

Three college friends and I took a two day canoe trip down the Vermillion River in Illinois. None of us had ever been on the river and we were using a Girl Scout guide book to navigate. We thought we had lined up the guide book with where we started on the river. The first day out the book warned of dangerous rapids, but when we came to rapids they were gentle and nothing to worry about. Then the book warned of a waterfall that we might need to portage around, but it too proved uneventful. The guide book indicated that the river was especially dangerous around an old factory, but we passed by what we thought was the old factory without incident. By now we were laughing at the Girl Scouts and their wimpy guide book. We were ridiculing its warnings and mocking its notes of caution. We ended our first day around a campfire thumping our male chests and trashing the Girl Scout guide book.

The next day we came to rapids that were dangerous, followed by a waterfall steep enough to capsized our two canoes, followed by an old factory where the current and the rocks were so treacherous we had to portage. By now it was clear that we had lined up the guide book with the wrong section of the river. The Girl Scouts were right all along. What they said was dangerous was truly dangerous. The guide book was right in every way. Where the river got serious, the guide book got serious. We were getting much better advice than we thought we were. Our failure to line up the guide book with the river was our big mistake. The analogy works for me this way: sooner or later we will find ourselves or someone we love in each and every psalm. But we have to live in the Psalms and make them our home to discern these correlations and to make these connections.

Praying the Psalms in worship is an exercise in solidarity with the people of God through time and throughout the world. Their interpretative and inspirational energy flows from the community to the individual and not the individual to the community. The Psalms work in the bedroom and the study, but first they belong in the sanctuary. They are deeply personal, but they become personal in the context of the people of God. Lining up the Psalms with life requires an unselfish reading. They are *community hymns* of praise and lament, confession and commitment, issuing out of the worshipping congregation. The horizon of each psalm is salvation history.

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them in the light of the global church. We have to get out of suburbia and into salvation history in order to understand them. Our ideas about what is relevant may be too narrow and selfish. The global church gives us the necessary vantage point from which to understand and pray the Psalms. The Psalms fit the mission God has for the church perfectly. Psalm 50 begins: "The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages." We cannot pray this psalm boldly and then live quiet lives of desperation. We cannot worship this way and then bemoan our boredom.

The temptation to reduce life to petty preoccupations and escapist obsessions will shrink if we pray the Psalms. Our capacity for faithfulness and resilience will increase as we learn to pray

Psalm 67: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all the nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you” (Ps 67:1-5).

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them on behalf of the household of faith. Left to ourselves and our own interests our world shrinks. But learning to pray the Psalms for the body of believers deepens our empathy for those in pain and expands our capacity for praise. The Psalms put an end to our superficial god-talk and invite our participation in a struggle that is much bigger than ourselves.

On any given Sunday we are with people going through their deepest, darkest valley. The range of afflictions is great: abuse, adultery, anorexia, alcoholism, bereavement, bankruptcy, divorce, delinquency, malignancies, mental illnesses, and moral failures of all kinds. Evil is the enemy prayed against in the Psalms and there is plenty of enemy talk in the Psalms. We pray out our hate, leaving vengeance to God. The thin veneer of our suburban niceness is exposed. By naming the enemy, the Psalms lay bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. The Psalms are an antidote to our perfunctory prayers. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone, but we are not alone and we are under orders.

On any given Sunday we are also with people experiencing their greatest joy. The range of blessings is great: health, holiness, happiness, love, integrity, social justice, friendship, forgiveness, reconciliation, marriage, meaningful work, table grace, adventure, and blessings of all kinds. Salvation is all encompassing. We direct our prayers of adoration and thanksgiving to the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our gratitude has the worthiest object of worship. Psalm 100 pulsates with praise:

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them in the light of Christ. Before the Psalms were the Church’s prayer book, they were prayed by Jesus. We use the same tools Jesus used to pray to the Father. He grew up on these prayers. They shaped his messianic self-understanding, even as they came to shape the Church’s understanding of Jesus.

Finally, lining up the Psalms with life is deeply personal. The full range of the Psalms corresponds with the fullness of our life experiences. The highs and lows, the good times and bad, the mundane and the momentous, the ordinary and the extraordinary, are all to be found in the depth and breadth of the Psalms. We have malignancy psalms, birth psalms, wedding psalms,

singleness psalms, graduation psalms, bereavement psalms, victory psalms, and many more. These psalms are different for different people, but there is a psalm for every life situation and for every experience. When my mother prayed the Psalms on behalf of others she often put their name and the date in the margins next to a particular psalm. Both naming and dating were important because the psalm was for that particular person and time. The Psalms put life in perspective. Psalm 34 was my father's psalm when at the age of forty-eight he was dying from cancer: "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps 34:17-18).

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

Psalm 107 begins Book V and concludes a trilogy, Psalms 105-107. These three psalms celebrate Yahweh's faithfulness to save (Ps 105) in spite of faithlessness (Ps 106) and concludes with his power to redeem (Ps 107). Psalm 107 describes four desperate situations: wanderers in a desert wasteland (Ps 107:4-9), prisoners chained in a dungeon (Ps 107:10-16), fools wasting away because of their rebellious ways (Ps 107:17-22), and sea-faring merchants caught in a storm (Ps 107:23-32). The Lord leads wanderers home, releases prisoners from dungeons, heals wayward fools, and rescues seafarers from the storm. These four scenarios represent the fallen human condition. We are lost, locked up, sick, and desperate. These archetypal descriptions of human need that everyone can identify with. Psalm 107 corresponds to Jesus' earthly ministry, which he began proclaiming "good news to the poor," "freedom for prisoners," "recovery of sight for the blind," and setting "the oppressed free" (Luke 4:16-21; Isaiah 61:1-2).

The In-Gathering

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story –
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
those he gathered from the lands,
from the east and west, from north and south [the sea].*

Psalm 107:1-3

Psalm 106 concludes, "Save us, Lord our God, and gather us from the nations" (Ps 106:47) and Psalm 107 identifies those who are "gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south" (Ps 107:3). The returning exiles from Babylon are a picture of the saving grace of God. God gathers the lost, imprisoned, ill, and distressed from the four corners of the earth. The picture corresponds to the apostle John's vision of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). Psalm 107 reminds us that everyone has a story but only one story redeems our story – the story of the Lamb that was slain before the creation of the world (Rev 13:8).

Wilderness Wanderers Delivered

*Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,*

*for he satisfies the thirsty
and fulfills the hungry with good things.
Psalm 107:4-9*

The wilderness wanderers include nomadic Abraham, exodus Israelites, exiles from Babylon, and the Samaritan woman at the well. In this four-fold sequence of dire straits we read four times, “Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble” (Ps 107:6, 13, 19, 28). The turning point came with a desperate cry to the Lord. Augustine wrote, “Everywhere, without exception, let not our merits, not our strength, not our wisdom, ‘confess unto the Lord,’ but, ‘His mercies.’ Let Him be loved in every deliverance of ours, who has been invoked in every distress.”¹ Four times over, in response to the Lord’s deliverance, the psalmist exhorts, “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind” (Ps 107:8, 15, 21, 31). The pattern of “calamity – cry – salvation – thanksgiving” covers Psalm 107:1-32,² followed by the sovereign Lord’s great restoration of his people (Ps 107:33-43).

Incarcerated Prisoners Released

*Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
because they rebelled against God’s commands
and despised the plans of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness,
and broke away their chains.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
for he breaks down gates of bronze
and cuts through bars of iron.
Psalm 107:10-16*

The psalmist captures the horror of prison’s isolation, bitter labor, and hopelessness. He sets up a contrast between the vast open spaces of a trackless wilderness with the claustrophobic confines of a tiny prison cell to show the extremes of distress. Prisoners and sickly fools suffer from their self-inflicted iniquities and rebellious ways. But in the case of the wanderers and sea-faring merchants their suffering results from living in a fallen world. The message that comes through is that we are all in need of deliverance. Whether we are like the promiscuous woman at the well or the religiously scrupulous Nicodemus we are in need of deliverance. We cannot save ourselves, only God in his mercy can redeem the lost. The difference between people in prison and people outside of prison are the iron bars between them. We all stand in the need of God’s gracious deliverance. Charles Wesley’s hymn captures it well: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay / Fast

¹ Augustine, *Psalms*, 534.

² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 386.

bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee."³

Addicts Healed

*Some became fools through their rebellious ways
and suffered afflictions because of their iniquities.
They loathed all food
and drew near the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He sent out his word and healed them;
he rescued them from the grave.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.
Let them sacrifice thank offerings
and tell of his works with songs of joy.*

Psalm 107:17-22

The psalmist does not specify a particular disease or illness, but the description fits a person who is addicted to drugs, or who has contracted a sexually transmitted disease, or whose diet puts them at high risk for diabetes and heart disease. The psalmist is aware of the physical side of spirituality. Decisions about what we put into our bodies has an impact on our health and our relationship to God. The psalmist emphasizes that rebellious fools are redeemable. Healing begins with crying out to the Lord in their trouble. The Lord's response is to send out his word and heal them. Ross relates this "word of the Lord" to the living Word of God (Isa 55:11; John 1:1).⁴ Jesus spoke and people were healed. "But just say the word," said the Roman centurion, "and my servant will be healed" (Luke 7:7). All that is needed for salvation and healing is the word of God. The psalmist ends this section by calling for a sacrificial thank offering. He exhorts those who have been "saved from their distress" to tell of the Lord's works with songs of joy. The link between our physical selves and our spiritual need for salvation corresponds to the apostle Paul's conviction: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" He went on to say, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Travelers Rescued

*Some went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the Lord,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up the tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths,*

³ Wesley, "And Can It Be?" 347. .

⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:306.

*in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;
they were at their wits' end.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders.*

Psalm 107:23-32

The fourth worst-case scenario places us in a flimsy wooden ship made of acacia planks bolted together with wooden dowels and caulked with pitch crossing the Mediterranean Sea in a fierce storm. The mode of transportation, whether by ship, plane, or car makes little difference to the meaning. What matters is our vulnerability to the dangers of nature and travel whether by sea, air, or on land. The Lord's sovereignty over all of life is affirmed by the fact that the tempest arises by his spoken word and is quelled by his whisper, but the real issue is our vulnerability and our constant need for rescue. "The hurricane shakes us into seeing that in a world of gigantic forces we live by permission, not by good management."⁵ We are not saved by our wits or our seamanship or any particular skill set, but by the mercy of God.

When Jesus and the disciples were caught in a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee. I doubt if the panicked disciples remembered Psalm 107. They awoke a sleeping Jesus, saying, "Lord, save us! We are going to drown!" And Jesus replied, "'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm" (Matthew 8:23-27). Yet, when Paul was a prisoner bound for Rome and facing imminent shipwreck, I imagine him praying Psalm 107 in the midst of hurricane force winds and a raging sea. His words to the crew reflect his spirituality and his seamanship. He co-mingled his knowledge of the sea with the Lord's assurance that no one will perish (Acts 27:13-25).

The psalmist paints a vivid picture of fear: "In their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end" (Ps 107:26-27). For the fourth time the psalmist repeats the line, "Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble," and for the fourth time he says that the Lord "brought them out of their distress." The Lord's deliverance met the challenge of the danger every time. "They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven" (Ps 107:30). And for the fourth time he encourages the rescued to "give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love." He finishes with an added exhortation that applies to all four desperate situations: "Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of elders" (Ps 107:32).

⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 386.

The Great Reversal

*He turned rivers into a desert,
flowing springs into thirsty ground,
and fruitful land into a salt waste,
because of the wickedness of those who lived there.
He turned the desert into pools of water
and parched ground into flowing springs;
there he brought the hungry to live,
and they founded a city where they could settle.
They sowed fields and planted vineyards
that yielded a fruitful harvest;
he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased,
and he did not let their herds diminish.
Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled
by oppression, calamity and sorrow;
he who pours contempt on nobles
made them wander in a trackless waste.
But he lifted the needy out of their affliction
and increased their families like flocks.
The upright see and rejoice,
but all the wicked shut their mouths.
Let the one who is wise heed these things
and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.*

Psalm 107:33-43

Wisdom reiterates the message of the four scenarios with a fresh description of the Lord's sovereign power to bring down the wicked and to lift up the humble. The Lord can take paradise and turn it into a wasteland and he can take a desert and turn it into a thriving city, a fertile farmland, a fruitful vineyard, and a hospitable place to raise a family. The psalmist uses social, economic and relational metaphors to create a picture of the abundant life (John 10:10). All the while acknowledging that "success" can be dangerous, because no sooner do we experience his blessings, but we turn away from him and take pride in "our accomplishments."

Mary's Magnificat begins the New Testament by celebrating the Mighty One's great reversal. "His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation." He lifts up the humble and scatters the proud. The Lord is faithful, he remembers "to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Luke 1:54-55). Augustine concludes his sermon on Psalm 107 by asking, "Who is wise? Who will consider these things; and will understand the mercies of the Lord?" He reminds the people of God that their confidence does not lie in their own merit or strength or power, but in the mercies of the Lord. Whoever is wise, Augustine exhorts, will remember that when they were wandering and in need that the Lord led them back home and fed them; when they were struggling against the difficulties of their sins and were bound down with the chains of habit, that the Lord released and freed them; when they hated the Word of God and were dying from a weariness of soul that the Lord restored them by

sending them the medicine of his Word; when they were in danger of being wiped out in the storm, the Lord stilled the storm and led them to port. Augustine closes with a reminder that they belong to the people of God. They are the humble who have received God's grace. They are the fruitful household of faith that is multiplying to the glory of God.⁶

⁶ Augustine, *Psalms*, 535-536.

The trilogy of covenant psalms (Psalms 105-107) puts the content of Psalm 108 in a new light. The psalmist has taken the words of David in Psalms 57 and 60 and edited them in such a way as to form a praise anthem with prophetic impact. What is missing from Psalm 57 and 60 is the description of desperate times. David is neither on the run from ravenous beasts (Ps 57:4) nor reeling from God's anger (Ps 60:1). The psalmist has combined the positive conclusions of two angst filled psalms (Ps 57:7-11; 60:5-12), in order to emphasize the victory of the covenant people of God. The exposition that follows is drawn from the expositions of Psalm 57 and 60.

Awake my Soul!

*My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.*

Psalm 108:1-5

A theology of trust and a psychology of confidence converge here as they did in Psalm 57 to form the resilient saint. In response to three substantial covenant psalms, celebrating the faithfulness of God (Ps 105), acknowledging the faithlessness of the people of God (Ps 106), and celebrating the Lord's saving deliverance for the people of God in dire straights (Ps 107), Psalm 108 brings the sequence to end in an anthem of pure praise and international victory. The psalm reflects the emotional relief of a steadfast heart and a melody of praise.

The expectation and experience of deliverance releases within the soul of the psalmist the spiritual endorphin of praise. David's exuberance can hardly be contained. The psalmist shouts, "Awake, my soul!" Peterson's paraphrase reads, "I'm ready, God, so ready, ready from head to toe, ready to sing, ready to raise a tune: 'Wake up, soul! Wake up, harp! Wake up, lute! Wake up, you sleepyhead sun!'" (Ps 57:8, Message).

