestly temple system was about to be rendered obsolete (Matthew 24:1). "The temple worship of the ancient people of God is all over and the way to God's holy presence has been opened up for all by means of this one sacrifice for the sin of the whole world."<sup>117</sup> "Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone' (Ps 118:22). Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which you must be saved"(Acts 4:10-12). Peter's Spirit-filled message confirms that Jesus has replaced the temple. The temple has been eclipsed by the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Zambian New Testament scholar Joe Kapolyo emphasizes the significance of Jesus abandoning institutional Judaism and the whole sacrificial system.<sup>118</sup> Only Christ fulfills the human need for salvation and the longing of the soul. If the temple is done away with, how much more will all religious traditions be eclipsed by the presence of Jesus? Jesus is Lord. He is the one who is greater than Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, ancestral worship, tribal animism, existential selfism, and all forms of Christ-less Christianity.<sup>119</sup>

The original band of disciples made an amazing adjustment to the physical departure of Jesus. They could no longer walk with Jesus nor enjoy table fellowship. They could not see him heal the sick or hear him preach. He was no longer there for them in a literal sense and they had to adjust. The New Testament is a testimony to the fact that the disciples made this adjustment

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<sup>115</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 165.

<sup>116</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 303.

<sup>117</sup> Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2:757.

<sup>118</sup> Kapolyo, "Matthew," 1161.

<sup>119</sup> Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 112.

amazingly well. Of course, they did so not in their own strength, but through the power and wisdom of the Spirit of the risen and ascended Lord.<sup>120</sup>

The absence of a literal, physical Jesus is as relevant for us as it was for the original band of disciples. The disciples had to learn how to follow Jesus without his physical presence. This is true for today's disciples as well. The danger of a "false literal" confronts the church today as it always has. Given the absence of Jesus, we are given to substitutes that stand in the place of a physical Jesus. The literal concreteness of a pre-Easter Jesus becomes transposed into the "false literal" experience of spiritual leaders who focus attention on themselves. It can be powerful personalities, but it can also be ecclesiastical bureaucracies, church buildings, cherished practices, and spiritual experiences, that stand in the place of Jesus. Traditional religious rituals, mega-church superstars, and down-home country pastors can substitute for the Spirit of the risen Christ. Instead of the church dependent on the fruit and gifts of the Spirit of Christ we give ourselves to "Christian" idols that stand in the place of a literal Jesus. Instead of shared leadership and every-member ministry, believers tragically live out their faith vicariously through charismatic pastors who they can see and touch. Jesus is gone, but he has not left a vacuum. The gift of the Holy Spirit makes possible the real presence of the risen and exalted Christ in the Body of Christ, the Church.

We must be clear, the longing expressed in Psalm 84 must be for the living God made real in Jesus and not for a false literal (an idol) that attempts to substitute for God. This yearning for the presence of God runs counter to the wisdom of the age that says the church must adapt to "the rise of consumerism." Church consultants may be right in their market analysis but they are wrong in their understanding of the church:

"What goes for cars, doctors, tires, and schools also goes for churches. Americans go where they think they can get the best deal, or where they think their needs will be met, regardless of previous affiliations. This means that a few weeks of poor sermons, weak music, or a dirty nursery may prompt present members to start looking elsewhere. . . . More and more Americans are opting for 'full service churches' that can offer quality and variety in music, extensive youth programs, diverse educational opportunities, a counseling staff, support groups, singles' ministry, athletic activities, multiple Sunday morning services, a modern nursery, and the other services and programs only available in larger churches."<sup>121</sup>

The church is not a religious institution programmed to meet consumer needs. Psalm 84 celebrates the inefficient irrelevance of the counter-culture household of faith. We cannot prove the societal worth of the church to a secular world. Nor can we promote the gospel as a product – designed to meet our emotional and spiritual felt needs. It is not our aim to create brand loyalty in a highly competitive marketplace. What we can do is love people and call to them to repentance and to new life in Christ. We can offer sinners like ourselves the gospel of grace. We can invite them into the Body of Christ through baptism and communion. Worship is our highest priority

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<sup>120</sup> Webster, *The God Who Kneels*, 119-121.

<sup>121</sup> Anderson, *Dying For Change*, 49, 51.

and greatest passion, but as Calvin warned we are not, “sedulously attentive to the observance of outward ceremonies, but destitute of genuine heart godliness.”<sup>122</sup> The relevant irrelevance of the psalmist’s quest for the presence of God is exactly what we want today in every aspect of the life of the church.

The passion of Psalm 84 corresponds to the church of Acts’ devotion to “the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). In Acts 2, description and prescription merge to form the nexus between God’s work and our work, rendering everything else superfluous and extraneous. In Psalm 84 we are given a special understanding of what it means to be devoted to these four disciplines, not as a to-do check-list, but as the way we seek God’s presence. The heartfelt yearning of Psalm 84 is transposed into practical spiritual disciplines or devotions that give the church authentic focus, identity, growth, and fellowship. The blessing of the real presence of Christ means that we are at home with God. It is as natural and normal as song birds nesting in the temple eaves. Beatitude based believers have humbled themselves and acknowledged their utter dependence upon the mercy of God.

### *The Journey of Desire*

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.  
As they pass through the Valley of Baka,  
they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion.  
Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;  
listen to me, God of Jacob.  
Look on our shield, O God;  
look with favor on your anointed one.*

Psalm 84:5-9

The psalmist’s journey may be a literal, physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or it may be an inward, meditative spiritual journey to the presence of God.<sup>123</sup> Either way the psalm gives voice to those who join desire, devotion, and discipline, and put one step in front of the other in their faith journey. The line, “whose hearts are set on pilgrimage,” is literally, “highways in their hearts.” That is to say that the journey to God is in their heart and on their mind. Even when the journey passes through the arid wilderness, the valley of Baka, the sojourners have “set their hearts on pilgrimage” (Ps 84:5). They embrace the blessing of God who provides pools of fresh water in a dry and weary land. What might have been “a place of dry adversity” becomes “a place of springs” because of the blessings of God.<sup>124</sup> Instead of growing weaker and weaker as they journey on, they become stronger and stronger. Hope in the Lord renews their strength, making it

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<sup>122</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, vol. 5:357

<sup>123</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:753.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 754.

possible for them to “soar on wings like eagles” and “run and not grow weary,” and “walk and not be faint” (Isa 40:31).

The psalmist focuses on the Lord God Almighty. “Hear my prayer, God of angel armies.” He seeks the direct and immediate response of the God of Jacob. The truth behind these titles draws on the history of covenant promises and the work of salvation. He prays for the king, God’s anointed one, who is strengthened by God to defend the people of God. He prays on the basis of God’s promises to the house of David (2 Sam 7:16). The psalmist is not praying to a vague generic deity who is free of any “intellectualized understanding.”<sup>125</sup> “Modern spiritual consciousness is predicated upon the fact that God is gone,” writes poet Christian Wiman, “and spiritual experience, for many of us, amounts mostly to an essential, deeply felt and necessary, but ultimately inchoate and transitory feeling of oneness or unity with existence. It is mystical and valuable, but distant.”<sup>126</sup> This is not the understanding of the psalmist who depends upon the God who has made himself known, the God of Jacob. The winsome skeptic’s disdain for empty religious jargon meets in the Psalms the power of God’s personal revelation. This revelation is alive and active and penetrating to the core. If you are tempted to “do a little linguistic dance around Christianity,” its time to grapple with the fact that God has revealed himself and this is not godtalk – this is revelation.<sup>127</sup> God has spoken and the “ever praising” worshiper believes in “the primacy of God’s word in everything: in creation, in salvation, in judgment, in blessing, in mercy, and in grace.”<sup>128</sup>

### *The Blessing of God*

*Better is one day in your courts  
than a thousand elsewhere;  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.  
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;  
the Lord bestows favor and honor;  
no good thing does he withhold  
from those whose walk is blameless.  
Lord Almighty,  
blessed is the one who trusts in you.*  
Psalm 84:10-12

At home in the house of God is the psalmist’s deepest joy (Ps 27:4; 73:25; Phil 3:8). He would rather be in the presence of God than anywhere else. Just one day in Christ is better than a thousand days apart from Christ. Posted up at the entrance way as an usher or a janitor is more fulfilling for the psalmist than being seated at the head table in the East Room of the White House or winning a Noble prize or receiving an Oscar. The psalmist’s “theory of relativity” means that nothing compares to the presence of God. Our translation “doorkeeper” is a bit misleading, because the official at the gate of the temple was a highly respected figure (1 Chron

<sup>125</sup> Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 18.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>128</sup> Peterson, *Answering God*, 86.