The psalmist emphasizes that Yahweh is the Lord of the nations and that all the peoples should be "brought to the knowledge of God."⁷ This corresponds to the apostle Paul's argument in Romans that Christ fulfilled the promises made to the patriarchs when he made it possible for the

⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 366.

Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy. He quotes from the psalms: “Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name” (Rom 15:9; Ps 18:49; 57:9; 108:3). There is a “cosmos-wide reach of God’s commitment and truthfulness” and a “cosmos-wide manifestation of God’s splendor.”⁸ We are encouraged to never lose sight of the universal scope of God’s glory.⁹ Delitzsch writes, “Here we perceive the self-consciousness of a comprehensive mission, which accompanied David from the beginning to the end of his royal career.” And this mission extends not only to the nations but to the universe. “Heaven and earth have a mutually involved history, and the blessed, glorious end of this history is the sunrise of the divine doxa over both, here prayed for.”¹⁰ Jesus echoes the scope of this psalm in his high priestly prayer when he prays, “Father, glorify me in our presence with the glory I had with you before the world began The glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:5, 24).

The Sovereign Savior

*Save us and help us with your right hand,
that those you love may be delivered.
God has spoken from his sanctuary:
“In triumph I will parcel out Shechem
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.
Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet,
Judah is my scepter.
Moab is my washbasin,
on Edom I toss my sandal;
over Philistia I shout in triumph.”*

Psalm 108:6-9

The trilogy of covenant psalms affirms Israel’s dependence upon the right-hand of God. Like David the warrior-king the exiles re-discover under pressure their need of the Savior. Israel’s very existence is impossible apart from God. Only with God can Israel succeed. The realization of God’s faithfulness (Ps 105), our resistance (Ps 106), and the desperation of the human condition (Ps 107), yields to a confident hope. Psalm 108 affirms that our hope is in the Lord and not in ourselves. We take our lead from the Lord Jesus who said, “By myself I can do nothing” (John 5:30). When Jesus disputed the Pharisees, he clarified the source of his power and authority. He said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 8:28). For the Son of David and his followers to pray Psalm 108 is to acknowledge that apart from Christ we can do nothing. We share in the apostle Paul’s conviction, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13 KJV). We see a corresponding link between the psalm and the apostle Paul’s experience when the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:199.

⁹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 112.

¹⁰ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 2:178.

The psalmist gives us the words to pray out our hope. David offers a simple prayer: “Save us and help us with your right hand, that those you love may be delivered” (Ps 108:6). The right hand of God is more than able to deliver. Everything that needs to be prayed is contained in that simple sentence. We are reminded that no matter how complex and chaotic our situation may be it comes down to this simple prayer for help. In spite of how things might seem in the moment there is a kingdom strategy at work. The word of God has spoken and the land belongs to the Lord. Ross writes, “By selecting these representative sections, the psalmist was recalling the ancient allotments of the land by the Lord in order to reiterate the fact that the land belonged to the Lord.”¹¹ David’s prayer for deliverance rests on the revealed promises of God. The land does not belong to various people groups; it belongs to the Lord. “In a few bold strokes the early history and distinctive areas of Israel are called to mind, and the chief agents of defense and rule (helmet and scepter) are named.”¹² Kidner draws special attention to the repeated “mine” and “my” to underscore that everything belongs to the Lord and this emphasis on God’s possessiveness only serves to affirm the lasting inheritance of the land to the people of God.

With the coming of Christ, the Son of David, there is a new inheritance that is described as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:4). This inheritance fulfills and transcends the covenant promises given to Israel. It is no longer tied to the land or political autonomy. “The notion of a holy land is superseded by that of a holy community (1 Peter 2:4-10).¹³ The boundaries of the Promised Land have been effectively shifted to the global reach of the gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The people of God are drawn from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). The messianic community is no longer ethnically and geographically limited to Jews and Israel. There is an open invitation to Jews and Gentiles, religious and secular alike, to come home to Jesus Christ. Our new home is anywhere Jesus is, whether in Ulan Bator, Mongolia or in Butte, Montana.

Led by God

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

Psalm 108:10-13

David’s four-part conclusion reflects the true character of a godly leader. The king asks a critical question, makes a painful observation, issues a desperate plea, and offers a confident hope. The question is asked by David, “Who will bring me to the fortified city?” The rhetorical question highlights the need of the hour and states the obvious – no human leader can accomplish this

¹¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:342.

¹² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 217.

¹³ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 336.

victory. The countries surrounding Israel, Moab, Edom, and Philistia, may wish for Israel's demise, but the Lord will triumph over these countries and they will become Israel's servants. Israel's destiny does not lie in the hands of the army, but in God.

There is no hint of triumphalism in David's question, "Who will lead me to Edom?" When David wrote this he may have been a conquering king fresh from a series of military victories, but he does not presume upon God's mercy. The Edomite threat has humbled David to his core and he wants all to know that he bows low before the sovereign Lord of Israel. David knows that he and his people are completely dependent upon the Lord to lead them. He stands in need of the Lord's rule and reign and he wants all to know that "human help is worthless" (Ps 108:12).

For the Christian, "the fortified city" points forward to "the great city" described in the Book of Revelation. It represents the power of evil arrayed against the people of God. No human leader is sufficient for the challenge; no army can achieve the victory. The question, "Who will bring me to the fortified city?" (Ps 108:10), takes on special significance in the light of the incarnation of God. The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus who "suffered outside the city gate" in order "to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb 13:12). The citizens of the New Jerusalem have been washed in the blood of the Lamb who suffered outside the city gate. God goes outside the city to die on the cross in order to lead us into the City of God. Jesus gained the victory by following a strategy radically different from any worldly king or political ruler. He rejected the Messianic enthusiasm of the crowds that wanted to seize him and make him king (John 6:15) in favor of the rule of God from above. He would neither make himself king nor be made king, by anyone other than his heavenly Father. Jesus, the Son of David, was a very different successor to David and a very different king.¹⁴

The fortified city of Edom continues to symbolize the world's opposition to Christ and his kingdom. Down through the centuries the Edomites opposed the people of God and sought their destruction. The fifth century BC prophet Obadiah prophesied against Edom. In spite of Edom's physical elevation and nearly impenetrable natural fortress, the descendants of Esau were destined for shame and judgment, because she had shown "violence against your brother Jacob" (Obadiah 1:10). Obadiah insisted that Edom was part of a bigger picture. He declared, "The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your head" (Obadiah 1:15). The house of Jacob will possess its inheritance and the house of Joseph will set on fire the house of Esau and it will be consumed (Obadiah 1:17-18). Obadiah prophesied that Edom as Edom would be no more: "There will be no survivors from the house of Esau" (Obadiah 1:18). But this is not the last word on the descendants of Esau. Under the rule of God, Edom has a future. In the future, the mountains of Esau will be populated by the people of God. "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom's will be the Lord's" (Obadiah 1:21). Obadiah envisions the future Kingdom of God embracing the land of the Philistines, Samaritans, Phoenicians, and Edomites.

Mount Zion and the mountains of Esau will be ruled by God's justice. David's strategy of conquest will become the Son of David's strategy of redemption. "The last line of the prophecy

¹⁴ O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations*, 116.

takes a giant step out of the centuries of hate and rivalry and invective. Israel, so often a victim of Edomite aggression through the centuries, is suddenly revealed to be saved from the injustices of the past and taking up a position of rule over their ancient enemies the Edomites. But instead of doing to others what had been done to them and continuing the cycle of violence that they had been caught in, they were presented as taking over the reins of government and administering God's justice justly. They find themselves in a new context—God's kingdom—and realize that they have a new vocation—to represent God's rule."¹⁵

Psalm 108 ends on a powerful note: apart from God we are helpless and lost, but with God “we will gain the victory” and God, not us, “will trample down our enemies” (Ps 108:13). We can be assured that the way Jesus, the Son of David, gains the victory does not follow the strategy of worldly kings and rulers.

¹⁵ Peterson, *The Message*, 494.

Psalm 109 teaches us what to do with our anger. The psalm's fierce language is not an embarrassment but a blessing, because without it we suppress our feelings instead of venting our hate in prayer.¹⁶ Psalm 109 leads the people of God emotionally as well as ethically. In a fallen and broken world believers will always find it difficult to stand at the right hand of the needy and seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. The psalmist is under attack for doing good and for obeying the Father's will and prayer pushes him past fear and hate. Psalm 109 shocks us out of our spiritual lethargy and moral complacency and brings into the real world of good and evil.

The apostle Peter used the psalms to process Judas Iscariot's replacement. Peter argued that "the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus." Peter quoted from Psalm 69:25 LXX, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it," followed by Psalm 109:8 LXX, "May another take his place of leadership" (Acts 1:16, 20). Often when the apostles quote a verse from the psalms they have in the mind the whole context, which is true in this case. Judas fits the description of the evil perpetrator in Psalm 109. It is also reasonable to conclude that Psalm 109 in its entirety helped Peter deal with his emotional reaction not only to Judas's betrayal, but to the crowds that shouted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Christians can hardly pray Psalm 109 without seeing in the innocent person's suffering "a mirror of Christ's sufferings."¹⁷

If we put ourselves in the psalmist's place Psalm 109 triggers our adrenal and makes our mind race. The psalmist reacts to vindictive people in his social sphere who do everything they can to attack him (Ps 109:1-5). This ignites the psalmist's rage, which is directed at the ringleader of the group (Ps 109:6-20).¹⁸ Instead of picturing a group of antagonists, the psalmist vents his anger against a singular individual who is responsible for all these hateful actions. In the final section (Ps 109:21-31), the psalmist expresses his weakness and cries out to God for help. His only hope is found in the Lord's steadfast love.

Under Attack

*My God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,
for people who are wicked and deceitful
have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
With words of hatred they surround me;*

¹⁶ Other imprecatory include Pss 7, 35, 58, 69.

¹⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 78.

¹⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 389. Kidner writes, "The sudden change from plural to singular, until the plural returns in verse 20, has prompted several interpretations. The simplest is that the 'him' and 'he' are a way of saying 'each one of them'; a not uncommon Hebrew idiom which verse 20 seems to support if it is summarizing the passage." Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:279-280. Goldingay sees Ps 109:6-19 as the accuser's maledictions. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 76-77. Allen, likewise, sees the accused quoting the accuser's trumped up charges and imprecations against his family. But as Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 159, we have to reckon with the fact that "the apostolic church understood this second section (Ps 109:16-20), like the first (Ps 109:1-5), to be spoken by the righteous against the wicked."

*they attack me without cause.
In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship.
Psalm 109:1-5*

David begins and ends with praise, “My God, whom I praise . . . With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him” (Ps 109:1, 30). The psalmist’s praise is set in sharp contrast to the deceit, lies, and hate speech of the wicked. The only voice missing is the Lord’s speech; everything else is a cacophony of hate and accusation. David pleads, “Do not remain silent!” We can empathize with the psalmist. Amidst all the false accusations, deceitfulness, and deception, we too may feel the silence of God. We may even wonder why the Lord gives the wicked such a long leash to spread their propaganda and falsehoods far and wide.

These are not foreign foes but people the psalmist knows well. They ought to be his good friends and fellow worshipers, but instead they are his enemies. They mount a verbal campaign against him. Their menacing tactics include deception, gossip, slander, and ridicule. David feels attacked and hated without cause. His friendship is rebuffed and his good works are despised. His only defense is prayer. And with all the evil attacking him, and with all the dark passion inside of him, prayer is the only release that brings him, sinner that he is, into the presence of God. Prayer is the defense that brings the worshiper’s just cause into the presence of the most honorable Judge, who alone has the right to judge. “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom 12:19; Deut 32:35).

We live in an equivocating age that confuses the meaning of good and evil and switches up right and wrong, truth and falsehood. There will be those who question the psalmist’s allegedly “self-righteous” take on the situation. The premise of Psalm 109 is that good is good and evil is evil. The prophet Isaiah said, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). The psalmist has no patience with those who debate his definition of hate speech or legitimize falsehood as free speech.

The Ringleader

*Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy:
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.*

*May a creditor seize all he has;
 may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
 May no one extend kindness [hesed] to him
 or take pity on his fatherless children.
 May his descendants be cut off,
 their names blotted out from the next generation.
 May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord;
 may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
 May their sins always remain before the Lord,
 that he may blot out their name from the earth.
 For he never thought of doing a kindness [hesed],
 but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted.
 He loved to pronounce a curse –
 may it come back on him.
 He found no pleasure in blessing –
 may it come back on him.
 He wore cursing as his garment;
 it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil.
 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
 like a belt tied forever around him,
 May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers,
 to those who speak evil against me.*

Psalm 109:6-20

Evil wears a human face. The lead accuser has responsibilities, achievements, parents, and children, and every opportunity to show kindness, aid the poor, help the needy, and heal the brokenhearted. But instead the persecutor embodied hate. There was no way the psalmist could take what was coming at him, but *personally*. Make no mistake evil is always personally. The psalmist identifies with God's curse against evil.

This is a passionate psalm, but David is not nearly as passionate as God is against evil and injustice. Like Job and Jeremiah, the psalmist shares God's passion against evil and enters into the divine case for righteousness. Psalm 109 recalls Job's deliberate response when he got up, tore his robe, shaved his head, and cursed the day of his birth. His curse is a reminder that God defines the good. Likewise, the psalmist refuses to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the false accusations and injustices perpetrated by his accuser. God's curse in the Garden says "No" to evil. God puts his foot down and shouts across the creation, across the cosmos, across all time. Sin is sin. Evil is evil. God's curse defines and separates out the good from the evil, life from death. Of the 127 uses of *hesed* in the Psalms there are only three instances where the word is used to refer to relations between human beings (Psalms 109:12, 16; 141:5).¹⁹ The psalmist contrasts the accuser's (*śāṭān*) evil aggression, not with human kindness and human justice, but with God's undeserved loving kindness and grace. Instead of reflecting the covenant love of God, the accuser "pursues the oppressed, the needy, and the grieved of heart in order to kill them (Ps

¹⁹ McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption*, 1025.

109:16).²⁰

The psalmist knows the difference between righteous indignation and mean-spirited vengeance. He expresses this in three ways. First, the psalmist looks to the Lord to judge his enemies. He concludes, “May this be the Lord’s payment to my accusers” (Ps 109:20). Secondly, the psalmist gives the person up to his own evil devises and strategies. This is a common theme throughout the psalms. The punishment for evil is contained within evil itself. Evil has a boomerang effect. What goes around comes around. The psalmist asks the Lord to give him a taste of his own medicine. “Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy, let an accuser stand at his right hand” (Ps 109:6). “He loved to pronounce a curse – may it come back on him” (Ps 109:17). The psalmist is not asking for anything bad to happen to his enemy that his enemy has not wilfully given himself to. As the apostle said, “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. . . .God gave them over to shameful lusts. . . . God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Thirdly, the psalmist reflects the social impact and public consequences of evil. The judgments requested by the psalmist sound harsh, but they reflect the future final judgment. “During the several minutes that it takes to pray through this psalm,” writes Patrick Reardon, “we are brought face to face with the real possibility of eternal loss and reminded that ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb 10:31).”²¹

The Cry of the Persecuted

*But you, Sovereign Lord,
help me for your name’s sake;
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.
For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is wounded within me.
I fade away like an evening shadow;
I am shaken off like a locust.
My knees give way from fasting;
my body is thin and gaunt.
I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.
Help me, Lord my God;
save me according to your unfailing love.
Let them know that it is your hand,
that you, Lord, have done it.
While they curse, may you bless;
may those who attack me be put to shame.
but may your servant rejoice.
May my accusers be clothed with disgrace
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.
With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;*

²⁰ deClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 831.

²¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 216.

*in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save their lives from those who would condemn them.*

Psalm 109:21-31

“But you,” signals a redemptive pivot in this Good Friday prayer (Ps 22:3, 19, 19).²² We do not hear the voice of Jesus in the David’s imprecatory petitions (Ps 109:16-20), but in David’s graphic description of innocent suffering we sense “its loudest echo in the experience of Jesus.”²³ The psalmist turns to the Sovereign Lord for deliverance. He prayed his fierce imprecations against his accuser in heart-broken weakness, acute physical trauma, social shame, and intense spiritual distress. This is not an excuse, but it accounts for his righteous state and his refusal to fight evil with evil. The psalmist is as insignificant as a bug on the sleeve only to be quickly brushed aside. His emaciated body invokes pity and shame from indifferent spectators who offer no help and shake their heads in disgust.

The psalmist appeals to the Lord’s unfailing love. He prays for a great reversal (Ps 107:33-38) to prove to the world the Lord’s goodness and righteousness (John 13:35; 17:22-23). Only the Lord’s blessing can overturn the accuser’s curse and lift up the poor and needy. The psalmist closes with a picture of the Lord standing at the right hand of the needy “to save their lives from those who would condemn them” (Ps 109:31). Spurgeon wrote, “Nothing can more sweetly sustain the heart of a slandered believer than the firm conviction that God is near to all who are wronged, and is sure to work out their salvation.”²⁴ This image of salvation contrasts with the earlier picture of an adversary (śāṭān) standing at the right hand of the accuser (Ps 109:6). The image invokes the gospel (John 3:17-19).

²² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 110.

²³ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 78.

²⁴ Spurgeon, “Psalm 109,” *Treasury of David*.

Psalm 110 is Yahweh's response to the plea of Psalm 109, "My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent" (Ps 109:1). The Lord's silence is broken with the words: "Yahweh says to David's Lord" (Ps 110:1). Psalm 109 ends with a picture of the Lord standing "at the right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them" (Ps 109:31). And Psalm 110 opens with the Lord sitting at the right hand of Yahweh awaiting the consummation of a deliverance that is already underway.

The implicit references to the Messiah leading up Psalm 110, prepare the worshiper for the extraordinary Messianic prophecy of one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament.

Psalm 107 previews Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus is the one who proclaims "good news to the poor," "freedom for prisoners," "recovery of sight for the blind," and "sets the oppressed free" (Luke 4:16-21; Isa 61:1).

Believers today pray Psalm 108 with Jesus in mind as the Lord of the nations and the hope of the world. He alone secures the covenant victory and will "trample down our enemies" (Ps 108:13).

Psalm 109 is a powerful Good Friday psalm because it causes the Church to reflect on the suffering of Christ. This is the psalm the apostles turned to in order to bring closure to the pain of Judas' betrayal. The implicit Messianic significance of these psalms leads to the explicit Messianic climax of Psalm 110. Like a symphony orchestra building to a climax, the Psalter moves to this magnificent proclamation. The exaltation and triumph of the Messiah celebrated in Psalm 110 is best seen in the light of Jesus' experience of the cross.

Jesus and the apostles interpreted Psalm 110 without debating its origin and setting. Scholars may debate the historical occasion for the typological link to the one greater than David, but the apostles boldly grasped Psalm 110 as Messianic prophecy. Bruce Waltke explained, "David probably composed his royal prophecy to be sung by cultic functionaries [worship leaders] at the coronation ceremony of his heirs, hoping that in the end of salvation history a final successor of his would fulfill and consummate his prophecy."²⁵

Commenting on 2 Samuel 23:1-7 Delitzsch describes David on his death bed acutely aware of the distance between himself and the promised Anointed of God. David "seizes the pillars of the divine promise, he lets go the ground of his own present, and looks as a prophet into the future of his seed." After quoting from 2 Samuel 23:3-4 Delitzsch concludes, "The idea of the future which passes before his soul is none other than the picture of the Messiah detached from its subjectivity. And if so there, why may it not also have been so even in Psalm 110?"²⁶

In seven verses, the psalm comprehends the eschatological consummation of salvation history. The psalmist includes the Ascension ("Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool

²⁵ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 518.

²⁶ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 3:186.

at your feet”), the militancy of Jesus Christ (“The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion”), the Church age (“Your troops will be willing on your day of battle”), the sacerdotal royal priesthood (“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek”), the final judgment (“He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth”), and the Incarnation (“He will drink from the brook along the way, and so he will lift his head high”). The sweeping impact of the shared work of the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit is deftly sketched in bold strokes on the canvas of our praying imagination. Spirit-inspired finite words reveal infinite truth. Luther wrote: “This beautiful psalm is the very core and quintessence of the whole Scripture. No other psalm prophesies as abundantly and completely about Christ. It portrays the Lord and his entire Kingdom, and is full of comfort for Christians.”²⁷

The apostles learned from Jesus how the Old Testament works. He was the first to draw their attention to a radical new interpretation of Psalm 110. Toward the end of his public ministry Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1 in the temple courts (Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). Jesus asked the Pharisees, “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They replied, “The son of David.” Jesus responded, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? Jesus quoted the psalm, “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’” Jesus leveraged this break with tradition (the father being superior to the son) and asked a question, “If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” Matthew reports, “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions” (Matthew 22:41-46).

Jesus implied that someone was destined to come after King David who was greater than David. Moreover, Jesus left the distinct impression that he was that someone. This exchange came back into focus when Jesus was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked him pointedly, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus replied, “You have said so. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 27:63-64; Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13).

By making the earlier implicit claim explicit Jesus’s confession led to his condemnation. The high priest tore his robe and charged Jesus with blasphemy. The high priest could not comprehend that the Yahweh’s covenant promise was being fulfilled, that the one greater than David had come. Psalm 110 became critical in shaping the apostolic understanding of Jesus. They quoted Psalm 110 twenty-four times to testify that the Son, “who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,” was by the Holy Spirit “appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3-4).

*David’s Son and David’s Lord*²⁸

The Lord [Yahweh] says to my Lord [Adnoni]:

“Sit at my right hand until I make a footstool for your feet.”

²⁷ Quoted in Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 492.

²⁸ Augustine, *Psalms*, 542. To paraphrase Augustine: Christ took upon himself flesh, died in that flesh, he arose in that flesh and he ascended in that flesh, and he sits on the right hand of his Father “in this same flesh so honored, so brightened, so changed into a heavenly garb, he is both David’s Son, and David’s Lord.”

*The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
“Rule in the midst of your enemies!”
Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning’s womb.
Psalm 110:1-3*

The dynamic purpose of the Psalms as a whole and Psalm 110 in particular is “to inspire and to promote the faith of Christians that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”²⁹ The majestic tone of David’s Spirit inspired prophecy draws the believer into a future that is now present and into a reality that is still unfolding. The ascended Lord Jesus sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father. The metaphoric language describes the indescribable majesty and power of the triune God (Rev 4:1-11). The ascension of Christ is preceded by his atoning sacrifice: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3).

Psalm 110 was Peter’s text when he preached at Pentecost, saying, “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, [But Jesus did!] . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:32-36). Peter referred to Psalm 110:1 when he defended the gospel of Jesus Christ before the same Sanhedrin that weeks before had accused Jesus of blasphemy for making a similar reference (Matthew 26:64). Peter declared, “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins” (Acts 5:31; see 1 Pet 3:22).

The author of Hebrews brings his sevenfold sequence of Old Testament messianic prophecies to a climax with Psalm 110:1 (Heb 1:5-13). The author chooses angels, the highest created beings, to contrast the utterly incomparable relationship between the Father and the Son. Each of his carefully selected Old Testament references bears up under closer scrutiny as an inspired testimony to the supremacy of the Son. In the pastor’s chain of quotations each line is linked to form “a direct verbal prophecy concerning the perpetual nature of the Son’s reign, having been explicitly fulfilled . . . in the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God.”³⁰

The apostle Paul drew on Psalm 110:1 when he spoke of the crucified and risen Christ Jesus seated at the right hand of God interceding for us (Rom 8:34); and when he encouraged believers to set their hearts on things above, “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1); and when he spoke of “the incomparable greatness of God’s power” because it was the same power that God exerted “when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in

²⁹ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 488.

³⁰ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 939.

the heavenly realms” (Eph 1:20).

Two images follow in the first half of this tightly crafted psalm.³¹ The psalmist pictures Yahweh extending the mighty rule of his king from Zion (see Ps 2:6), followed by a sweeping panorama of his army prepared for battle. Looking out over this vast army “arrayed in holy splendor,” David likens the refreshed and ready troops to the dew glistening in the early morning light. The militant imagery of Psalm 110 is not meant to convey a worldly struggle of armed conquest. The imagery is rooted in the era of Israel’s conquest of Canaan, but the prophetic trajectory of these images is transposed by the apostles to describe the Church militant. Yahweh’s command, “Rule in the midst of your enemies!” describes the Church age from the Ascension of Christ to his second coming. This is the era of gospel witness when God’s merciful and missional millennium means Satan is bound and unable to deceive the nations for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-6). One thousand symbolizes the perfection of God’s mercy and the completeness of the Church from Pentecost to the second coming of Christ. John describes martyred and witnessing saints in heaven and on earth continuing to seek first Christ’s kingdom. These are the troops “arrayed in holy splendor” glistening like dew in the morning sun.

The messianic army of the conquering Messiah fights with the strategic initiatives and tactical shrewdness of the sacrificial Lamb of God. As Paul said, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4). Make no mistake the fight is on and there is plenty of evil to contend with. Augustine said that we do not understand the meaning of “Rule in the midst of your enemies” if we do not realize that this war is on-going.³² “Jesus is not only our Friend, but our Commanding Officer. . . We disciples are not only his family; we are his troops.”³³ Christ’s followers are meant to “put on the full armor of God, so that [they] can take [their] stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:11). The right kind of militancy is essential if we are going to be useful in the Lamb’s army. When the militancy of the world is substituted for the militancy of the Lamb, Christians end up being driven more by fear than the gospel. The militancy of the believer is different from anything the world has ever seen. “All the armor language is a way to talk about identification with God and his purposes.”³⁴ To recognize “the devil’s schemes” is to see the world from God’s perspective. There is a demonic source and energy behind atrocities and catastrophes, but the fight is not for victory but from victory. The triumph of Christ and his Church is certain. The psalmist’s picture of a refreshed and renewed army, that is constantly replenished like the dew every morning, is a beautiful picture of the vital, ever-growing global Church under the rule of Christ.

Eternal Priest-King

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind:

³¹ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 501. Waltke writes, “The two parts consist of seven verses: 3 + 4, the number of perfection. Moreover there are ten lines of poetry, 5+5 (see translation), the number of fullness. Both numbers figure prominently in the Davidic covenant, which this oracle supplements. D. N. Freedman (Psalms III:101-105, *The Anchor Bible*; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970, 113) strikingly observed that each stanza contains seventy-four syllables. In sum thematically and structurally the psalm has two parts.”

³² Augustine, *Psalms* 110, 542.

³³ Bruner, *John*, 891.

³⁴ Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 339.

*“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”
The Lord is at your right hand,
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.
He will drink from a brook along the way,
and so he will lift his head high.
Psalm 110:4-7*

Three images focus our attention on Christ in the second half of Psalm 110: his sacerdotal priesthood based on Melchizedek, an historical precedent (type) of Christ; his victorious actions as Judge “on the day of his wrath” against the kings of the earth in final judgment; and a very human Messiah, “thirsty in his humanness and kneeling at the brook,”³⁷ along the way, and then resuming his royal mission.

By Yahweh’s appointment the Lord who sits enthroned in Zion is ordained as “a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek is an obscure and mysterious person whose brief story is cited in Genesis 14:14-27. He lived in the time of Abraham and is presented in Psalm 110 and in the Book of Hebrews as an ancient precedent for a perfect, permanent priesthood. He foreshadowed Jesus’ high priestly ministry. Aaron’s Levitical priesthood followed Melchizedek by several hundred years and was based on the Mosaic law and ancestry. The Aaronic priesthood was eventually judged to be “weak and useless” and was “set aside” because Jesus became “the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb 7:18, 22).

Melchizedek symbolizes a flesh and blood *type* for the Incarnate One. His name meant the “king of righteousness” and he was the King of Salem, which means the “king of peace.” He was a priest of God Most High, described in four poetic lines: “Without father, without mother, without genealogy / having neither beginning of days nor end of life / made like the Son of God / he remains a priest forever.”³⁸ Melchizedek was an historical person who played a cameo role in salvation history. He offered Abraham bread and wine and blessed Abraham, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen 14:18-20). Abraham honored Melchizedek and acknowledged his priestly role with a special tithe. This is what we know of Melchizedek. We know nothing about Melchizedek’s parents, his birth, his ancestry, and his death, but David is led by the Spirit to give messianic significance to Melchizedek.

The author of Hebrews gives this typology a strategic interpretative twist. Instead of Jesus resembling Melchizedek, it is Melchizedek who resembles the Son of God (Heb 7:3). What we don’t know about Melchizedek is used figuratively to illustrate the new and better priesthood of Jesus Christ. F. F. Bruce explains, “It is not the type which determines the antitype, but the antitype which determines the type: Jesus is not portrayed after the pattern of Melchizedek, but

³⁷ Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 46.

³⁸ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 298,

Melchizedek is ‘made conformable to the Son of God.’”³⁹ Melchizedek foreshadows Jesus Christ, the King of righteousness and the King of peace and our great high priest, “who has been made perfect forever” (Heb 7:28). The author of Hebrews makes sure believers grasp his big idea: “Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (Heb 8:1-2).

If the reference to the priestly order of Melchizedek takes us back to Genesis, then the cryptic description of the final judgment leads us forward to the Book of Revelation. The power of God, symbolized by the Lord’s right hand, judges the nations and crushes kings. 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. Even so, this does not mean that believers refuse to be Christ’s salt and light in a dark and decaying world. To sit idly by and watch the world go to hell is to ignore and reject Yahweh’s command, “Rule in the midst of your enemies!” (Ps 110:2). The one who is powerful to save, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9) is also powerful to judge (Ps 2:9).

The third and final image of the eternal Priest-King pictures him drinking from a brook along the way. This simple act of quenching his thirst underscores the humanity of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He rules over a host arrayed in holy splendor. He has the power to save for eternity through his atoning sacrifice and he brings down judgment on the nations once and for all. But this closing picture of an individual stooping down to take a drink of water triggers our praying imagination to behold the Incarnate One. We see Jesus traveling through Samaria “tired as he was from the journey” sitting by Jacob’s well, having a conversation with a woman at high noon over thirst. “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,” Jesus says to her. “But whoever drinks the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:1-26). We see Jesus again, but this time he is on a Roman cross, a victim of Roman and Jewish law. And before he says, “It is finished,” he cries out, “I am thirsty” – giving final exclamation to the truth of the incarnation. The psalmist prophetically points forward to the one who left his throne to identify fully with our fallen human condition. Augustine closes his sermon on Psalm 110 by quoting the last line of the psalm, “and so he will lift his head high.” Augustine continued, that is to say, that “because He was humble, and ‘became obedient to death—even death on a cross:’ therefore God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a Name which is above every name; that at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”” (Phil 2:8-11).⁴⁰

³⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 160.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Psalms*, 544.

The timing of Psalm 111 is special. The editors place it right after Psalm 110's eschatological consummation of salvation history. Worshipers need to catch their breath and step back for a moment. Psalm 110's sweeping vision of the eternal Priest-King calls for a praise hymn that celebrates God's great works. Psalm 111 recalls the redemptive works of God, the exodus deliverance, the manna provision, and the conquest of the promised land in order to praise the Lord. This acrostic psalm has ten verses and twenty-two lines (excluding the first line that stands outside the acrostic arrangement), one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This tightly crafted praise hymn invites the people of God to follow the lead of the psalmist.

The psalmist understood the vast array of idolatrous perversions of God and his ways, but wholesale elimination of God and his works was beyond imaging. There was no secular state of mind when he penned Psalm 111. Only a fool would say, "There is no God," and then he would only have the nerve to say it in his heart! (Ps 14:1). But in the secular age it is easier not to believe in God than to believe in God. We have gone from everyone believing in God to "the courage to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, and without supernatural significance."⁴¹ The perversity of the wisdom of the age has its own demonic brand of futility and darkness (Rom 1:21).

The call to sing a praise hymn to Yahweh in celebration of his great works may have always been counter-cultural, but now more than ever the people of God must worship with their whole heart and mind. They cannot afford to be practical atheists on the job and then come to church and mouth their hymns and praise songs. There is no room here for nostalgic nominalism or sentimental piety. Worshipers today really have to believe that God is sovereign over the most real world, that there is such a thing as capital "T" Truth! The psalmist is calling for flat-out praise and adoration. The scientist ought to be wearing his white lab coat when he sings the doxology and the soldier in his uniform when he sings "Stayed upon Jehovah." There should be no confusion of loyalties or split epistemologies. The people of God do not live in two worlds. The presiding judge dons her black robe as if it were a choir robe and lifts her voice in praise.

The Works of the Lord

*Praise the Lord.
I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
Great are the works of the Lord;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.
He provides food for those who fear him;*

⁴¹ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 77.

*he remembers his covenant forever.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.
He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever –
holy and awesome is his name.*

Psalm 111:1-9

The first line, “Praise the Lord” (Hallelujah) is a likely liturgical addition that sets Psalms 111, 112, and 113 apart as a praise set. We would like to know more about how the Psalter was arranged and how the psalms were actually used in worship. Perhaps all three psalms were used as a liturgical unit at the yearly Passover in response to Psalm 110. Taken together the psalms celebrate God’s redemptive acts (Ps 111), God’s righteous people (Ps 112) and God’s gracious redemption of the poor and lowly (Ps 113). This three psalm unit is part of a larger sequence known as the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 111-118).⁴²

The psalmist leads by example. His worship is deeply personal, honest from the inside-out, and boldly public. There is not a hint of religious showmanship behind his passionate first person declaration, “I will extol with all my heart.” His worship context is the shared company of faithful believers in the assembly. The physical facility for worship is not mentioned. Only the relational solidarity of authentic worship is emphasized. He is among the people of God who worship willingly and enthusiastically with their whole heart.

The exemplary character of worship inspires our responsibility to lead others to worship the Lord. Worship pastors and musicians are obvious examples, but parents and friends have an important role to play in encouraging and exemplifying worship as well. The psalmist takes the initiative, “I will extol the Lord,” and so should we. There is no indication in the psalm of putting on an affected or animated performance so as to impress people. We worship not to be seen or copied by others. We worship in the company of the committed to glorify God with sincerity and integrity. The psalmist’s appeal is echoed by the author of Hebrews (Heb 10:22-25).

The main section of the psalm (Ps 111:2-9) is focused on the works, deeds, and wonders of the Lord. These works are described as “great,” “glorious,” “majestic,” “faithful,” and “just.” The psalmist begins with an all encompassing statement of praise that includes creation and redemption. It is easy to see how this verse inspires the scientist to ponder the macro and micro cosmos and delight in every aspect of God’s work in creation. The descriptive adjectives such as great and glorious are only so much flattery if the objects of God’s work are not taken seriously. The scientist analyzes, specifies, quantifies, and images God’s creation, giving new meaning to our descriptive terms “majestic,” “awesome,” “wonderful.” The call to ponder the great works of

⁴² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 401.

the Lord in creation is the scientist's holy calling, a calling that only serves to deepen our worship and enrich our delight.

James Clerk Maxwell, the famous nineteenth century mathematical physicist who formulated the classical theory of electromagnetic radiation, suggested in 1874 that Psalm 111:2 be engraved in Latin and hung over the main entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England. When the lab moved to new facilities in 1973, Andrew Briggs, a PhD student at the time, suggested that Psalm 111:2 be inscribed in English and once again posted at the entrance, bearing witness to the greatness of the Lord's work.⁴³ The Lord's enduring righteousness integrates the work of creation and the work of redemption. The psalmist's approach encourages scientists to be theologians and theologians to be scientists. His unified field theory of knowledge encourages a free exchange between natural and special revelation. All truth is God's truth, whether found through scientific research or biblical interpretation. The providence of God is displayed in creation and in history. The same one who created the starry host saved the people of God with an everlasting salvation (Isa 45:12,17).

To pray Psalm 111 at the Passover festival inspires worshipers to remember the Exodus and the Lord's deliverance of his people out of bondage. To say that the Lord is compassionate and gracious draws the Israelite back to Exodus 34:6: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." To remember the daily supply of manna, recalls the Lord's gracious provision and his everlasting covenant. To remember the conquest of Canaan and the giving of the Law testifies to the Lord's faithfulness and justice. The psalmist praises the Lord's glorious and wondrous works, but these works only go to prove that the Lord is righteous, gracious, compassionate, faithful, upright, holy, and awesome. The value of these works lie in the Lord's everlasting covenant and in the redemption of his people. The psalmist establishes the everlasting continuity between the word and covenant of God and our salvation. Our faith in Christ is built on this Mount Sinai word and this Exodus covenant. You might say we are saved because of them and they are saved because of us.

To pray Psalm 111 at the Lord's Table inspires believers to remember that their deliverance from the bondage of sin and death comes from the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The epicenter of redemption has shifted from the Exodus to the cross. Psalm 111 causes the believer to remember the Lord's great work of redemption, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the "one new humanity" in Christ (Eph 2:15) and the worldwide body of Christ. The author of Hebrews takes the praise recital of Psalm 111 and sees all of these redemptive works fulfilled in Christ in whom we have a "better hope" (Heb 7:19), a "better covenant" (7:22), "better promises" (8:6), a "better sacrifice" (9:23), "better possessions" (10:34), a "better country" (11:16), and a "better resurrection" (11:35). "In God's gracious purpose the perfection of the Old Testament faithful was only possible together with us. . . . They died without having received the ultimate promise until the advent of Christ, his sacrificial death, and the enacting of the new

⁴³Veinott, "Sermon on Psalm 111," delivered August 20, 2013.
http://cantonnewlife.org/sermons/psalm/psalm_111_2/psalm_111_2.html

covenant.”⁴⁴

The Fear of the Lord

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.*

Psalm 111:10

No one arrives at this “beginning” without being moved by the Lord’s great works. There is an intuitive grasp and experiential awareness of the grace of God preparing us for the Lord’s faithfulness and justice. Nature-alone materialism is not the way to maturity and exclusive humanism offers no escape from despair. Knowledge limited to sensory experience, to the empirical world of the five senses, is not the most important form of knowledge. This is why we are told over and over again that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Divine revelation is foundational to both relational and scientific knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to see the world and ourselves from God’s perspective and to obey his precepts. This is what it means to have “good understanding.”

The psalmist’s admonition to fear the Lord underscores the personal nature of wisdom. All knowledge is ultimately relational and reverential. This bound phrase, the fear-of-the-Lord involves a way of life “appropriate to our creation and salvation and blessing by God.”⁴⁵ Our fear of the Lord is not mixed with dread or terror, but with gratitude, trust, and delight (Ps 111: 2, 4, 9, 5).⁴⁶ This is the wisdom that leads to extolling the Lord with all our heart.

⁴⁴ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 447.

⁴⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places*, 43.

⁴⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 398.

Psalm 112 celebrates all who fear the Lord by offering a beautiful portrait of true human flourishing. The last verse of Psalm 111 sets the agenda for Psalm 112. Like the description of wisdom in Proverbs 31, the psalmist sketches a personal profile rich in legacy, industry, justice, resilience, compassion, generosity, and perseverance. Psalm 112 is a direct counter-part to Psalm 111, matching not only its acrostic style, but reflecting its themes in the life of the person of God. Those who fear the Lord reflect the Lord's great works, his righteous deeds, his compassionate ways, and his faithfulness and justice. Side by side the two psalms praise the glory of God and the dignity of man.

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord.

I will extol the Lord with all my heart
 in the council of the upright and in the assembly
Great are the works of the Lord;
 they are pondered by all who *delight* in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
 and *his righteousness endures forever*.
 He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
 the Lord is *gracious and compassionate*.
 He provides food for those who fear him;
 he *remembers* his covenant forever.
 He has shown his people the power of his works,
 giving them the lands of other nations.
 The works of his hands are faithful and just;
 all his precepts are *trustworthy*.
 They are *established* for ever and ever,
 enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.
 He provided redemption for his people;
 he ordained his covenant *forever* –
 holy and awesome is his name.
 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
 all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
 To him belongs eternal praise.

Psalm 112

Praise the Lord.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord,
 who find *great delight* in his commands.
 Their children will be *mighty* in the land;
 the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
 and *their righteousness endures forever*.
 Even in the darkness light dawns for the upright, for
 those who are *gracious and compassionate and righteous*.
 Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely
 who conduct their affairs with justice.
 Surely the righteous will never be shaken;
 they will be *remembered* forever.
 They will have no fear of bad news;
 their hearts are steadfast, *trusting* in the Lord.
 Their hearts are *secure*, they will have no fear;
 in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
 They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor,
 their righteousness endures *forever*;
 their horn will be lifted high in honor.
 The wicked will see and be vexed,
 they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
 the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.

A comparison of the two psalms line for line reveals the correspondence between the Lord's character and the character of the person who fears the Lord. Looking up to extol the Lord corresponds to looking around at those who delight in his commands. The Lord's great works in creation correspond to the blessing of a great legacy found in faithful children and an upright generation. God's enduring righteousness parallels man's enduring righteousness. God's works are remembered because he is gracious and righteous. Human flourishing survives the darkness because man takes after his gracious, compassionate and righteous Lord. The Lord provides food, a metaphor for all of God's gracious provision, and his counterpart, the person who fears the

Lord, gives generously, lends freely, and acts justly. The gift of the promised land corresponds to the resilience of those who persevere in righteousness. Since the Lord is completely trustworthy those who fear the Lord trust in him. Their hearts are steadfast even when bad news comes. God's word is altogether faithful and upright and those who obey him will find their hearts secure and their victory sure. The promise of God's eternal covenant and everlasting life gives the people of God the freedom to give to the poor generously and the dignity to live confidently. The antithesis of the person who fears of the Lord is found in the description of the vexed and despairing wicked.

Human Flourishing

Praise the Lord.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord,

who find great delight in his commands.

Their children will be mighty in the land;

the generation of the upright will be blessed.

Wealth and riches are in their houses,

and their righteousness endures forever.

Even in the darkness light dawns for the upright,

for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.

Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely

who conduct their affairs with justice.

Surely the righteous will never be shaken;

they will be remembered forever.

They will have no fear of bad news;

their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord.

Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear;

in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor,

their righteousness endures forever;

their horn will be lifted high in honor.

Psalm 112:1-9

The link between the two psalms demonstrates the synergy between a robust theology of creation and redemption (Ps 111) and a theology of the person. Human flourishing is grounded in Psalm 111 and reflected in Psalm 112. Each successive generation raised in a materialistic, naturalistic world-view tends to be more self-indulgent and self-centered. The we-expect-more-of-everything outlook imposes a litany of expectations in the search for self-fulfillment. These intangibles include, "creativity, leisure, autonomy, pleasure, participation, community, adventure, vitality, stimulation, and tender loving care."⁴⁷ Social analyst Daniel Yankelovich writes, "Instead of a concern with moral obligations to others pursued at the cost of a personal desire, we have the concept of duty to self pursued at the cost of moral obligations to others. Personal desire achieves the status of an ethical norm."⁴⁸ Yankelovich observes, "By concentrating day and night on your

⁴⁷ Yankelovich, *New Rules*, 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

feelings, potentials, needs, wants and desires, and by learning to assert them more freely, you do not become a freer, more spontaneous, more creative self; you become a narrower, more self-centered, more isolated one. You do not grow you shrink.”⁴⁹

If the secular age has “lowered the bar” on the requirements of a life well lived, the psalmist has not.⁵⁰ His description of the good life begins with a key word, “blessed,” which means more than happiness. To be “blessed” is to experience the inner joy of a person who is right with God (Ps 1:1).⁵¹ The Hebrew word for “blessed” is “ashr” which means “to find the right path” (Prov 3:13, 17). Jesus’ theory of real happiness can be summed up in the Beattitudes as eight fundamental emotional attitudes, eight convictions of the soul, eight character qualities of the inner person (Matthew 5:3-12). Jesus paints a portrait of the person who fears the Lord from the inside out, just as the psalmist did. And like the psalmist, Jesus emphasized that such a person finds “great delight” in the commands of God. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law, and he promised that “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

This legacy of faithful obedience is passed on to successive generations who fear the Lord and delight in his commands. Their faithful presence is reflected in their integrity and in their commitment to hard work. The psalmist’s reference to the blessing of “wealth” and “riches,” should not be confused with a “prosperity gospel” or a worldly success ethic. Ross suggests that these two words can be translated as “honor” and “sufficiency” which is to say that God’s blessings are material as well as physical, emotional, and spiritual.⁵² The blessing of physical provision is coupled with the believer’s enduring righteousness and tempered with the reminder that we live in a fallen and broken world that is dark with sin and suffering. But the psalmist insists that “even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous” (Ps 112:4). The psalmist affirms the physical side of spirituality and the spiritual side of physicality. Devotion and work, family life and doctor’s appointments, educating the young and caring for the old, all form an integrated whole with the fear of the Lord centering every ambition, desire, commitment, action, and effort.