26:1,12) who played an important role in administering the liturgy at the gate (Psalm 15). But the psalmist does not use the term for “gatekeeper.” Instead, he speaks of “waiting at the threshold.” The humble and lowly status of the worshiper is preferred over official status. Or as one translation reads, “I’d rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honored as a guest in the palace of sin” (Ps 84:10, *The Message*).

The reason for his passion for God is no mystery. “God, like a sun, gives grace to his people; and like a shield, he gives them glory.”<sup>129</sup> It means that “the Spirit of glory and of God rests” on all those in Christ (1 Pet 4:14). It means that “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). It means that because of the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and the obedience of Jesus Christ and his sprinkled blood we have a living hope, a lasting inheritance, and a coming salvation (1 Pet 1:2-5). The promise of God’s presence is transposed into an even higher key. “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Rev 7:17). It means that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7).

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<sup>129</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:758.

Psalm 85 is a meditation on salvation and spiritual renewal. We pray this psalm as Nehemiah might have when he returned to the land of Israel with the exiles to reestablish Jerusalem and the people of God. We pray this psalm along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who prepared her heart and mind for the coming of “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). We pray this psalm with Jesus who made our salvation possible by his obedient and atoning sacrifice on our behalf. We pray this psalm with all those who seek the salvation that only God can give.

Salvation is not a religious abstraction but the lived experience of the redeemed. Every goodness we can possibly imagine finds its source in God’s saving grace. Salvation encompasses deliverance from sin and death, despair of self and alienation from others, and the pressures of the world and a meaningless life.<sup>130</sup> Salvation changes us in every way, giving us an abiding relationship with God and a deep sense of hope and confidence. In Christ we live into a new reality, the old creation is gone and the new creation has come (2 Cor 5:17).

The psalmist remembers the Exodus as the epicenter of redemption. The pivotal event in Israel’s history when the Lord restored the fortunes of Jacob, forgave their iniquity, and covered all their sins. He remembers the Lord turning away his wrath (Ps 85:1-3). But now he prays for a restoration of that “first love” experience of God’s saving grace. The psalmist does not feel the need to review Israel’s rebellion and apostasy. He assumes that the cause of God’s displeasure is common knowledge and does not need to be rehearsed. What is important is that the psalmist’s plea for full restoration be heard. He entreats the Lord to put away his displeasure and “grant us your salvation” (Ps 85:4-7). In the final section, the psalmist highlights the shared experience of the fullness of salvation by elaborating on the attributes of the Lord: peace, purity, wisdom, righteousness, glory, love, and faithfulness (Ps 85:8-13).

*Forgiveness Remembered*

*You, Lord, showed favor to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people  
and covered all their sins.  
You set aside all your wrath  
and turned from your fierce anger.*

Psalm 85:1-3

The historical background for this psalm is difficult to determine. It may have come after the Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (450-440 B. C.) when the faithful remnant cried out to God for help to reclaim the land, rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, and restore the people of God to their past blessings. Psalm 85 is a postexilic appeal for revival based on remembering God’s blessing at Sinai and a full restoration of salvation. The pattern of redemption, rebellion, and renewal, makes the psalm relevant in many situations where the

<sup>130</sup> White, “Salvation,” 968.

forgiven faithful seek the joy of their salvation. It is easy to imagine Nehemiah identifying with this psalm. His prayer expresses many of these same themes: the Lord's covenant faithfulness, the acknowledgment of previous sin, the purpose of God's judgment, and the promise of restoration if the people return to him (Neh 1:5-11). Nor is it difficult to imagine Mary four hundred years later being drawn to this psalm when she sang in praise to the Lord, "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Luke 1:54-55). The ebb and flow of faithful obedience has characterized the people of God from the days of Israel to the present age of the Church giving this psalm universal appeal.

The psalmist begins with the foundation of restoration, forgiveness. For the believer the epicenter of redemption has shifted from the Exodus to the cross of Jesus Christ. This is where our appeal for renewal begins. Christ has covered all our sins. The blood of the Passover lamb was a type pointing forward to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We are redeemed by "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet 1:19). Through "faith in his blood" we are able to draw near to the holy God (Rom 3:25; Eph 2:13). In Christ, we are "justified" (Rom 5:9), "redeemed" (Eph 1:7), and have "peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:20). The apostles emphasize the cleansing power of Christ's blood. The blood of Christ cleanses our consciences (Heb 9:14) and "purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7). The power of Christ's forgiveness in our lives inspires us to "love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8; see James 5:20). This "covering" of sin, this community -building love depends absolutely on the atoning sacrificial love of Christ. The apostle Paul said, "Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Rom 5:9). The psalmist asks the Lord to "set aside" all his wrath and turn from his "fierce anger" (Ps 85:3) and the apostles declare that Jesus "rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10).

### *Renewal*

*Restore us again, God our Savior,  
and put away your displeasure toward us.  
Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?  
Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?  
Show us your unfailing love, Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.*

Psalm 85:4-7

There is an overriding communal cast to this renewal prayer that makes it hard for people steeped in western individualism to appreciate. Westerners begin with the individual but the psalmist begins with the people of God. When he says, "Restore us again, God our Savior," he includes the history of the people of God who stand together through time. They are not a collection of networked individuals but a faithful company who share a common salvation, even as they share together judgment, repentance, and restoration. Nehemiah is not a solitary figure who prays on

behalf of himself. He is the Lord's servant praying for the people of Israel. He confesses his sins and the sins of his people (Neh 1:6-7). Mary's prayer is deeply personal, "My soul glorifies the Lord" (Luke 1:46), but also powerfully communal. She is in solidarity with Abraham and his descendants. The psalmist refuses to make this prayer for renewal and restoration about himself. It is about us, the people of God, and not about "me."

The author of Hebrews says we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19). But the psalmist is also bold and his confidence stems from the same source. The reason the believer can boldly enter into the presence of God is the same reason the psalmist can pray the way he does. This confidence is not about our self-confidence but about God's self-consistency. The reason the prayer gradually gathers strength is because all the petitions depend upon the promises of God.<sup>131</sup> The psalmist dares to beseech God for his "unfailing love," because he knows the character, promises, and actions of God his Savior.

This boldness is not to the credit of the psalmist but the to the mercy of God. Whatever is good and praiseworthy flows from the mercy of God and not what we deserve. This leads to a humble boldness. Augustine expressed it this way: "seeing that we are not proud means that we are not lifted up. And if we are not lifted up, we will not fall. And if we don't fall, we will stand. And in standing we will cling fast and abide. And when we abide we will rejoice in the Lord our God. This is the path to confidence. Everything we have, our father, our country, our inheritance, our salvation comes from the mercy of God."<sup>132</sup>

### *Convergence*

*I will listen to what God the Lord says;  
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants –  
but let them not turn to folly.  
Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
Love and faithfulness meet together;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.  
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,  
and righteousness looks down from heaven.  
The Lord will indeed give what is good,  
and our land will yield its harvest.  
Righteousness goes before him  
and prepares the way for his steps.*

Psalm 85:8-13

The convergence of all that is good creates a beautiful picture of salvation. The psalmist's confident hope comes from listening to the Word of God. God promises an inner harmony and an ultimate convergence of righteousness and peace. The Divine purpose—bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth in Christ, overcomes the great divorce between our fallenness and

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<sup>131</sup> Kidner, *Psalms* 73-150, 308.