The psalmist’s description of the good life is not a formula for the selfish accumulation of possessions and experiences. On the contrary, the blessings of God increase our responsibility to meet the needs of others with graciousness, generosity, and compassion. The emphasis on justice and giving freely pervades the psalm. The psalmist pictures those who fear the Lord giving to their children (Ps 112:2), righteously compensating their employees (Ps 112:3,5), being generous with others, lending freely (Ps 112:5), and gifting the poor (Ps 112:9). This spiritual direction corresponds well with James’ admonition: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). The apostle Paul quoted verse nine when he encouraged the believers at Corinth to be generous: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever” (2 Cor 9:9).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁰ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 31.

⁵¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:377.

⁵² Ibid., 378.

The person who fears the Lord is not only generous and just, but resilient. The psalmist draws out this truth in three ways. “Even in darkness” the upright expect the light to dawn. Sickness, betrayal, opposition, disaster, and death itself are not the final word. There is a hint here of the statement in the Gospel prologue, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Even when “bad news” comes – a distraught phone call from a loved one, or an unsettling medical diagnosis, or a termination notice from an employer, there remains a sense of peace (Phil 4:7) and resolve. “Their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord” (Ps 112:7). Even when it looks like the enemy is winning and justice is losing, the righteous are not shaken and their hearts are secure. There is a “no fear” response by those who fear the Lord.

Human Grief

*The wicked will see and be vexed,
they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.*

Psalm 112:10

The alternative to “fear-of-the-Lord” human flourishing is the grief-ending way of the wicked. Psalm 1 develops the contrast between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, likening the wicked to chaff that the wind blows away. Here, the psalmist describes the inevitable reaction of the wicked to those blessed by the Lord. They will see and be vexed, not only on the day of judgment, but even now. They may have happiness but not joy; success but no peace. They may be everyone’s envy, but no one’s friend. Their desires and ambitions, their longings and dreams, will come to nothing. Their covetousness leads them astray and they know it in their hearts. Jesus picked up on the language of Psalm 112 when he warned of the final judgment, “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13:28).

Tradition designated Psalms 113-118, the Hallel (Hymns of Praise) as the psalms to be sung at the Passover in celebration of the Lord's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.⁵³ Psalm 113 and 114 were sung before the meal and Psalms 115-118 after. We may assume that Jesus sang Psalm 113 with the disciples before he celebrated his last Passover when he instituted the Lord's Supper. To pray Psalm 113 before reading John 13 puts Jesus' foot-washing in perspective. Psalm 113 is a call for the people of God to praise Yahweh because of his incomprehensible greatness and his unfathomable grace. Psalm 113 celebrates the Lord whose glory is above the heavens, but who humbly stoops down to raise the poor from the dust, lift the needy from the dump, and make the barren woman "a happy mother of children." The Lord transcends his transcendence. In humility he rescues the poor and redeems the lost.

Jesus became the embodiment of Psalm 113 when he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist and began washing the disciples feet. By deliberately dressing down, he dramatically portrayed his descent into humble service and sacrifice. The "One who sits enthroned on high" stooped down and on bended knee humbly illustrated "the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). The God who kneels is an apt description of God's saving grace. There is a far greater danger of reading too little into this picture than reading too much. Missionary Leslie Newbigin writes, "The foot-washing is a sign of that ultimate subversion of all human power and authority which took place when Jesus was crucified by the decision of the 'powers' that rule this present age."⁵⁴ The association of Psalm 113 with John 13 puts both biblical texts in perspective.

Praise the Name

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord, you his servants;

praise the name of the Lord.

Let the name of the Lord be praised,

both now and forevermore.

From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,

the name of the Lord is to be praised.

Psalm 113:1-3

The call to praise is repeated in five quick bursts. The invitation is compelling and comprehensive. The Name stands for the totality of the Lord's character and actions. "You his servants" is inclusive of all God's people, even those "other sheep" who will hear the Lord's voice (for "there shall be one flock and one shepherd" - John 10:16). The title "servant" gives special status to every single believer. It stands for the privilege and responsibility of "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession," for the purpose of declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pet 2:9). "Both now

⁵³ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:386. Okorochoa, "Psalms," 717.

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *The Light has Come*, 168.

and forevermore,” means today, tomorrow, and always. Or, as the apostle Paul said, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18). “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,” means “from east to west, from dawn to dusk, keep lifting all your praises to God” (Ps 113:3, Message). This continual praise and worship of the Lord as Creator and Redeemer is the leading edge of everything the Church does throughout the world from evangelism to ministries of compassion and justice.

The imperative of praise is as contagious as it is compelling. Believers cannot be hounded or browbeaten into “enthusiastic and spontaneous praise.”⁵⁵ No one can “make” someone praise the Lord, but we can lead others by our conviction and our practice. Those who “rejoice in the Lord always” and who deal with their worries and anxiety “by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,” will encourage others to enter into worship. The evidence of the “peace of God” – the peace that transcends all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus – is the greatest invitation to others to enter into continuous praise (Phil 4:4-7).⁵⁶ Augustine saw in this invitation to praise a call to humility and wisdom – the humility of the trusting child and the wisdom of the mature believer: “Let your old age be childlike, and your childhood like old age; that is, that neither may your wisdom be with pride, nor your humility without wisdom, that you may ‘praise the Lord from this for evermore.’”⁵⁷

Glory and Grace

*The Lord is exalted over all the nations,
his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God,
the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of the people.
He settles the childless woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 113:4-9

The stanza begins with the Lord of glory exalted above the nations and ends with a once barren woman who is now a happy mother of children. The fact that these two images merge in a single

⁵⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:390.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, 331. Somewhat characteristically Calvin takes the psalmist’s call to praise as an occasion to rebuke human apathy. “And if we consider how cold and callous men are in this religious exercise, we will not deem the repetition of the call to praise God superfluous. We all acknowledge that we are created to praise God’s name, while, at the same time, his glory is disregarded by us. Such criminal apathy is justly condemned by the prophet [psalmist], with the view of stirring up to unwearied zeal in praising God.” Calvin is right in his assessment of the human condition, but the psalmist does not condemn “criminal apathy” or say anything negative in his invitation to continuous praise.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Psalms*, 548.

picture of reality is the reason why everyone, everywhere, everyday should praise the Lord. Those who pray the Psalms are familiar with the description of transcendence. The Lord is over the nations, above the heavens, beyond comparison, and sits enthroned on high as King of kings and Lord of lords. But the greatness and glory of the Lord is matched by the Lord's humility and grace. The Majestic One "stoops down to look on the heavens and earth." Literally, he makes himself low. He comes down to see. He condescends to care. He transcends his transcendence. "He is anything but aloof" and his actions "anticipate the great downward and upward sweep of the gospel."⁵⁸ No one is like the Lord.

Psalm 113 celebrates the essence of salvation history. We are never far from an example of the Lord stooping down to rescue the poor, the needy, and the barren, whether it be Joseph or Job or the whole people of Israel (Deut 7:7) or Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. The psalm looks back to Hannah's song and quotes from it directly, "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor" (1 Sam 2:8). Psalm 113 is the DNA of the gospel. Patrick Reardon reads the psalm as a "prayerful compendium" of the Gospel of Luke, with Mary's Magnificat capturing the polarity of "high and low" reflected in the psalm and the motif that runs through the Gospel.⁵⁹

How can we but praise the Lord when his stooping down means raising us up? Are we not the poor, the needy, and the barren? Martin Luther emphasized that the Lord only lifts up those who know they are "pressed down." He does not lift up those who are self-centered and self-sufficient. "But although we are in truth all cast down and depressed, yet He does not lift and raise up all, but only those who acknowledge themselves to be downcast and depressed."⁶⁰ Grace leads us to confess that we are downcast sinners in need of salvation. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Grace awakens our need for God and with Paul we acknowledge that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29).

Envisioned in the psalmist's examples of grace is the descent of the Incarnate One, full of grace and truth (John 1:14), who "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:7). "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," writes Paul, "that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). In the upper room, John tells us that "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:3-5). We have in this scene a vivid picture of Psalm 113, of the Lord of glory stooping down to raise us up.

⁵⁸ Kidner, *Psalms*, vol. 3:402.

⁵⁹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 223.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Psalms*, LW, vol. 11:392.

Psalm 114 is an Hallel hymn of praise that was traditionally sung along with Psalm 113 before the celebration of the Passover. The range of salvation history encompassed in this short, enigmatic psalm covers the exodus, Mount Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, and finally the conquest of the promised land. It is a spiraling burst of praise, a theologically loaded exclamation mark, that poetically compares the new creation of God's redemption to his power to part the Red Sea, throw the Jordan River in reverse, and bring forth a spring of water out of rock. What is also impressive, is that as the gospel of Jesus Christ spread the disciples were accused of turning the world upside down and causing trouble all over the world (Acts 17:6).

Psalm 114 is synonymous Hebrew parallelism in its most cryptic and perfect form. The eight verses are composed of fourteen paired relationships which are the same yet different: Israel/Jacob, Egypt/a people of a foreign tongue, Judah/Israel, sanctuary/dominion, sea [Red Sea]/Jordan River, mountains/hills, rams/lambs, sea/Jordan, fled/turned back, mountains/hills, rams/lambs, the presence of the Lord/the presence of the God of Jacob, rock/hard rock, pool/springs of water. The purpose of this literary composition, according to Patrick Reardon, is to slow us down and make us go over everything twice. "Such poetry is deeply meditative, and the reader who resists its impulse will find himself with acid indigestion of the mind, serious 'heartburn' in a most radical and theological sense."⁶¹ The psalm's "ultimate aim" is to get the people of God "to take the God of the exodus seriously."⁶² The psalmist reframes the Exodus in a startling new way. Kidner writes, "Here is the Exodus not as a familiar item in Israel's creed but as an astounding event: as startling as a clap of thunder, as shattering as an earthquake."⁶³

Cataclysmic events are described in clipped phrases. The staccato style invokes energy and action. I picture African believers pounding out the beat on drums while the congregation dances to the rhythm. Nothing mellow and placid is able to capture the great escape and nature's commotion. Psalm 114 rocks. The people of God are coming out, the sea is fleeing, the mountains are leaping, the earth is trembling, and it is all because of the presence of the Lord, who turns "the hard rock into springs of water." Creation is upended; redemption flows.

Exodus

*When Israel came out of Egypt,
Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.*

Psalm 114:1-2

The usual call to praise the Lord is skipped in the psalmist's rush to describe the epicenter of Israel's redemption, the exodus from Egyptian slavery. The delay in mentioning the Lord by

⁶¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 225.

⁶² Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:321.

⁶³ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 403.

name “builds anticipation.”⁶⁴ The exodus is a type, an historical event in the past that represents God’s future redemptive work. Believers today rejoice that the future has become the present. The prophetic trajectory of the exodus, the Passover, the law, and the conquest of the promised land has all been realized in the cross of Christ. “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

The one distinguishing mark of the oppressor’s culture highlighted by the psalmist is language (Psalm 114:1). This is not a passing reference to the language barrier and the difficulty of communicating in a foreign language. The psalmist sees language as a key to understanding culture. Linguistics is the medium of a way of thinking and living that violated the will of God. It symbolized a barbaric worldview. The oppressive Egyptians were idolatrous pagans, jabbering on about sexual encounters with goddesses and romantic relationships between brothers and sisters.⁶⁵ On subjects such as architecture and philosophy their Egyptian masters sounded sophisticated, but they worshiped the sun and the moon. Their pantheon was filled with “a chattering menagerie” of animal gods. Sex worship was pervasive and they offered their most beautiful women to mate with bulls and goats.⁶⁶ The Israelites were shocked and appalled.

The reference to Israel and Judah may be two ways of representing all the people. Israel stands for the people as a nation and Judah stands for all twelve tribes that make up the nation. Likewise, the reference to “sanctuary” and “dominion” represents two sides of the same reality. Israel was a both a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6). The spiritual and political realities merge under one Lord, who is both Priest and King. Ross writes, “. . . The Israelites entered a special relationship with the Lord and became a new order of creation. Their new status would mean that they would be the sanctuary and the dominion of God almighty.”⁶⁷ The New Testament resonates with this typological language. “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Believers constitute a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9) and the new reality of Church and Kingdom are intimately related.

Creation’s Response

*The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back;
the mountains leaped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?
Why, mountains did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?*

Psalm 114:3-6

The tumult in nature signals supernatural events on the ground. In a few poetic lines, the psalmist

⁶⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:401.

⁶⁵ Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, 177.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁶⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:402.

covers the Red Sea parting and the Jordan River crossing and Mount Sinai erupting. Three major defining moments in the wilderness epic testify to the Lord's power over nature (Exod 14:13-31; 19:16-18; Josh 3:15-16; 4:21-24). The nature gods of Egypt and Canaan are vanquished by the Lord of creation. They are not gods at all, but servants of the Lord most high. Nature is questioned, but she need not respond because the answer is obvious. The description of the sea fleeing, the river backing up, and the mountains skipping like lambs, suggests that nature itself is in a flutter when God shows up. Kidner puts it well: "With a superb flourish it shows us the scurrying and excitement set up by the Creator's arrival with His earthly court: sea and river falling over themselves, so to speak, to make way for Him; mountains and hills no longer aloof and majestic but all animated and agog."⁶⁸

Nature miracles abound at strategic points in salvation history. The Gospels pick up this aspect of the story with Elizabeth's conception of John and Mary's conception of Jesus. The new creation is ushered in by Jesus who demonstrates the power of God to feed multitudes, calm the sea, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Nature will also play a big role in the final judgment and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth.

The Presence of the Lord

*Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool,
the hard rock into springs of water.*

Psalm 114:7-8

The climax of the psalm comes when the God of the exodus is named. He is the Lord, the God of Jacob. His presence shakes the earth and causes the sea to flee. Creation trembles before God and the people of God fear the Lord. Nature is neither deified nor demonized, but it reflects its Creator and submits to its Master. The presence of God at the Exodus was marked by unmistakable power miracles, but the psalm closes with two redemptive miracles.

At Rephidim there was no water for the people to drink and they quarreled against the Lord and against Moses. Moses rebuked the people for putting the Lord to the test. But the Lord told Moses to strike the rock with the same staff that he used to part the Red Sea and water would come forth (Exod 17:1-7). A similar incident took place at Kadesh, only this time, the Lord said, "Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink" (Num 20:8). These two miracles of bringing water out of rock testify to "God's absolute creative power" and they bear witness to God's redemptive grace that chose to make of an oppressed people his chosen people, "his sanctuary and dominion."⁶⁹

To pray Psalm 114 today is to be aware of the presence of Jesus. It is to see him, the God of Jacob incarnate, sitting by Jacob's well engaging in conversation with a Samaritan woman. It is

⁶⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 403.

⁶⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:406.

to hear him say, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that ask you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” It is to hear Jesus offer her living water “welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10,14).