<sup>132</sup> Augustine, *Psalms* 85, 406.

our fulfillment. The psalmist envisions the end goal and from our vantage point in salvation history we understand the means to that goal. Through the Incarnation, God descends into our suffering humanity, joins us on the ash heap, takes up this mean battle with Satan, and goes to the cross. The Lord of Glory is crucified, but the cross is not the last word and the resurrection is not a wild card played at the end. There is a beautiful coherence between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the truth of the universe. The power of the resurrection fits with the wonder and meaning of life as we know it, from our understanding of the created order to the justice of the moral order.<sup>133</sup> Christ makes possible the promise of peace to God's faithful servants. Christ brings salvation near to those who fear him. In Christ love and faithfulness meet and righteousness and peace kiss.

The Hebrew poet has paired the blessings of salvation: peace and faithfulness, salvation and glory, love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace. These are not opposites that require reconciliation but blessings that prove reconciliation. Each attribute is a reflection of the Lord's goodness and character, like a musical variation in the symphony of salvation beautifully orchestrated by the Chief Musician. Love and faithfulness are friends united in Christ. Righteousness and peace kiss each other because Christ Jesus who is our peace has made us righteous in him. We cannot have peace without righteousness nor righteousness without peace. Only in Christ do they come together. Augustine read the testimony of the Incarnate One in the faithfulness that springs from the earth and the Father's acceptance of the atoning sacrifice in the righteousness that looks down from heaven.<sup>134</sup> When Jesus prayed Psalm 85 he must have identified himself and his ministry with the promise of the abundant life and the fruitful harvest (John 10:10; Luke 10:2). He united righteousness and peace and love and faithfulness like no one else and who better than the Christ can it be said, "Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps" (Ps 85:13).

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<sup>133</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 32.

<sup>134</sup> Augustine, *Psalm 85*, 408-409.

By placing this David psalm in the middle of the Korah psalms the editors remind us of how important complete dependence upon the Lord is for spiritual formation. Psalm 86 stands in contradiction to the “I can do it myself” attitude and an antidote to the self-pity that buckles under pressure. David is passionately dependent upon the Lord who is the subject of all his thoughts, pleas, prayers, and praise.<sup>135</sup>

Every line reminds us that the Lord is sovereign over all. The psalmist identifies the Lord four times by the name Yahweh which stands for the unique character of the covenant keeping God who revealed himself by name to Moses (Ps 86:1, 6, 11, 17; see Exod 6:3). He uses Elohim five times (Ps 86:2, 10, 12, 14, 15), a more general term for God that is derived from a plural of majesty and is used in the singular for the transcendent God of creation. However, the name for God that the psalmist weaves throughout is Adonai which means Master or Sovereign. It is translated “Lord” seven times in Psalm 86 (Ps.86:3,4,5,8,9,12,15) and it is used as a reminder of the supplicant’s submission and subservience to the Lord.

We can picture Jesus praying Psalm 86 as a psalm that shaped his self-understanding and his devotion to the Father’s will. It was a perfect prayer when he was alone with the Father or when he led the disciples in prayer. Some lines, such as, “I will glorify your name forever,” remind us of Jesus’ prayer of consecration (John 17:1-26). Psalm 86 takes into account the chronic opposition that Jesus faced from the religious leaders. David’s evident lack of self-pity and his determination to remain resilient in spite of his enemies fits perfectly with Jesus’ calm confidence before his sworn enemies.

We pray this Psalm today in the light of our confession that Jesus is Lord. We declare with our mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and we believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9). The Lordship of Jesus Christ shapes our understanding of this psalm. We cannot distance ourselves from the passion of the psalmist for we have even more reason to pray this psalm than King David did.

### *Hear Me Out*

*Hear me, Lord (Yahweh), and answer me,  
for I am poor and needy.  
Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;*

<sup>135</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:778. Ross writes: “A number of commentators have rated this psalm somewhat second class because of its lack of originality. It seems to use standard expressions and motifs from earlier psalms.” Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 56-57. Wilcock writes: “Nearly the whole of this one [Ps 86] turns out to be a mosaic of fragments pierced together from others [Psalms], and from related Old Testament scriptures.” Wilcock refers to “recycled” passages and the fabric of Psalm 86 being a “patchwork,” adding, “But David himself would have found that it fitted him well enough, and what he would own, we ought not to call common.” Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:619. Goldingay writes: “Although practically every phrase in the psalm can be linked with some verse in the Psalms, it would be misleading to list these in such a way as to suggest that the psalmist was directly taking phrases from those sources. Its relationship with the other psalms is more like that of the Revelation of John with the Old Testament, where hardly a verse would survive without the scriptural phraseology that lies behind it, but the book comes into being because the visionary is soaked in the Scriptures rather than because he is directly sampling them at every point.”

*save your servant who trusts in you.  
You are my God; have mercy on me, Lord (Adonai),  
for I call to you all day long.  
Bring joy to your servant, Lord (Adonai),  
for I put my trust in you.  
You, Lord (Adonai), are forgiving and good,  
abounding in love to all who call to you.  
Hear my prayer, Lord (Yahweh);  
listen to my cry for mercy.  
When I am in distress, I call to you,  
because you answer me.*

Psalm 86:1-7

The devotional passion expressed at the outset of this psalm ought to move all who follow Christ to pray in a similar way. To pray the way David prayed is to sweep aside the spiritual apathy that threatens to hinder our communion with God. Psalm 86 serves as a personal and communal guide to authentic dependence upon the Lord. First, we have to care that God hears us and then we have to pray. But we have this assurance, “the Spirit helps us in weakness” (Rom 8:26).

The psalmist builds his case for God’s response with solid reasons. This first section begins and ends with the psalmist entreating Yahweh to listen (Ps 86:1, 6). He offers five compelling personal reasons. God will hear him because, “I am poor and needy,” “I am faithful to you,” “I call to you all day long,” “I put my trust in you.” and “I call to you, because you answer me.” Every one of these reasons can be traced back to the character of God who is “forgiving and good” (86:5), “abounding in love” (86:5), and responsive to distress (86:7). The psalmist continues to sing God’s praises. The Lord will respond because of his great and marvelous deeds (86:10), his great love toward him and his deliverance from death (86:13), and because the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness” (86:15). The psalmist’s appeal is predicated on the prior action of God’s mercy, “for you, Lord (Yahweh), have helped me and comforted me” (Ps 86:17).

#### *Only You Lord*

*Among the gods there is none like you, Lord (Adonai);  
no deeds can compare with yours.  
All the nations you have made  
will come and worship before you, Lord (Adonai);  
they will bring glory to your name.  
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;  
you alone are God.  
Teach me your way, Lord (Yahweh),  
that I may rely on your faithfulness;  
give me an undivided heart,  
that I may fear your name.*

*I will praise you, Lord (Adonai) my God, with all my heart;  
I will glorify your name forever.  
For great is your love toward me;  
you have delivered me from the depths,  
from the realm of the dead.*

Psalm 86:8-13

The appeal of the psalmist to be heard by God leads to an eruption of praise. Compared to the unreal gods of the pagan imagination David declares emphatically there is no contest – the Lord wins. “There is none like you, no deeds compare with yours” (Ps 86:8). Calvin comments that the psalmist has gathered courage and new strength for prayer. He commends the psalmist for holding in “contempt and derision all the false gods in whom the heathen world imagined some help was to be found.”<sup>136</sup> The gods are a lost cause, but the nations are not. The psalmist credits the Lord with their existence and says that one day all the nations will recognize and worship the Lord. David’s doxology is bold on two fronts – the religious and the political. The Lord rules over all. David declares, “You alone are God” (Ps 86:10). There is no division in the psalmist’s mind between personal devotion and social engagement. There is a largeness to David’s world and the Lord is at the center. He would agree with David Wells, “The self is a canvas too narrow, too cramped, to contain the largeness of Christian truth.”<sup>137</sup>

David has yet to share with the Lord the besetting problem that lies behind his personal lament and his deep need to be heard. That will come in the final section (Ps 86:14-17), but he has prioritized his prayer in a beautiful way. Regardless of the vortex of threatening circumstances he prays for wisdom. “Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness” (Ps 86:11). The psalmist knows that to lead he must be led. He seeks to be mastered by the Master. When Augustine came to this verse in his sermon on this psalm he immediately exclaimed, “Your way, Your truth, Your life is Christ. Therefore the Body [of Christ] belongs to Him, and Body is of Him.” Then he quotes Jesus saying, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6), adding, “It is one thing to lead to the way, another to guide in the way.” Believers, Augustine insists, “must be guided by Him in the way itself, lest they fall.”<sup>138</sup>

This desire for wisdom goes beyond cognition and schooling. He longs of the understanding and insight to remain faithful to the Lord’s way even in stressful circumstances. He wants his intuition and visceral reaction to life’s pressing problems to be governed and guided by the will of God. This wisdom is not primarily a matter of doctrine and discursive knowledge, although these play a vital role and should not be diminished. The focus of the psalmist is not so much on person-as-thinker or person-as-believer, as it is on person-as-lover.<sup>139</sup> Augustine assumes that the follower of Jesus Christ is an embodied agent who needs some precious hand-holding as she makes her way. He asks, How does the Lord lead us? To which he answers, “By always admonishing, always giving you His hand.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 384.

<sup>137</sup> Wells, *No Place For Truth*, 183.

<sup>138</sup> Augustine, *Psalms 86*, 415.

<sup>139</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 62.

<sup>140</sup> Augustine, *Psalms 86*, 415.

His prayer for wisdom, “Teach me your way, Lord,” moves immediately to his plea, “Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name” (Ps 86:11). The apostle’s prayer echoes the psalmist’s concerns (Phil 1:9-11). The heart symbolizes who we are in the depth of our being. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Yet we are told by the prophet Jeremiah that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19; see Luke 6:45). Yet it is with the heart that we believe and are justified, and it is with the mouth that we confess and are saved (Romans 10:10). David had a heart after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22) and the hardhearted Israelites were said to have a “heart of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26). Real wisdom is trusting in the Lord with all your heart and leaning not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). Throughout the Old Testament the people of God are exhorted to serve the Lord with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 10:12; Joshua 22:5). True communication means speaking the truth from the heart (Psalm 15:2), because the message has been taken to heart (Revelation 1:3), even as true counsel instructs the heart (Psalm 16:7). True repentance is “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17; see Joel 2:13; Romans 2:29). Real maturity is characterized by having “integrity of heart” (Psalm 70:72), “an undivided heart” (Psalm 86:11), “an upright heart” (Psalm 119:7), a “singleness of heart” (Jeremiah 32:39), a humble heart (Matthew 11:29), a “heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12), and a “sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22).

Only the Lord really knows the heart. The psalmist prays, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). “Test me, O Lord, and try me,” David prayed, “examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth” (Psalm 26:2-3). What we are like outwardly may be a charade. The real issue is a person’s heart, which has a way of showing its true colors under the pressure of time and circumstance. As the psalmist prayed, “Surely you desire truth in the inner self; you teach wisdom in the inmost place” (Psalm 51:6).<sup>141</sup>

The psalmist sees the undivided heart as a gift that naturally leads to praise. When we have begun to grasp the Lord’s great love for us, how can we keep from praising? “I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise,” wrote C. S. Lewis. “The world rings with praise.” We praise spontaneously what we like – what we love. We do not have to be badgered or lectured in how to praise. Lewis writes, “I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time the most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least.”<sup>142</sup>

The proof of the Lord’s great love for David is found in his deliverance from death. “You have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead” (Ps 86:13). The word that David uses for death is *she’ol* (Ps 6:5) which refers “to the underworld or the realm of the dead.”<sup>143</sup> The psalmist seems to imply that he is grateful for “a future deliverance from the power of death.”<sup>144</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Webster, *Soundtrack of the Soul*, 73-74.

<sup>142</sup> Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 93-94.

<sup>143</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:784.

<sup>144</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 313.

It was not just that his life had been spared physically but that he was saved “from a still deeper abyss of death.”<sup>145</sup> This kind of death is referred to in the Book of Revelation as “the second death” (Rev 2:11; 20:14) and those whose name are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life need not fear the second death. The exuberance of the psalmist is shared by the New Testament believer who can say with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21).

*Turn to Me*

*Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God;  
ruthless people are trying to kill me –  
they have no regard for you.  
But you, Lord (Adonai), are a compassionate and gracious God,  
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.  
Turn to me and have mercy on me;  
show your strength in behalf of your servant;  
save me, because I serve you  
just as my mother did.  
Give me a sign of your goodness,  
that my enemies may see it and be put to shame,  
for you, Lord (Yahweh), have helped me and comforted me.*  
Psalm 86:14-17

Finally, we get to the presenting problem, but everything that has been said is fundamental to the supplicant’s spiritual formation. David’s description of “arrogant foes” and “ruthless people” recall Psalms 3-7 in Book I. These psalms describe the Absalom conspiracy and the rebellious reaction of Saul’s ancestors from the tribe of Benjamin (2 Samuel 13-20). These psalms, along with Psalm 86, must have resonated with Jesus who faced the scorn and ridicule of the religious leaders who conspired against him and plotted his death. They gave Jesus the words to pray when confronted by “arrogant foes” and “ruthless people.”

By this point in the psalm, we sense that David has almost lost interest in his enemies. They remain a serious threat, but his focus on the Lord is complete. We picture Jesus praying this way about his enemies. Instead of elaborating on how bad his enemies were, Jesus, like David, focused on how good God is. David quoted from the Lord’s word to Moses, “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ps 86:15; Exod 34:6). The issue for believers is not how bad the world is, but how good the Lord is and how he has empowered us to be. Instead of praying for the defeat of his enemies, David prays for a sign of the Lord’s goodness so as to shame them into true recognition and submission to God. He asks the Lord for evidence of his mercy and strength. His plea is endearing, “Save me, because I serve you just as my mother did” (Ps 86:16). His poignant bottom line underscores the absolute sufficiency he has found in the Lord: “for you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me” (Ps 86:17).

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<sup>145</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 390.

Embedded in Psalm 86's personal plea for spiritual renewal is a prophecy that anticipates the theme of Psalm 87 and the global reach of the gospel. The psalmist declares, "All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name" (Ps 86:9). The Sons of Korah celebrate this amazing truth with a psalm dedicated to the City of God and the gathering of God's people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

We cannot pray this psalm today without hearing the Lord's great commission to go and make disciples of all nations. We remember the Magi who came from the east to worship the one who was born king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-2). We recall the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10), and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), all of whom put their faith and trust in Jesus. The exclamation of the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross, "Surely he was the Son of God!" has become the testimony of many from every nation and people group. Psalm 87 anticipates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the world-wide impact of the gospel.

The terse, staccato style of Psalm 87 lends itself to a burst of praise. Exuberance describes this good news psalm. It deserves to be sung or shouted. The gates of Zion are flung open to the world so that all may enter into the city of God and the joy of the Lord. The inclusiveness of the Kingdom is glorious and the songs of praise never cease.

*The City of God*

*He has founded his city on the holy mountain.  
The Lord loves the gates of Zion  
more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.  
Glorious things are said of you, city of God:  
Psalm 87:1-3*

The psalm begins with an "abrupt and emphatic" statement of fact.<sup>146</sup> God "founded" this place. The meaning and purpose of this city on the holy mountain is established in the will of God. Place matters, but not because of geography. The place itself is not holy. God makes it holy. His presence is what sets this place apart as holy. The "gates of Zion" stand for the whole city and represent the bustling human activity that brings energy and joy to the city. The Lord's love for the "gates" is a metaphor for his electing love that makes this place his home and the people his people. The psalm will go on to prove that the Lord's exclusive love for Zion, "more than all the dwellings of Jacob," is for the sake of inclusion. The reason "glorious things" are said about this city is because everybody is welcome – everybody can find their true home here.

We explored the meaning of Zion earlier in our discussion on Psalm 14. Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. When Jesus Christ came *person* replaced *place*. The

<sup>146</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 314.