The collection of praise hymns known as the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113-118) are framed by three acrostic psalms (Ps 111, 112, 119). The Hallel psalms were sung during the celebration of the Jewish festivals, especially the Passover. Traditionally, Psalms 113 and 114 were used before the Passover and Ps 115-118 after.⁷⁰ We may picture Jesus and the disciples singing these psalms as they worshiped together for the last time before Christ's Passion (Mark 14:26). On Good Friday and Easter Sunday salvation history reached its defining moment and the psalms gave the disciples insight and perspective, even as they do to believers today. The Passover liturgy has become a Eucharist liturgy, giving believers understanding and confidence as they face new challenges and idolatries. "Psalm 115 is a stirring lesson to the people of God in every age concerning survival in an alien, hostile environment. It teaches the necessity of rising above life's questions and paradoxes on God-given wings of prayer and faith."⁷¹

The psalmist builds a case for continuous praise by exalting the divine testimony over our frail egos (Ps 115:1), by exposing the emptiness of a pagan idolatrous culture (Ps 115:2-8), by exhorting believers to trust in the Lord and receive his blessings (Ps 115:9-13), and finally by expressing the Lord's benediction, followed by our commitment to extol the Lord "both now and forevermore" (Ps 115:14-18). The psalmist balances a significant cultural critique of pagan idolatry with a strategic call for humility, trust, and praise. His spiritual direction frames the problem of cultural alienation with a call to self-denial, resilient trust, and meaningful praise.

It's Not About Us

*Not to us, Lord, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.*

Psalm 115:1

The unusually cryptic statement at the beginning suggests that the psalmist wants to get one thing clear right away. The psalmist will go on to emphasize that the Lord is our all-sufficient help and shield. He is our blessing, the source of our flourishing, and the reason we praise him. But first, he kicks our egos to the curb. The critique of idolatry that follows is not intended to give us a sense of cultural superiority or a martyr complex. Believers are directed to subvert their own egos and to resist confusing the glory of God with their own self-serving purposes. A classic case of an ego directed, self-serving defense of God's glory, was when Moses, struck the rock even though he had been ordered by the Lord to speak to the rock. His response to the people was filled with anger, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (Num 20:10). This illustrates how easy it is for us to merge God's glory and our ego into a mass of toxic hate for the very people we have been called to love.

The poetic brevity of the psalmist's epithet is disproportionate to the extent of the problem. We

⁷⁰ Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 168.

⁷¹ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 111.

have made the clash with culture about us and we have taken the world's opposition personally. We make it about ourselves when we feel threatened and fearful of the pagan culture that surrounds us; when we feel it is our right, even our duty, to vent our anger and express our hate against those who violate the will of God. The self-absorbed wilful ways of the disciples before Pentecost are very different from the self-sacrificing boldness of the disciples after Pentecost.

The apostle Peter took the “not-for-our-sake” principle to heart when he wrote his letter to believers who were resident aliens in Asia. He counseled these believers who felt like foreigners in their homeland to “live such good lives among pagans that, though they accused you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12). His strategy for cultural engagement stressed submission and sacrifice as a positive and constructive approach. Instead of an embattled and embittered ego there was a resilient saint who sought the glory of God. To borrow the words of Oswald Chambers, the Lord says in effect, “*Identify yourself with My interests in other people,*” not, “*Identify Me with your interests in other people.*”⁷²

There is a striking parallel between Jesus and the disciples praying as they left the upper room, “Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory,” and Jesus praying in Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, takes this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). The same understanding of God and his glory governs both prayers. When we pray for the name of God to be glorified we are submitting our will to God's will – our ways to God's ways. This is an essential first step in a biblical cultural critique.

Secular Idols

*Why do the nations say,
“Where is their God?”
Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.*

Psalm 115:2-8

The psalmist uses the world's question, “Where is their God?” to expose the cynicism and

⁷² Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, 292 (10/18).

skepticism of the world. The psalmist challenges the premise of the question. Evidence for the living God abounds in his glory and in his love and faithfulness. But the nations insist on questioning this most obvious truth. They have no right to play dumb, contends the psalmist, especially when the foolish question is coming from idol makers. They have taken an image, and by human design and skill, crafted a substitute for the living God. Idols can be either metal objects or mental constructs. Images sculpted in exquisite detail are no more or less idolatrous than mental concepts which contend that the earth is a speck of cosmic debris. The psalmist mocks the logic of a people who put their hope in inanimate statutes of wood and gold. But is ancient idolatry any more illogical than modern idolatry's assertion that the potter was made by the pot and the blacksmith was made by the horseshoe?

It is not breaking news to say that we live in the secular age where believing in God does not come easy. Today, belief in God is just one option among many. Exclusive humanism and expressive individualism are the radically new options "in the marketplace of beliefs, a vision for life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed."⁷³ We have gone from everyone believing in God, in at least in some kind of nominal way, to "the courage to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, without supernatural significance." In our late modern culture, materialism equates with maturity, and everyone follows their own spiritual inspiration. There is no determinative perspective outside the self. We have gone from a view of the person as body and soul in community to the isolated, imperial self, who must generate his or her own meaning. We have become a collection of individuals with a low view of human flourishing. As Anthony Bourdain famously said. "Your body is not a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride." We have shifted from the God-created cosmos to a material universe produced by time and chance. This dramatic shift in perspective means that people are no longer even asking the question cynically, "Where is their God?" The nations have become like their idols, senseless. Their idols can't speak, see, hear, smell, touch, and move, and they cannot reason, understand, believe, and worship.

One simple statement of faith refutes the pagan cynicism and spiritual blindness: "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps 115:3). The psalmist begins there and then ends with an observation: "Those who make them [idols] will be like them, and so will all who trust in them." He sets up a contrast between God in heaven and man-made idols. It comes down to "trust." Who are you going to trust? The God of heaven or the idol you made. It's your call? The psalmist warns that we become what we love and trust.

Trust in the Lord

*All you Israelites, trust in the Lord –
he is their help and shield.
House of Aaron, trust in the Lord –
he is their help and shield.
You who fear him, trust in the Lord –
he is their help and shield.
The Lord remembers us and will bless us:*

⁷³ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 22-23.

*He will bless his people Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
he will bless those who fear the Lord –
small and great alike.
May the Lord cause you to flourish,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 115:9-15

The psalmist's strategy for cultural engagement and his method for dealing with idolatry is disarmingly simple: Trust in the Lord. We might expect a more complicated and involved answer given the surrounding culture's skepticism and pervasive idolatry. But the psalmist offers no agenda for changing the world nor a plan for refuting idolatry. Instead, he makes a direct appeal to the people of Israel, to the House of Aaron, and to the person who fears the Lord, to trust in the Lord. Each of his appeals to trust is answered antiphonally by a choir singing, "he is their help and shield." There is no need for strategists or consultants or experts or even theologians. Everything gets worked out in worship. The fundamental need of the hour is to trust in the Lord.

The psalmists and the apostles were surprisingly simple in their call for faithfulness. The apostle John in the Book of Revelation describes at length the messy complexity of evil, but when it comes to giving spiritual direction to those who fear the Lord the challenge is always basic and uncomplicated. No one can claim confusion over the diagnosis and prescription. Five staccato imperatives make up Christ's renewal agenda for the Church of Sardis: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains! Remember! Obey! Repent!" (Rev 3:1-6). The Holy Spirit does not belabor his spiritual direction. If we are trusting in the Lord, we will do what the author of Hebrews exhorted us to do and fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2). The path of discipleship is clear and straightforward and there is not reason to make it difficult. "A mind cluttered by excuses," writes Dallas Willard, "may make a mystery of discipleship, or it may see it as something to be dreaded. But there is no mystery about desiring and intending to be like someone that is a very common thing. And if we intend to be like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves."⁷⁴ The "secret" to trusting in the Lord is simple. "It is the intelligent, informed, unyielding resolve to live as Jesus lived in all aspects of life."⁷⁵

The parallel response to trusting in the Lord is the blessing of the Lord. The Lord is no one's debtor. He meets and exceeds all expectations. The poet makes sure that each expression of trust is matched and exceeded by the blessing of the Lord. There is a dynamic relationship between trusting in the Lord and being blessed by the Lord. Trusting believers place their faith in the Lord. They center their lives around the Lord. Miroslav Volf writes, ". . . Human beings flourish and are truly happy when they center their lives on God, the source of everything that is true, good, and beautiful. As to all created things, they too ought to be loved. But the only way to

⁷⁴ Willard, "Discipleship," 25.

⁷⁵ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 10.

properly love them and fully enjoy them is to love them ‘in God.’”⁷⁶

In the tradition of the Aaronic blessing, the psalmist emphasizes the relational blessings of the Lord (Num 6:23-27). The abundant life (John 10:10) does not primarily consist in the world’s calculation of wealth, but in the richness of social (“small and great alike”) and generational (“both you and your children”) harmony. The psalmist leaves the same impression of God’s great provision as the apostle does when he prays, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph 3:20-21).

Forevermore

*The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to mankind.
It is not the dead who praise the Lord,
those who go down to the place of silence;
it is we who extol the Lord,
both now and forevermore.
Praise the Lord. [Hallelujah]
Psalm 115:16-18*

The psalmist celebrates the transcendent majesty of the Lord and recognizes humanity’s divinely appointed stewardship of the earth. This straightforward truth flies in the face of the secular age with its doctrine of “immanentization” and “mundanization.”⁷⁷ The late modern self contends that life is enclosed in a material, nature-alone world and that a life lived well has nothing to do with “the Maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 115:15). On the contrary, the psalmist’s expansive horizon includes the “highest heavens” and “now and forevermore.” Embedded in his comprehension of transcendence and eternity is the conviction that death does not end all and that silence is not the last word. Those who extol the Lord will go on praising both now and forevermore. The psalmist’s insights on eternity and everlasting life may be vague but they are true and in the course of salvation history the hope of the resurrection will be revealed. “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . .For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality” (1 Cor 15:42-44, 53).

⁷⁶ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 58.

⁷⁷ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 31,48.

Psalm 116 is more than one person's passionate testimony; it is our testimony too. Psalm 116 is an Hallel hymn of praise inspired by the Exodus and sung at the annual Passover feast. The psalmist gives the believer a theology of salvation to navigate life. His cry for mercy, his fear of death, and his plea for help, are true to the human condition. We cannot save ourselves.

This communal psalm is deeply personal.⁷⁸ There is not a neutral line in the whole psalm. Pathos is in every line. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" and we echo, "Lord, save me!" We share his passion for the Lord who is gracious and righteous, full of compassion and worthy of all praise. Like the psalmist, we are bold to say, "I will call" on the Lord (Ps 116:2, 4, 13, 17). The psalmist leads us in gratitude for the Lord's deliverance. The Lord has delivered us from death, from tears, from stumbling, and raised us up to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (Eph 5:1). Spurgeon captured the meaning of the psalm in a sentence: "Personal love fostered by a personal experience of redemption is the theme of this Psalm, and in it we see the redeemed answered when they pray, preserved in time of trouble, resting in their God, walking at large, sensible of their obligations, conscious that they are not their own but bought with a price, and joining with all the ransomed company to sing hallelujahs unto God."⁷⁹ In three stanzas the psalmist covers his cry for deliverance (Ps 116:1-4), his need for deliverance (Ps 116:5-11), and his gratitude for deliverance (Ps 116:12-19).

The Anguish of the Grave

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
 he heard my cry for mercy.
 Because he turned his ear to me,
 I will call on him as long as I live.
 The chords of death entangled me,
 the anguish of the grave came over me;
 I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
 Then I called on the name of the Lord:
 "Lord, save me!"*

Psalm 116:1-4

"I love the Lord," *because*. There is always a redemptive antecedent. God's grace goes before making our response possible. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Before we can say, "I love the Lord," we need God to act. For "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Psalm 116 was one of the psalms traditionally sung after the celebration of the Passover meal. Jesus and the disciples sang this psalm *after* Jesus showed them "the full extent of his love" by washing their feet (John 13:1). This psalm was sung *after* Jesus gave a new command to love one another: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Psalm 116 was sung *after* Jesus said, "If you love

⁷⁸ Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3:942. Boice: "'I' occurs eighteen times, 'my' nine times, and 'me' seven times in the NIV."

⁷⁹ Spurgeon, "Psalm 116," *Treasury of David*.

me, keep my commands” (John 14:15) and *after* Jesus said, “If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father. . .” (John 14:28). The disciples prayed Psalm 116 in the light of Jesus’ upper room discourse.

The intensity of the psalmist’s cry for mercy corresponds to his fear. “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me,” implies extreme danger – mortal danger. His life is in peril. He feels like a trapped animal or a terminally ill patient facing immanent death. Shrouded in metaphor the specific occasion remains a mystery. Serious physical illness may be the threat, but the psalmist leaves the specific nature of the experience open. The “chords of death” may be a cancer diagnosis or an opioid addiction. It may be an abusive relationship or suicidal thoughts. But whatever the presenting problem may be, the primary cause of all life-threatening endangerment is sin. If we think cancer is insidious, sin is more insidious. If we think AIDS is awful, sin is worse. Ultimately the root cause of all our fears is the fact that we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1).

The presenting problem needs to be addressed with great care and compassion but when we cry to the Lord for mercy we are dealing with the root cause of all our suffering. We are crying out for his forgiveness and for deliverance from our bondage to sin and death. The cry, “Lord, save me!” is the fundamental cry for salvation. It is wonderful when cancer goes into remission or an addiction is overcome or a broken heart is healed, but ultimately the fundamental human need is for deliverance. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23).

The Lord’s Deliverance

*The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.
For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
I trusted in the Lord when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;
in my alarm I said,
“Everyone is a liar.”*

Psalm 116:5-11

The dramatic shift in tone signals that the Lord has come to the psalmist’s rescue. His personal testimony is important, but secondary to his description of the Lord. All praise goes to the Lord who is gracious and righteous and full of compassion. These three attributes describe the Lord

and his salvation. He is gracious because he extends his unmerited favor upon needy sinners; he is righteous because he is true to his holy word and he makes things right; and he is compassionate, because he acts on behalf of the needy. The psalmist identifies himself as “simple,” that is to say, “helpless,” “unwary,” “naive.”⁸⁰ He is in need of the Lord’s saving power and he cannot save himself. The psalmist leads by example. Implicit in his story is our story. We acknowledge our complete dependence on the Lord. We mourn for our sin, and we turn to him for his gracious forgiveness. It is sad, but true. We have to be at the end of our resources before we can receive the mercy of God.

After praising the Lord for his saving benefits, he admonishes himself, saying, “Return to your rest, my soul.” The loaded term here is “rest” which goes back to the Sabbath rest in the wilderness and then forward to the promised everlasting rest of the people of God. There is an immediate in-the-moment “rest” and a future everlasting “rest.” The Lord’s “rest” is made possible by his saving deliverance. The psalmist praises the Lord for his deliverance from death. He is no longer a broken man, crying his eyes out and stumbling around in the dark. The Lord has given him joy and strength for the purpose that he might walk before the Lord in the land of the living. The metaphor of “walking” pictures an abiding and obedient relationship with the Lord. The apostle Paul exhorted believers, “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.”⁸¹ Since we are dearly loved children, having been delivered from sin and death, we are commanded to follow the example of our heavenly Father. Because of Christ’s love we are commanded to walk in the way of love.