Incarnate One fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In himself, Jesus summed up the meaning of Zion and the meaning of the “land” was replaced by the meaning of the person. Chris Wright explains, “The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding the ultimate future of God’s people.”<sup>147</sup> Instead of the holiness of *place*, “Christianity has fundamentally. . .substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space.”<sup>148</sup>

Even before the coming of Jesus Christ, the meaning of Zion was always been more spiritual than political and more universal in scope than ethnic. “Salvation was not a matter of making earthly Zion the center of life; it was a matter of trusting in the Lord and being guaranteed a place in a more glorious city in his eternal kingdom.”<sup>149</sup> Psalm 87 corresponds with the prophecy of Isaiah and the glory of Zion, when all the nations will gather to recognize what God has done:

“Your gates will always stand open. . . .The children of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations. . . . Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isaiah 60:11-16).

The author of Hebrews also envisions Mount Zion welcoming the people of God. “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. . . .But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God . . . .” (Heb 12:18, 22). All the identifying qualities of Mount Zion are relationally God-centered and culminate in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, whose sprinkled, sacrificial blood is powerful to save.

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

The apostle John sees “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). This Holy City is home to the 144,000 who stand on Mount Zion (Revelation 14:1; Joel 2:32; Hebrews 12:22; Galatians 4:26). They represent “the totality of God’s people throughout the ages,” as well as the militant last generation of believers fighting to the end.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>147</sup> Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 93. W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land*, 368, quoted in Wright.

<sup>149</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:798.

<sup>150</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 733; See Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 229-232.

John's reference to Mount Zion echoes the Lord's promise, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain" (Ps 2:6).

### *The Citizens of Zion*

*"I will record Rahab and Babylon  
among those who acknowledge me –  
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush [the upper Nile region]  
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"  
Indeed of Zion it will be said,  
"This one and that one were born in her,  
and the Most High himself will establish her."  
The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:  
"This one was born in Zion."  
As they make music they will sing,  
"All my foundations are in you."  
Psalm 87:4-7*

Without hesitation or prejudice the psalmist quotes the Lord's description of what is so glorious about Zion.<sup>151</sup> The citizens of Zion are drawn from everywhere, even Israel's enemies and rivals. The most unlikely candidates for conversion become the citizens of God's kingdom because they know him and worship him. Shockingly, archenemies and oppressors are suddenly fellow citizens with God's people, rejoicing side-by-side and singing their hearts out, in praise of Yahweh. The five nations listed, Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush (Nubia and parts of Ethiopia) all have a history of violence and hatred against Israel. But the tragic past is not remembered in the wake of this glorious news. Apparently two of John Newton's hymns could be sung in Zion, *Amazing Grace* and *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken*.

It is not just that these foreign nationalities have been accepted and assimilated into Israel. Miraculously, these Egyptians and Babylonians and Ethiopians have been reborn in the City of God. They are not second class citizens. The Lord himself declares, "This one was born in Zion." And then he repeats it for emphasis: "Indeed of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her.'" And then again for the third time: "The Lord will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion.'" The psalmist uses the language of birth to speak of conversion and in doing so "anticipates the later language of being 'born again' in the New Testament."<sup>152</sup> The new birth is not a matter of natural descent nor of human enterprise. This is a work of the Holy Spirit. "Every conversion is a virgin birth. With human beings this [new life] is impossible; but with God absolutely everything is possible (Mt 19:26). The Holy Spirit, in other words is the miraculous *how* of New Life."<sup>153</sup> The only way to become the children of God is to be born of God (John 1:13). The psalm's expression, "this one and that one" (Ps 87:5), emphasizes one person at a time. One by one we enter the kingdom of God.

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<sup>151</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:795.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 796.

<sup>153</sup> Bruner, *John*, 24.

It is not difficult to imagine that Jesus had in mind Psalm 87 when he said to Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Undoubtedly Nicodemus understood himself to be a solid citizen of the kingdom of God – the ultimate insider if there ever was one. He was a Pharisee who sat on the Jewish ruling council. But Jesus implied otherwise when he repeated, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. . . . You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:5-7). It must have been shocking to Nicodemus to realize that he had to “born of the Spirit” just like God-fearing Gentiles from far flung nations.

The meaning of Psalm 87 is played out throughout the Gospels. For Matthew, the magi represent the unexpected, but very welcome, citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are like Rahab, the surprising recipient of God's grace when the Israelites entered the promised land. They are like Naaman the Syrian, trusting in God's Word. They are like the Queen of Sheba, but they are bowing before the one greater than Solomon (Matthew 12:42). They are like the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John and the Roman centurion in Luke's gospel. Surely if God can raise up the children of Abraham from stones, as Jesus said, then he can extend His grace to Eastern magi and Mongolians and Latin Americans. If God's grace can overcome the distance between Babylon and Bethlehem, it can overcome all cultural and intellectual barriers. As Jesus said, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen....there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). The impact of the gospel led the apostles to see the promise of Zion fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem. Paul wrote, “the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:26).

The psalm ends on a note of joyful celebration, and “as they make music they will sing, ‘All my springs are in you’” (Ps 87:7). A similar theme is sung in Psalm 46:4: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (see Ezekiel 47:1). In an arid land where water is scarce and a constant concern, there is nothing like an endless supply of fresh running water to symbolize life. If the language of new birth invokes Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, then, springs of fresh water make us think of Jesus’ conversation with 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).

Psalm 88 may be the saddest prayer in the psalter because no one wants to ever have to pray this prayer. Death and dying are tough subjects under any circumstances, but the conditions described in this psalm are the worst imaginable. The psalmist has hit rock bottom in every way. He is already half dead with one foot in the grave. He is physically spent, emotionally crushed, utterly alone, and abandoned by friends. He feels utterly rejected by everyone including the Lord. He is overwhelmed by his troubles and drowning under the breaking waves of God's the wrath.

The lament psalms usually give some hint of hope or glimmer of praise, but there is nothing positive here. The psalm ends where Simon and Garfunkels' 1964 ballad "Sound of Silence" begins, "Hello, darkness my old friend." The whole psalm from beginning to end is more like a loud, painful wail from the hospice bed than anything else. Yet, it is in Jesus' prayer book.

I shared with my friend who turned eighty this year that we were praying for my wife's ninety-four year old father. We prayed that he would remain alert and ambulatory right up until he died. We suspected that institutional care would break him and we hoped he would be spared. My friend's response, "We all pray for that, but it doesn't usually work out that way."

However, in my father-in-law's case it did. Our prayers were answered. On the weekend before he died he went to the gym on his own and to the movies with his son. On Sunday he went to church and then to a concert at night with friends. Coming out of the concert his walker got caught in a crack in the sidewalk and he fell. Two days later he died in the hospital from internal bleeding. An hour before he died he quoted Proverbs 3:5-6 in four languages including, Chiluba, French, and Portuguese. He had acquired these languages over a lifetime of missionary service. Shortly before he died he told my brother-in-law, "I'm homesick for heaven."

I would love to go that way. I imagine we all would. But for some of us, the dying process will be so extreme that we will end up praying Psalm 88. Dying can be very cruel, an unmitigated horror, even for those who take Jesus at his word: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25). Such is the frailty and weakness of the human condition that such a prayer needs to be in our prayer book and we need to know it is there.

### *Overwhelmed*

*Lord [Yahweh], you are the God who saves me;  
day and night I cry out to you.  
May my prayer come before you;  
turn your ear to my cry.  
I am overwhelmed with troubles  
and my life draws near to death.  
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am like one without strength.*

*I am set apart from the dead,  
like the slain who lie in the grave,  
whom you remember no more,  
who are cut off from your care.  
You have put me in the lowest pit,  
in the darkest depths.  
Your wrath lies heavily on me;  
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.  
You have taken from my closest friends  
and have made me repulsive to them.  
I am confined and cannot escape;  
my eyes are dim with grief.*

Psalm 88:1-9a

The more we grasp the gritty faith of the psalmist the more we will understand why this sad psalm is in the Psalter. His resilient faith is evident in five ways: First, he is not silent, he prays, and that fact alone is no small feat. Second, he persists in calling out to the God who saves him. After all is said and done God is his salvation. Third, he credits the sovereignty of God with everything, even his suffering. He lets God be God. Nothing that happens to him is blamed on secondary causes. Fourth, the psalmist believes that to live is to behold God's wonders and experience his love. He rests his case for deliverance on witnessing the faithfulness of God in the land of the living. Our mission is to praise God. Fifth, everything comes down to God and him. As far from God as he may feel, it is his relationship with God that matters most to him and upon which everything else depends.

Sometimes we complain of being "overwhelmed." At times I have used the word to describe the normal pressures of daily work. But that is not how the psalmist is using the word. He is overwhelmed because of the intensity of all his troubles and because he is on the verge of death. He is in a life and death situation and death is winning. Prayer is his recourse. All the ugly, disparaging groans and indictments he utters are safe to say in the supplicant's privileged communion with God. The reason Psalm 88 is in the Psalter is because God gives us permission to pray this way. Broken-hearted, soul-despairing, prayers are redemptive no matter how dark and tragic they may sound to those who overhear them. God invites these wrenching prayers and even promises to pray through them. "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Rom 8:26).

Despair is found in an alternative discourse of silence and escape. The danger to dread is when the nursing home patient or the distraught widow or the addicted teen shuts down and withdraws into their private hell. For believers to refuse to vent their raw emotion in prayer or to cloak their prayers in pious cliches is the greater danger, because it turns the sufferer inward upon himself or herself. It is naive to think that believers are not tempted to turn to opium and its derivatives instead of prayer. Hydrocodone and oxycodone are the drugs of choice for people trying to escape the kind of pain described in Psalm 88. When these drugs are carefully administered to relieve pain they serve a necessary purpose. Most of us have personally experienced the positive

benefit of pain medications. It is when these drugs are over prescribed and abused that they end up doing more harm than good. Although hydrocodone and oxycodone were not available to the psalmist, the cultivation of the poppy plant goes back as far as six thousand years. Andrew Sullivan reports that Homer called it a “wondrous substance. “ The eighth century B.C. Greek poet marveled that those who consumed opium “did not shed a tear all day long, even if their mother or father had died, even if a brother or beloved son was killed before their own eyes.” “For millennia,” writes Sullivan, opium has “salved pain” and “suspended grief.”<sup>154</sup> The psalmist boldly testifies to his need to pray, especially in the valley of the shadow of death. The dark night of the soul has no purpose other than prayer and any retreat from prayer into drugs or despair rejects the honesty of Psalm 88.

The psalmist’s lament is passionately God-directed even though his extreme pain and grief renders his plea self-centered. He defines himself in four disturbing “I am” statements: “I am overwhelmed with troubles. . . I am on the verge of death. . . I am without strength. . . I am as good as dead” (Ps 88:3-5).<sup>155</sup> But then he takes his lament a step further and credits God for his dire circumstances in four indictment statements: “You have put me in the lowest pit. . . Your wrath lies heavily on me. . . You have overwhelmed me. . . You have taken from me my closest friends” (Ps 88:6-8). The psalmist has no patience for secondary causes. No mention is made of sickness and disease or enemies and foes. Implicit in his lament is his faith in the sovereignty of God and the conviction that nothing happens to him apart from the will of God. He does not waste his energy blaming others or bemoaning his actions. This is all between God and himself. His final “I am” statement brings this section to a close: “I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief” (Ps 88:8-9a).

*Appealing for Deliverance*

*I call to you, Lord, every day;  
I spread out my hands to you.  
Do you show your wonders to the dead?  
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?  
Is your love declared in the grave,  
your faithfulness in Destruction?  
Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,  
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*

Psalm 88:9b-12

For a second time the psalmist makes a passionate plea for deliverance. His body language reflects his intensity. He is probably on his knees or stretched out on the ground with his hands palm’s up beseeching God. Implicit in his appeal is the chief end of man – to glorify and praise

<sup>154</sup> Sullivan, “Andrew Sullivan on the Opioid Epidemic in America.” *New York Magazine*.

<sup>155</sup> Augustine, *Psalms 88*, 424. Augustine insists on a verse-by-verse messianic interpretation of Psalm 88. He hears “the voice of Christ” in every line of prophecy. In some cases it is easy to hear echoes of Psalm 88, for example when Jesus in Gethsemane said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38; Ps 88:3). In other cases it is more difficult. Augustine relates the meaning of Ps 88:5, which he translates, “free among the dead,” to Jesus’ statement, “I have authority to lay it [my life] down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). Calvin, *Psalms*, vol.5, 409. Calvin bluntly refuted Augustine’s “refined interpretation,” saying, “. . . That Christ is here described, and that he is said to be free among the dead, because he obtained victory over death . . . has no connection with the meaning of the passage.”

God. He reasons that if he is dead he can no longer behold the wonders of God. If he dies he cannot return as a “shadow” to praise the Lord. If goes down to the grave he cannot testify to the faithfulness of God. His appeal is God-honoring rather than self-serving and his reasoning reveals a child of the covenant who thinks and acts according to the love and righteousness of God. If God wants the testimony of his faithfulness to continue in the life of the psalmist then he will have to be saved from “this unwarranted and fast-approaching death.”<sup>156</sup>

We can imagine Jesus praying this psalm in the days leading up to the crucifixion. He identified with the psalmist’s sorrow and fear of imminent death, but unlike the psalmist he understood that his death and resurrection were crucial to the revelation of God’s love and faithfulness. He prayed to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Instead of death ending his testimony; death was the necessary fulfillment of his testimony. The author of Hebrews describes Christ appearing “once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). This is why the apostle Paul said, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

#### *Unresolved Lament*

*But I cry to you for help, Lord;  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
Why, Lord, do you reject me  
and hide your face from me?  
From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;  
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.  
Your wrath has swept over me;  
your terrors have destroyed me.  
All day long they surround me like a flood;  
they have completely engulfed me.  
You have taken from me friend and neighbor –  
darkness is my closest friend.*

Psalm 88:13-18

The lament psalms invariably reach resolution in praise, but this psalm is the exception that proves the rule. This last section repeats the difficult themes of the first: rejection, isolation, abandonment, and fear of death. The psalmist adds a depressing note: “From my youth I have suffered and been close to death.” This is what someone who has suffered a lifelong debilitating and deadly illness might say. Not only is his lament intensive but extensive. Perpetual pain has been the story of this person’s life. Psalm 88 gives voice to the many faithful believers who live with intense chronic pain and life-draining weakness. Anderson says the Psalm “creates an impression of unrelieved gloom without a ray of light,” which begs the question why this afflicted person prays at all.<sup>157</sup> The fact that his passionate cry for help is directed to the Lord and punctuates the Psalm three times testifies to his utter dependence on the Lord. The psalmist is

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<sup>156</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 2:811.

<sup>157</sup> Anderson, *Psalms (73-150)*, 623.

like Job who at the point of his greatest bondage and fear proved the depth of his faith precisely because he had no worldly reason to trust in God.

We want resolution for our pain and grief and the degree to which we want it often corresponds to the intensity of our pain. Whether we plead with God three times or a thousand times, we may hear the Lord say, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Earlier I shared how our prayers for my father-in-law were answered. He was physically, mentally and spiritually active right up to his death at the age of 94. This was not the case however, with my mother-in-law Merry. She was diagnosed with multiple myeloma twelve years before she died and she suffered the ravages of both the disease and chemotherapy. The cancer spread throughout her body resulting in extreme pain that never let up. Drugs and radiation of the brain caused a fundamental personality change that hollowed out this beautiful, fun-loving, God-fearing mother and grandmother. My father-in-law could say at the end, “I’m homesick for heaven,” but I remember when Merry, who never swore, woke up one morning and said, “Oh, hell, I’m still here! I dreamed that I had died and gone to heaven.”