The psalmist ends this second section with two succinct quotes that sum up our need for deliverance. “I am greatly afflicted,” acknowledges our great need for God. Failure to understand our situation results in an inflated-self and a resistance to God’s saving grace. C. S. Lewis famously said, “A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world—and even might be more difficult to save.”⁸² The second quote, “Everyone is a liar,” warns us not to put our trust in people. It may sound harsh, but it is not, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The apostle John wrote, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make [God] out to be a liar and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:10).

The psalmist attributes both perspectives, his need for deliverance and his confidence in the Lord’s deliverance, to the Lord’s faithfulness. The apostle Paul draws on Psalm 116:10 (LXX) to affirm his gospel proclamation of the risen Lord. “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have the same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Cor 4:13-15). Paul

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 362. Calvin writes, “The term, rendered ‘simple,’ is often understood in a bad sense, denoting persons inconsiderate and foolish, who will not follow wholesome advice. But, in this place, it is applied to those who are exposed to the abuse of the wicked, who are not sufficiently subtle and circumspect to elude the snares which are laid for them.”

⁸¹ The verb *περιπατέω*, “to walk” is used eight times in Ephesians (2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15) metaphorically to refer to one’s conduct or lifestyle.

⁸² Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 181.

takes these two negative statements, one about affliction and the other about liars, and turns them into a positive testimony of the proclamation of the gospel.

The Response of a Grateful Servant

*What shall I return to the Lord
for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants.
Truly I am your servant, Lord;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.
I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the Lord –
in the midst, Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord [Hallelujah!]*

Psalm 116:12-19

The third stanza begins with a humble question. It is the question all those who have experienced the Lord's salvation ask. It is an impossible question, because we can never repay the Lord for his goodness, but the question is necessary because we long to act in accord with our new life in Christ. The question implies the devotion of a grateful person. We want to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because "it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13).

The psalmist vows to lift up "the cup of salvation," "to call on the name of the Lord," and to "fulfill [his] vows in the presence of all the people." These three descriptive phrases are variations on a theme of complete commitment. The psalmist seeks to participate in the fullness of salvation. It is moving to think that Jesus sang this psalm with the disciples shortly after he instituted the Lord's Supper. He lifted up the cup of salvation, saying "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Jesus knew that he would be "lifted up from the earth" and that he would draw people to himself (John 12:32). No one has ever lifted up the cup of salvation, and called on the name of the Lord, and fulfilled his vows in the presence of God's people the way Jesus has. But as shocking as it may be, we are called to follow his example. We cannot replicate his sacrifice, nor would we want to, ("He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" – Heb 9:26), but we can deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23).

At the grave side of saints, I have read, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15). “Precious” may mean either “highly valued” or “costly,” but both meanings may converge in this instance. The Lord highly values the life of his saints and he finds the death of his saints costly.⁸³ We who remain feel their absence with an ache in our heart. The more they loved and the greater their service the more they are missed. But it is not only the saints who remain who feel their absence, the Lord himself pays a costly price in the death of his servants. The loss is related in some special way to the loss the Father experienced in giving up the Son. Jesus linked his own sacrificial death for our salvation with our costly service and death. He said, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

The psalmist concludes with an affirmation of his loyal love and humble obedience. His calling and identity are certain. He declares, “Truly I am your servant, Lord.” He knows who he is and to whom he belongs. He pledges himself as the son of your handmaid in “absolute servitude” and loyalty.⁸⁴ The Lord has set him free “from the tensions and anxieties of the world by delivering him from death, and so now he belongs to the Lord as a servant, a loyal servant – the redeemed belong to the Lord.”⁸⁵ There is nothing he desires more than to offer the sacrifice of praise and to call on the name of the Lord. He reaffirms this desire to fulfill his vows to the Lord, in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord. The psalmist’s passion for the Lord corresponds to the apostle’s exhortation “to offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1). The psalm ends on a high note of praise. Hallelujah! The very one who died to set us free, left the upper room on the night he was betrayed with Psalm 116 guiding his thoughts and prayers.

⁸³ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 410.

⁸⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:431.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Psalm 117 leads us from the Jesus' upper room discourse and his atoning sacrifice (Ps 116) to his exaltation and glorification, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11). Psalm 117 begins to wrap up the Hallel psalms (Ps 111-118) with an appeal for universal praise. "This tiny psalm is great in faith," writes Derek Kidner, "and its reach is enormous."⁸⁶ The psalmist frames his exhortation to praise the Lord for his love and faithfulness in the broadest possible way. Everybody is called to praise. Every tribe, people group, and language is summoned to extol the Lord. Every nation is *commanded* to praise. For the shortest psalm in Jesus' Prayer Book it may be one of the most controversial psalms because of its radical inclusiveness – all nations and peoples, and its radical exclusiveness – one Lord.

The call to praise the Lord extends to the Gentile nations, fulfilling the promise given to Abram, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). The gospel is as exclusive as it is inclusive. One of the most famous and most controversial lines of the gospel is Jesus' one liner: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And within weeks of the Jesus' resurrection Peter declared to the Jewish religious leaders, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which you must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus called his disciples to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," but the inclusiveness of the gospel was predicated on the exclusiveness of the truth, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Doxology

*Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
For great is his love toward us,
and faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord [Hallelujah].*

Psalm 117:1-2

The people of God are often called to praise the Lord, but here all the nations are urged to extol the Lord (see Psalms 6, 96). The psalm corresponds to Daniel's vision of "one like a son of man" who was given "authority, glory and sovereign power" and "all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him" (Dan 7:14). The synonymous parallelism of "nations" and "peoples" stresses "the real fact" that the whole world will acknowledge the Lord as King of kings and Lord of lords.⁸⁷ In the Book of Revelation a four stanza Hallelujah! anthem proceeds a description of the one called Faithful and True, who will rule with an iron scepter (Ps 2:9) and his name is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16).

⁸⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 411.

⁸⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:350.

The psalmist's exhortation to worship the Lord recognizes the world of the nations. This is not an "undifferentiated world" but a world of "separate political and ethnic entities."⁸⁸ And each national entity and each ethnicity is being called to worship the one and only Lord. The implications of this for evangelism and worship are significant. It takes a caring gospel-centered church to communicate the unchanging gospel in ways that are ethnographically sensitive.

When we gather together to worship the Lord, the enormity of the psalmist's claim may be missing. It is easy in the secular age to be conditioned to think that each person or group of people have the right to determine for themselves what is true. But amidst the world's many gods and ideologies there is only one God and this God is not a vague abstraction nor a mysterious force. If we consider our own personal identity as distinct and unique, how can we deny any less to the Author of Life and the Maker of the Universe. The Lord declares, "I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not make for yourself an idol..." (Ex.20:3-4). Psalm 117 celebrates the inclusiveness of the exclusive gospel by leading us in worship. To sing this truth is no less radical than to preach it. We tend to attribute the offense of the gospel only to preaching and proclamation, but the psalmist encourages us to sing our theology and pray our conviction.

The reason all the peoples of the world and all the nations glorify the living God is because of his great love and because of his everlasting faithfulness. "The claim of the Christian community," writes Leslie Newbigin, "is that in Jesus the absolute truth has been made present amid the relativities of human cultures, and the form which this truth took was not that of dominance and imperial power but that of one who was without power, or—rather—whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering."⁸⁹ Believers confess, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom 1:16). We share the apostle's hope and enthusiasm for the universal appeal of the gospel: "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him" (Rom 15:11; see Ps 117:1). And we sing with Charles Wesley,

O for a thousand tongues to sing,
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace.
My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad,
The honors of thy name.

⁸⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:350.

⁸⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 163.

Psalm 118 concludes the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 111-118) with a communal song of thanksgiving. The psalm celebrates the steadfast love of the Lord with a festal processional up to the altar. The psalmist drew on Moses, echoed the prophets, and inspired Jesus and the apostles. Jesus quoted the psalm to reveal his identity and the apostles quoted the psalm to define the church. This is a psalm that gives depth and meaning to the pastor's call to worship, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24 KJV). Patrick Reardon calls Psalm 118 the Sunday psalm because "it sets the tone for Sunday morning worship," adding, "Sunday morning is the hour of victory." We never tire of its great truths because, "Every Sunday morning is the Church's jubilant celebration of the Resurrection of Christ."⁹⁰

Jesus is the Son of David, the people's representative, and the singular voice leading the congregation. His proclamation is met with the antiphonal response of the people. He is Israel embodied and God incarnate. He is King and Kingdom, Prophet and proclamation, Priest and sacrifice. He is the stone the builders rejected and the cornerstone upon which everything depends. He is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, who is the light of the world and the sacrifice upon the altar. Psalm 118 is quoted extensively in the New Testament. Its liturgical significance for Israel made it a revelatory platform for Palm Sunday and Pentecost. Its theological importance gives shape to our understanding of Christ and the Church.

Call to Worship

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love [hesed] endures forever.*

Let Israel say:

"His love [hesed] endures forever."

Let the house of Aaron say:

"His love [hesed] endures forever."

Let those who fear the Lord say:

"His love [hesed] endures forever."

Psalm 118:1-4

The psalmist introduces the big picture of salvation with a traditional four-fold call to worship. The first line is a sufficient summons to gather the people of God for worship, but the psalmist compounds the invitation by identifying separately the people of Israel, the priesthood, and finally, all those who feared the Lord. It was his way of emphasizing the importance and the inclusiveness of this special opportunity to praise the Lord (Ps 115:12-13). No one is left out; everyone is called to praise the Lord. Nor is there any attempt to match a particular goodness with a particular segment of the congregation. All give thanks for the same fundamental relational reason: the Lord is good; his love [hesed] endures forever. Hesed is the essential character of God, whose love is filled with mercy, fidelity, and kindness. Hesed is both who God is and what he does; it is "a relational term that describes both the internal character as well as

⁹⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 235.

the external actions” of the God who sustains all life’s relationships.⁹¹ True worship creates a palpable sense of reverence and affection for the transcendent majesty of God who is best known for his *hesed* love. There is a place for wrestling with doubt and crises, but there is also a place for the people of God to be summoned joyfully to praise the Lord eagerly for his steadfast love.

The return of the exiles to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity may have been the occasion that inspired this psalm. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that the day would come when the desolated towns of Judah and deserted streets of Jerusalem would be alive once again with the sounds of joy and gladness. Worshipers would bring “thank offerings to the house of the Lord, saying, ‘Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; his love endures forever’” (Jer 33:11). Psalm 118 begins and ends on this high note of praise for the steadfast love of the Lord (Ps 118:1, 29). Ezra reports that the dedication of the second temple was a joyous occasion, accompanied by a large number of sacrifices on the altar. He references the various groups identified by the psalmist, “Then the people of Israel – the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles – celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16). Likewise, Nehemiah’s description of the Feast of Tabernacles fits Psalm 118 well. He describes a festive family atmosphere, adding, “From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great” (Neh 8:17). Psalm 118 is well suited to these pivotal occasions when communal thanksgiving, spiritual direction, salvation history, and messianic expectation converge.

Call for Deliverance

*When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place.
The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
The Lord is with me; he is my helper.
I look in triumph on my enemies.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in humans.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.*

Psalm 118:5-9

The complexity of the psalm is due in part to multiple voices participating in the praise. The entire community has been summoned to praise the Lord for his steadfast love, but in this next section a single voice shares his testimony. He personally articulates the distress of the human condition. His cry for help is representative of everyone’s shared experience. Although this particular aspect of the psalm is not considered to be messianic, it is not difficult to see a correspondence between the psalmist’s personal experience and the shared humanity of the

⁹¹ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner. *The Book of Psalms*, 8. Jacobson writes, “The Lord’s *hesed* is the basis on which the psalmist dares to ask for deliverance and forgiveness. The Lord’s *hesed* describes how and why the Lord created and sustains the good creation. The Lord’s *hesed* is that to which the hymns of praise and songs of thanksgiving bear witness. The Lord’s *hesed* is what the wisdom psalms teach. And *hesed* is the most important characteristic that God desires to see embodied both in individuals and in the communities that pray the psalms.”

representative Son of Man. The author of the Book of Hebrews quotes from this text, “The Lord is *my* helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (Heb 13:6; Ps 118:6,7 LXX). He does so having made a strong case for Jesus’ identification with us in our suffering and in our sinful humanity. Jesus is our representative. He can empathize with us in our weakness because he has been “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15).

The Lord brings the psalmist “into a spacious place” and sets him free from the threatening confines of sin and death. The psalmist is no longer bound by fear. He agrees with David, “. . . In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps 56:11). This grace-inspired courage and resilience parallels the Christian’s experience. Paul writes, “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 2:20). This section ends with a reaffirmation of trust in the Lord. Israel had a long history of turning away from the Lord to trust in foreign powers, even as Christians today are tempted to trust in worldly sources of power and security. But here the psalmist and the congregation are in agreement: “Everyone is a liar” (Ps 116:11); humans are untrustworthy. Put your hope in God. “It is better to take refuge in the Lord” (Ps 118:8).

God’s Salvation Praised

*All the nations surrounded me,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They surrounded me on every side,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They swarmed around me like bees,
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the Lord helped me.
The Lord is my strength [song] and my defense;
he has become my salvation.
Shouts for joy and victory
resounds in the tents of the righteous:
“The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!
The Lord’s right hand is lifted high;
the Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!”
I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the Lord has done.
The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Open for me the gate of the Lord,
through which the righteous may enter.
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.*

Psalm 118:10-21

Whether it was the exodus-Israelites or Babylonian-exiles, Israel felt her beleaguered and vulnerable status among the powerful nations of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. They were like a besieged city, encircled by armies that on an imperial whim might swoop down and annihilate them. Surely the returning exiles from Persia under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra felt this way. The psalmist's confidence is shared by Christ's followers today. God's elect exiles are chosen outsiders. They are resident aliens in their home culture because of their faith in Christ and their commitment "to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against the soul" (1 Pet 2:11).

The psalmist personalizes a desperate situation with vivid metaphors. It is as if he had disturbed a bee hive and was forced to fend off a swarm of angry bees. He felt like he was pushed to the edge of a cliff and was about to fall. But the psalmist's response in this life-threatening crisis is to quickly turn to the Lord for deliverance. He describes this redemptive reversal with an unusual verb, which he repeats three times: "But in the name of the Lord I cut them down" (Ps 118:10,11,12). This word choice may be theologically significant. It literally means, "I circumcise them."⁹² The Greek translators did not know what to make of this unusual word choice. From the context they interpreted "fend off" or "ward off," which has led to a range of militaristic descriptions of defeat.⁹³ But what if the "cutting" the psalmist has in mind has more to do with the supernatural work of the Lord to circumcise the heart (Deut 30:6) and change the perspective of Israel's enemies.

On Pentecost, Peter confronted the crowd saying, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Luke describes the impact of Peter's message: "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins'" (Acts 2:36-38). It is significant that the language of circumcision used in Psalm 118 may imply a typological significance fulfilled on Pentecost. The gospel conquers not with the weapons of the world but in the name Christ.