Psalms 88 and 89 are extreme prayers. Together they form a provocative sequence to bring Book III to a sober and unsettling end. Psalm 88 is a deeply personal lament on death and dying and Psalm 89 is a passionate public lament on God's covenant love and the future of faithfulness. If Friedrich Nietzsche had considered these psalms he might have thought twice about his charge that believers are naive. The intensity of the psalmist's quest for answers in the face of death and silence echo Job on the ash heap crying out, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). These psalms recall Jacob's all-night wrestling match as he clung to God, saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen 32:26). These two psalms explore the sharp edge between hope and hopelessness with a resilient faith that is not afraid to speak to God boldly. They invoke the memory of Jesus in Gethsemane, praying, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Implicit in the Spirit's inspiration is a messianic yearning for the new life that is beyond death and for the new covenant that lasts forever.

Psalm 89 may be unusually long given the singularity of the tension running through the psalm. Two-thirds of the psalm establishes the great faithfulness of the Lord whose steadfast covenant love establishes creation and the Davidic covenant *forever* (Ps 89:1-37). The final one third laments the undoing of everything promised by the Lord. The people of God and the anointed one are rejected, defiled, plundered, scorned, and ashamed (Ps 89:38-51). The sharp contrast between "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and "Great is Thy Faithlessness" is shocking and inexplicable. The psalm closes with the people of God taunted by all the nations and mocked by their enemies. The psalm is long, but it is impossible to break it up and still deliver its intended message. The tension in the text leads to the passion of the passage. The tension in Psalm 89 between the everlasting promise of the Lord's love and faithfulness and the painful present experience of futility and shame cannot be ignored. If the psalm is divided up into positive and negative sermons the meaning is lost.

#### *Creation and Covenant*

*I will sing of the Lord's great love [hesed] forever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known  
through all generations.  
I will declare that your love [hesed] stands firm forever,  
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to David my servant,  
'I will establish your line forever  
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"  
The heavens praise your wonders, Lord,  
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.  
For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord?  
Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?*

*In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;  
 he is more awesome than all who surround him.  
 Who is like you, Lord God Almighty?  
 You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.  
 You rule over the surging sea;  
 when its waves mount up, you still them.  
 You crushed Rahab like one of the slain;  
 with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.  
 The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth;  
 you founded the world and all that is in it.  
 You created the north and south;  
 Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.  
 Your arm is endowed with power;  
 your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.*

Psalm 89:1-13

There is no hint in the first section that a powerful lament is coming. Ethan the Ezrahite sets the story of the Lord's great love to music.<sup>158</sup> Everything is positive, from the highest heavens to the smallest child. He is eager to sing praise and to declare truth in concert with creation and the heavenly hosts. These opening verses inspired James Fillmore to write the popular twentieth century hymn "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever," but it was Lord's covenant promises to David (2 Samuel 7:5-16) that inspired the psalmist to see God's great faithfulness to creation and the house of David. He stresses the "foreverness" of God's covenant promises to David whose throne is established "firm through all generations" (Ps 89:4). The privilege of relationship ("my chosen one") and the purpose of responsibility ("my servant") are united in a single everlasting calling.

The psalmist focuses on the Lord's "truthfulness" or "faithfulness" (Ps 89:1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 24, 33, 49). Goldingay translates 'ê<sup>m</sup>ûnâ as "truthfulness" whereas the NIV and ESV use "faithfulness."<sup>159</sup> *Hesed* is also repeated seven times and is translated "commitment" or "steadfast love" or "great love," or "faithful love" (Ps 89:1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49). In each of these references it is the Lord's truthfulness, faithfulness, great love, and commitment that is being praised. These powerful attributes cannot be defined any further than the perfection of truth, faithfulness, love, and commitment. This highly relational understanding of the Lord is what the psalmist praises. They are on full display in the heavens above and on the earth below. No one compares to the Lord. God is sovereign over creation and David's throne. The heavens praise the Lord's wonders and "the assembly of the holy ones" praise his faithfulness (see Job 1-2). All of creation, including the hosts of angels, offer reverent and exuberant praise to God.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>158</sup> In 1 Kings 4:31, Solomon is said to be wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman (Ps 88). Both names are referenced in 1 Chronicles 2:6 as sons of Zerah from the tribe of Judah and identified as temple musicians in 1 Chronicles 15:17, 19.

<sup>159</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:668.

<sup>160</sup> The Bible consistently refers to angels, not as flighty cherub-like creatures, but as behind-the-scenes messengers on a mission. They worship God, reveal his will, and do his bidding. The basic assumption that angels play a strategic role in the drama of salvation history is undebatable. Distinguished scientist Edward O. Wilson stretches credulity when he encourages belief in extraterrestrial beings. He writes, "The meaning of human existence is best understood in perspective, by comparing our

Next, the psalmist features the chaos of nature and nations. The “surging sea” is ruled by God and brought under control and enemies like Rahab, a nickname for Egypt (Isaiah 51:9-10), are crushed and scattered. The whole cosmos belongs to the Lord. The heavens are his; the earth is his. He founded the world and created north, south, east and west. “You own the cosmos – you made everything in it, everything from atom to archangel. You positioned the North and South Poles; the mountains Tabor and Hermon sing duets to you” (Ps 89:11-12, The Message). The psalmist’s praise is on the same page as the apostle’s praise, when Paul says, “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 him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17).

### *Righteousness and Justice*

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;  
love [hesed] and faithfulness go before you.  
Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,  
who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.  
They rejoice in your name all day long;  
they celebrate your righteousness.  
For you are their glory and strength,  
and by your favor you exalt our horn.  
Indeed, our shield belongs to the Lord,  
our king to the Holy One of Israel.*

Psalm 89:14-18

This five verse bridge between the celebration of the Lord’s power in creation and the Lord’s covenant faithfulness to his anointed one David is especially significant in the light of Jesus’ teaching. The psalmist revels in the moral character revealed in and through the Lord’s rule: righteousness, justice, love, and faithfulness. These life-giving, life-transforming, divine attributes correspond beautifully to Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus may have had in mind the psalmist’s blessing as he began his sermon with the Beatitudes (Ps 89:15).

“Righteousness” is not a stodgy, stuffy religious word, but a comprehensive, powerful word that embraces justification by faith in Christ, personal holiness, the work of sanctification, and the pursuit of social justice in every sphere of life. “It would be a mistake to suppose,” writes John Stott, “that the biblical word ‘righteousness’ means only a right relationship with God on the one hand and a moral righteousness of character and conduct on the other. For biblical righteousness is more than a private and personal affair; it includes social righteousness as well. And social righteousness, as we learn from the law and the prophets, is concerned with seeking a man’s liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honor in home and family affairs. Thus Christians are

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species with other conceivable life-forms and, by deduction, even those that might exist outside the Solar System.” Wilson believes that God is an “idol of the mind” and faith is a product of “the biological evolution of human instinct,” but he also believes in the plausible existence of aliens. If one of the world’s most distinguished evolutionary biologist can write convincingly about aliens, perhaps Christians should believe confidently in what the Bible says about angels.

committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to God.”<sup>161</sup>

The way of righteousness, justice, love and faithfulness resonates with Jesus’ understanding of heart righteousness. Believers learn to acclaim the Lord, walk in his light, and rejoice in his righteousness. Jesus taught that true righteousness was not an imposed obligation, but a joyful privilege flowing out of a covenant relationship. The joyful description of the believer walking in the light of the Lord’s presence, rejoicing in his name all day long, and celebrating his righteousness, is for God’s great glory and our great good. The psalmist closes out this bridge by referencing the king and the promise of God’s favor. Righteousness exalts the king and strengthens his “horn,” a symbol of power and might. Justice, love, and faithfulness establishes the king as the people’s “shield,” a symbol of sovereignty, and demonstrates tangibly that the king belongs to the Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

### *Faithfulness Forever*

*Once you spoke in a vision,  
to your faithful people you said:  
“I have bestowed strength on a warrior;  
I have raised up a young man among the people.  
I have found David my servant;  
with my sacred oil I have anointed him.  
My hand will sustain him;  
surely my arm will strengthen him.  
The enemy will not get the better of him;  
the wicked will not oppress him  
I will crush his foes before him  
and strike down his adversaries.  
My faithful love [hesed] will be with him,  
and through my name his horn will be exalted.  
I will set his hand over the sea,  
his right hand over the rivers.  
He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father,  
my God, the Rock my Savior.’  
And I will appoint him to be my firstborn,  
the most exalted of the kings of the earth.  
I will maintain my love [hesed] to him forever,  
and my covenant with him will never fail.  
I will establish his line forever,  
his throne as long as the heavens endure.*

*“If his sons forsake my law  
and do not follow my statutes,  
if they violate my decrees*

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<sup>161</sup> Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 45.

*and fail to keep my commands,  
 I will punish their sin with the rod,  
 their iniquity with flogging;  
 but I will not take my love [hesed] from him,  
 nor will I betray my faithfulness.  
 I will not violate my covenant  
 or alter what my lips have uttered.  
 Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness –  
 and I will not lie to David –  
 that this line will continue forever  
 and his throne endure before me like the sun;  
 it will be established forever like the moon,  
 the faithful witness in the sky.”*

Psalm 89:19-37

The question addressed decisively in this section is not what David can do for the Lord, but what the Lord has done and will do for David. Life is not measured by what is achieved for God but by what is received from God. The Lord used some fourteen first person “I” statements in Psalm 89:13-37 to describe his actions on behalf of his anointed one. The same number of “I” statements is used in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 to explain what the Lord will do for his beloved people and for David. The thrust of the message is the same for prophet and psalmist alike, David is not a self-made man. The Lord made David who he is and gave him everything he has. The Lord gave him strength, raised him up, anointed him and crushed his foes. The Lord established David’s reign over the sea and over the rivers and promised that his covenant with David would never fail. Even when David’s sons and future generations are disobedient and faithless, the Lord declares, “I will not take my love from, nor will I betray my faithfulness. . . .I will not lie to David. . . .” (Ps 89:33, 35).

The relationship between the Lord and David is so special that it goes beyond David to the future Son of David of whom David said, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (Ps 110:1). David calls on the Lord, saying, “You are my Father, my God, my Rock, my Savior” and David is designated as the Lord’s “firstborn,” one who is exalted above all the kings of the earth (Ps 89:27; Ps 2:7). For hundreds of years it appeared that these glowing promises of eternal reign to David and his heirs were hyperbole. Israel was an oppressed and beleaguered people who returned from exile to repopulate and rebuild their land under threat from the world’s superpowers. It looked like the line of David had reached its end and these glorious prophecies were only faint hints of past glory. But then something miraculous happened that changed the course of history, “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town of Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.” God picked up the thin thread of salvation history and made good on his promises to the house of David. Gabriel said to Mary, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:26-33).

*How Long?*

*But you have rejected, you have spurned,  
you have been very angry with your anointed one.  
You have renounced the covenant with your servant  
and have defiled his crown in the dust.  
You have broken through all his walls  
and reduced his strongholds to ruins.  
All who pass by have plundered him;  
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.  
You have exalted the right hand of his foes;  
you have made all his enemies rejoice.  
Indeed, you have turned back the edge of his sword  
and have not supported him in battle.  
You have put an end to his splendor  
and cast his throne to the ground.  
You have cut short the days of his youth;  
you have covered him with a mantle of shame.*

*How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?  
How long will your wrath burn like fire?  
Remember how fleeting is my life.  
For what futility you have created humanity!  
Who can live and not set death,  
or who can escape the power of the grave?  
Lord, where is your former great love [hesed],  
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?  
Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked,  
how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,  
the taunts with which your enemies, Lord, have mocked,  
with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.*

Psalm 89:38-51

The lengthy description of God's great faithfulness, his enduring truthfulness and everlasting covenant love, is suddenly and without warning countered in a stark description of utter rejection. Like a bolt of lightning coming out of nowhere, the psalmist paints a picture of total disaster and devastation. Derek Kidner writes, "Either the unclouded praise of verses 1-37 was a miracle of self-discipline, if it was composed in this situation, or else it was drawn from an existing psalm to strike a positive note (by a different exercise of self-discipline) before the unburdening of grief which now ensues."<sup>162</sup> Now we begin to see why Psalm 88, the somber psalm on death, is linked to Psalm 89, the sober psalm of rejection.

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<sup>162</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 324.

The psalmist refused to spend any time on secondary causes. The cause of this devastation is not credited to the apostasy of the northern kingdom nor to the idol worshiping kings of Judah. Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar is not blamed for the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24). To be sure, enemies and foes and the power of the sword are factors in this tragic lament, but the psalmist insists that it is the Lord who bears primary responsibility. "But you," the psalmist cries. "You have rejected . . . You have spurned . . . and you have been very angry with your anointed one." The verbs of judgment and rejection pile up on one another: *You have renounced the covenant / defiled the crown / broken down your anointed one's defenses / reduced the city to ruins / exalted the enemy / made the enemy rejoice / supported the enemy in battle / put an end to your anointed one's splendor / cut short the days of his youth / and covered him with shame.* The celebration of God's great faithfulness becomes an intense, painful lament of God's great faithlessness. But the psalmist does not blame God for his apparent faithlessness and abandonment. He does not judge God's absence nihilistically. He does not give himself over to despair. Implicit in the psalmist's lament is an earnest and lively commitment to the sovereignty of God over all creation, over all history, over the people of God, and over everyone. This lament is not an accusation of despair as much as an expectation of deliverance. There are no grounds for optimism, but every reason to hope.

The psalmist does not ask, "Why?" He does not ask why precisely because of the message of the prophets and conviction of the psalmists. He has a firm grip on Israel's history of apostasy and idolatry. He knows why divine judgment has fallen on the people of God; why the crown has been defiled and why Israel's enemies have had the upper hand. Instead of asking why, he asks, "How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?" It is not a question of whether God will fulfill his covenant but of when. He appeals to the Lord for action because of the brevity and futility of life. Unless the Lord shows his great love and faithfulness there is no reason for hope. As the Lord's anointed one he asks the Lord to remember how fleeting is his life. He pleads with the Lord to be mindful of his persecution. He has been mocked and taunted by his enemies. "They have mocked every step of your anointed one" (Ps 89:51).

The trajectory of salvation history leads downward to the manger. We remember that God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation. Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. The first Exodus was glorious. The Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led through the wilderness by Moses and Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, led us to Kings Saul and David. Here, Israel is at its height. David's son Solomon begins the descent.

We find it more difficult to follow Israel's history when the kingdom is divided between Jeroboam's Israel in the north and Rehoboam's Judah in the south. Against a litany of bad kings, Elijah and Elisha keep Israel's history alive. From there the story-line belongs to the prophets. Their ministry, from Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah tried to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah, but few grasped the promised hope and few honored the faithfulness of God with obedience and devotion. God judges his people and sends

them into exile. The Babylonian captivity runs for 70 years. Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. This is where Nehemiah and Ezra come in as well.

The first Exodus was powerful. God's ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, all add up to a spectacular defining moment. But the second Exodus from Babylon was nothing by comparison. Israel trekked back to their homeland as refugees. We remember the first Exodus, but few of us know much about the second Exodus. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days under Solomon and the first temple, cried, because they were disappointed. Malachi's cry for faithfulness is the last word in this downward trajectory, followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded by the descent of the people of God.

It is not difficult to imagine Jesus, the Son of David, the anointed one, praying these words as he suffered the taunts and mockery of religious and political power-brokers. The people of God were living in the state of rejection described by the psalmist and their only hope was in a deliverer who took up their pain and bore their suffering. "Yet he was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isa 53:3). The power of the psalm to capture the movement of history that led to the cross cannot be credited to authorial intent but it can be credited to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The psalmist did not know how the covenant-keeping Lord of truthfulness and faithfulness would keep his promises to the house of David and to the people of God. He did not know how the rejection and humiliation would be borne by the Son of David. Who ever imagined that the Lord of Glory would become the Crucified God? The anointed one "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:7-8).

*Doxology*

*Praise be to the Lord forever!*

*Amen and Amen.*

Psalm 89:52

Book III of Jesus' Prayer Book ends in doxology (Ps 41:13; 72:19; 106:48; 150:6). If the psalmist praised the Lord for his truthfulness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and commitment, how much more should we? When we sing of the mercies of the Lord we cannot help but think of Jesus Christ and praise the Lord.

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