The fourth description of deliverance takes a verse from Moses' victory song, "The Lord is my strength and my defense [song]; he has become my salvation" (Exod 15:2). Whatever stigma or discouragement was felt by a beleaguered and despised people is now past history. "Shouts of joy and victory" replace the cry for help and the moan of the refugee. The congregation lifts its voice in praise for the mighty things accomplished by the Lord's strong right hand. The chorus repeats three times its praise for the Lord's right hand and its mighty deeds for emphasis.

As the thanksgiving processional nears the gates of the Lord, the psalmist proclaims on behalf of

⁹² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:449. "If we retain the meaning 'I cut them off,' the psalmist would then be saying something like this: he (i.e., the nation under his leadership) was surrounded by enemies (more powerful nations) and almost perished, but that the Lord ended that crisis with a great victory which he describes with the word 'circumcised' and not one of the many verbs for military victory; he did not have the literal sense in mind, but rather the significance of circumcision, circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6), meaning that by supernatural intervention that changed their minds with regard to Israel the nation was able to gain freedom."

⁹³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:358, "in Yhwh's name I indeed withered them." Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 414, "I will drive them back." Peterson, *The Message*, 676, "in God's name I rubbed their faces in the dirt."

the people and in the confidence of the Lord's strength, "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done." The psalmist's statement recalls Psalm 115:17, "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place of silence; it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore." The psalmist's enduring confidence lies not in himself, for as he says, "The Lord has chastened me severely." For himself and for the people the favor of the Lord rests on mercy, not merit. The reason he and his people have not been given over to death lies in the redemptive mercy of the Lord.

It is striking to realize that Jesus prayed this psalm in preparation for his passion. This very psalm may have echoed in his mind as he said to Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, "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 11:25-26). This is not idle speculation given the fact that this is one of the psalms traditionally sung at the end of the Passover. It is a psalm that Jesus and the disciples knew well and prayed often. Even the reference to severe chastening would have found its mark in Jesus' contemplation of the cross, knowing that he was about to be "pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities," because the Lord had "laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:5-6). Paul wrote, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

The psalmist shouts on behalf of a beleaguered people who have been redeemed by the strong right hand of the Lord, "Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord" (Ps 118:19). The request is reminiscent of the "liturgy at the gate" (Pss 15, 24). When Jesus walked through the gate on Palm Sunday he knew that he was ultimately entering the very presence of God to offer a one time atoning sacrifice for our sins (Heb 9-10). His righteousness has made possible our entrance into God's presence.

The Festal Processional

*The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;*

his love endures forever.

Psalm 118:22-29

Israel, the beleaguered little nation, is the stone rejected by the builders who stand for the superpowers of the day. Yet what the world rejected the sovereign Lord in his mercy chose. Israel is the load bearing foundation for his kingdom. This is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abram, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2). This is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic" (Isa 28:16).

This entrance liturgy is antiphonal. The voice of the psalmist declares, "Let us rejoice today and be glad," and the voice of the congregation responds, "Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success!" The psalmist plays a representative role on behalf of the people, praising God for "he who comes in the name of the Lord." The interplay between the psalmist and the worshipers reinforces the Messiah's saving relationship with Israel. The stone stands not only for Israel, but the One who comes in the name of the Lord, to bring salvation and to bless the house of the Lord.

The carefully orchestrated harmony in the psalm between Israel and her representative is missing in Jesus' use of Psalm 118 in the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. At the harvest, the landowner sends his servants to collect his fruit, but the tenants beat and kill his servants. Last of all, he sends his son, but the tenants throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. Jesus says to Israel's leaders, in what must have been an exasperated tone of irony, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'" (Matthew 21:42; Ps 118:22-23). In Psalm 118, Israel is rejected by the likes of Babylon, Persia, Egypt and Samaria, but in the parable of the tenants, it is Israel's own leaders who reject their rightful representative, their God-Anointed Messiah. Peter makes this very point in his trial before the Sanhedrin. When he quotes Psalm 118 he declared, "*Jesus is* 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone,'" adding, "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).

The apostles develop the typology of Psalm 118 in keeping with Jesus' own interpretation. The confession of Christ is the rock upon which the church is built (Matthew 16:18), and all who come to him, "the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Peter adds, "Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'" (1 Pet 2:4-7). Paul alludes to Psalm 118 when he refers to "Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:20-22). The often repeated call to worship, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 116:24; Isa 25:9) is embedded in a theology of salvation that depends exclusively and absolutely on the gospel of grace. Our rejoicing depends on Jesus the Rock of our salvation.

The psalmist describes the whole congregation erupting in praise, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Lord, save us!” There was a similar emotional outburst when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover riding a donkey. Jesus intentionally identified himself with Zechariah’s well-known prophecy (Zech 9:9), and the enthusiastic crowd entered into the drama. The people paved the way for Jesus with their coats and they cut down palm branches to lay on the path. They shouted, “Hosanna!” adding in their excitement, “to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:9; see Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:38; John 12:13). This left little doubt as to Jesus’ special identity and it drew the ire of the Pharisees in the crowd who said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” But Jesus responded, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:39-40).

Year after year Israel re-enacted this festal procession at their three main feasts, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. It was a joyous time of celebration and thanksgiving. They rehearsed the blessings of God and looked forward to the Son of David who would set things right and bring in the kingdom. Derek Kidner writes, “What those who took part in such a ceremony could never have foreseen was that it would one day suddenly enact itself on the road to Jerusalem: unrehearsed, unliturgical and with explosive force. In that week when God’s realities broke through His symbols and shadows (Heb 10:1), the horns of the altar became the arms of the cross, and the ‘festival’ itself found fulfillment in ‘Christ our passover’ (1 Cor 5:7).”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 73:150*, 415.

The longest psalm in Jesus' Prayer Book is an extended meditation on the significance of the word of God. Each of the twenty-two stanzas of this elaborate acrostic psalm serves as an effective prayer for Bible study and meditation. In the torah tradition of Psalm 1 and Psalm 19, the psalmist poetically crafted these twenty-two prayers in a single psalm to deepen the people of God's devotion, delight, and dependence on the word of God.

Disciples of all ages and levels of spiritual maturity may begin here in prayer when they open the Bible. Whether it is a young parent sitting down for morning devotions or a pastor preparing a sermon, Psalm 119 gives the follower of Christ the words to express their deep, heartfelt desire to understand and obey the word. To pray these eight-verse stanzas is to be reminded that we are blessed in specific ways when we come to the Bible for wisdom and direction.

Each of the twenty-two acrostic stanzas consists of eight alphabetized verses constructed around eight synonyms for God's word. These eight synonyms for the word of God are listed here in order of their occurrence: *law* (*torah*, 25 times), *word* (24 times), *decision* (or *judgment*, 23 times), *testimony* (23 times), *command* (22 times), *statute* (21 times), *precept* (21 times), *saying* (or *oracle* or *promise*, 19 times). All eight words are used in four stanzas (Ps 119:57-64, 73-80, 81-88, 129-136) and all the stanzas have at least six references to the word of God.⁹⁵ Furthermore, all 178 references to Scripture relate "explicitly to its Author."⁹⁶ The word is never abstracted from its personal source in God. Each word is described in relation to God: *your* commands, *your* statutes, *your* word of truth, and *your* laws.

Each word calls the hearer to action. We are not passive recipients of divine revelation but active followers of God's word and way. We seek more than head-knowledge. We want to be wise with the wisdom of God. Understanding yields to devotion and devotion to obedience. Through meditation and study we internalize God's word. Disciples love the word of God and it shows in how they live. Psalm 119 is "a medley of praise, prayer and wisdom" dedicated to discerning, applying and enjoying the wisdom of God in every aspect of life. "There is no hint of legalism . . . It breathes a spirit of devotion and celebrates the closest of relationships between the psalmist as 'your servant' and Yahweh as 'my God.'"⁹⁷

1. Blessed Followers

*Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the Lord.
Blessed are those who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart –
they do no wrong
but follow his ways,*

⁹⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:460.

⁹⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 419.

⁹⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 140, 142.

*You have laid down precepts
 that are to be fully obeyed.
 Oh, that my ways were steadfast
 in obeying your decrees!
 Then I would not be put to shame
 when I consider your commands.
 I will praise you with an upright heart
 as I learn your righteous laws.
 I will obey your decrees;
 do not utterly forsake me.*
 Psalm 119:1-8

Psalm 119 begins the way Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a blessing. His blessedness is “not discernible in the ordinary course of things.”⁹⁸ It is hidden in the will and word of God. We will not find it talked about in the press or on campus or in the office. Jesus drew on the Old Testament roots of the word blessed. The Hebrew word for blessed is *ashr* which meant to find the right path (Prov 3:13). Psalm 119 and Jesus’ Beatitudes reflect a theology of grace. They are not a list of legalistic prerequisites or moralistic preconditions for faithfulness. They are a description of the attitude of heart and the condition of the will that turns to God for God’s blessing. They describe a *state* of grace, not a *means* of grace. These are not *prerequisites* for grace but the *evidences* of grace. To be redeemed by God’s grace is to be freed from the torment of our own beginnings.⁹⁹

The psalmist begins with forgiveness. To be “blameless” is to be forgiven and free from the burden of sin and death. This makes walking according to the law of God, keeping his statutes, and seeking the Lord wholeheartedly possible. This is not to say that we have no sin, because “if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 1:8-9). The psalmist’s bold statement, “They do no wrong but follow his ways,” means that God’s way is the path of freedom and righteousness. The way is not shrouded in mystery and confusion. God in his word lays it out for us and bids us “follow me.” Karl Barth reminds us, “I believe—not in myself—I believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.” Faith delivers us from trust in ourselves, in our circumstances, and in any other anchor. “We shall never be true to ourselves. . . In God alone is there faithfulness, and faith is the trust that we may hold to Him, to His promise and to His guidance.”¹⁰⁰ Walking along the way is as straight-forward as putting one foot in front of another. Barth continues: “Jesus goes, and the disciple accompanies Him on the same way. It is Jesus who chooses the common way, and treads it first.”¹⁰¹

We were not meant to have multiple beginnings (Phil 1:6). We are committed to a long obedience in the same direction. We cherish the testimony of our conversion but now our attention is drawn to “the perfect law of freedom.” We continue in it – not forgetting what we

⁹⁸ McCullough, *Finding Happiness in the Most Unlikely Places*, 23.

⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 96.

¹⁰⁰ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 19.

¹⁰¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4:3:1, 510; 535-536.

have heard, but doing it, because we know we will be blessed in what we do (James 1:25). The apostle Paul delighted in sharing his Damascus road experience but his devotion was never fueled by nostalgia. He wrote, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:13-14).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer began his meditation on Psalm 119 by emphasizing that we must go beyond beginnings. “God has once and for all converted me to himself;” he wrote, “it is not that I have once for all converted myself to God. God has made the beginning; that is the happy certainty of faith.”¹⁰² Only the Holy Spirit has the power to convert the old creation into a new creation. The *Creator Spiritus*, who began the world’s *creation* (“the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters,” Gen 1:2), and who now begins the world’s *new creation* and its definitive salvation.”¹⁰³ Beatitude-based believers know that their new creation beginning lies not in themselves but in God. We are the least likely candidates for conversion and all of us need a miracle to believe. “Every conversion is a virgin birth.”¹⁰⁴ The apostle John wrote, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn 1:12-13).

Psalm 119 weans us away from a preoccupation with the start of the Christian life and redirects our focus to finishing well. Faithfulness to the end affirms faith from the beginning. “Today we emphasize the New Birth,” writes Peter Gillquist, “the ancients emphasized being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living; they spoke of the glories of the eternal kingdom. . .the emphasis in our attention has shifted from the completing of the Christian life to the beginning of it.”¹⁰⁵ We embrace the law of God not as a burden that induces guilt but as a blessing that gives freedom. We hear Jesus say to us, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). To be Jesus’ friend involves obeying his commands, not out of compulsion and duty, but out of love and devotion. “You did not choose me,” Jesus said, “ but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit. . .” (John 15:14-16). Mercy, not merit, induces the desire and the gift of obedience.

Humility is highlighted in this first stanza. “Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!” (Ps 119:5). This is the earnest sigh of a person in “the state of grace” who wants to remain forever in the company of Jesus. This yearning for God and his ways is a reflection of God’s Spirit at work in the believer’s life. The possibility of shame and the absence of God’s blessedness enters the human heart with a deep sense of dread. Instead of the wisdom of God’s decrees, commands, and statutes, the believer contemplates the inevitable consequences of living by one’s own passions and ambitions. Humility is expressed in the sigh, in the fear of shame, and in the dread of being forsaken by God. The holy fear of being abandoned by God is not induced by anything God has said or done, but by our own sinful inclinations. We pray with the hymn

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 93.

¹⁰³ Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 1:24.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Gillquist, “A Marathon We Are Meant to Win,” 22.

writer, “Let Thy goodness like a fetter / Bind my wandering heart to Thee / Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love / Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above.”¹⁰⁶ The stanza closes with a pledge of fidelity and obedience. This is not the wilful, self-centered “I will” that is filled with pride, but the “I will” that joyfully confesses “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). The last verse reminds Christ’s followers that we are commissioned to “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

2. *Embrace the Word*

*How can a young person stay on the path of purity?
By living according to your word.
I will seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.
Praise be to you, Lord;
teach me your decrees.
With my lips I recount
all the laws that come from your mouth.
I rejoice in following your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches.
I meditate on your precepts
and consider your ways.
I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.
Psalm 119:9-16*

The path of purity implies to some people a forced march of religious scrupulousness or a steep ascent to moral perfection, but for the psalmist, purity is a call to freedom – freedom from sin’s contamination and pollution. Purity involves soul-cleansing forgiveness and single-minded faithfulness. It is not squeaky clean obsequious piety. It is the prophetic freedom to pursue God unencumbered by sin and divided loyalties. This is the purity of heart that wills one thing: to follow Jesus along the way. The apostle James wrote, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).

Nominal Christianity assumes that young people’s rite of passage into adulthood involves ignoring and violating the revealed will of God. British abolitionist William Wilberforce made clear in his 1797 treatise on Christian character that it was naive to advise young people to sow their wild oats. To say flippantly that youth will be youth and make light of sin overlooked the grave danger of God’s displeasure.¹⁰⁷ Wilberforce warned that “we devise some means or other for stifling the voice of conscience. ‘We cry peace, when there is no peace!’”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” 2.

¹⁰⁷ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 115.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed that “we have become accustomed to a very godless conception of youth. . . .It is very presumptuous and wrongheaded to think that the human being has to become entangled deeply in the guilt of life in order to know life itself, and finally God. We do not learn to know life and guilt from our own experience, but only from God’s judgment of humanity and his grace in the cross of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁹ The apostle Paul may echo Psalm 119:9 when he writes, “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22).

The whole of the second stanza seeks to answer the psalmist’s question “how” can a young person stay on the path of freedom. Seven ways are clearly stated, beginning with “By living according to your word.” This fundamental truth is followed by six supporting assertions.

“I seek you with all my heart. . .” / “I have hidden your word in my heart. . .” / “I recount with my lips all the laws that come from your mouth.” / “I rejoice in following your statutes. . .” / “I meditate on your precepts. . .” / “I delight in your decrees. . .”

Each first-person assertion emphasizes responsibility and submission. The psalmist dedicates himself to seeking God with his whole heart. His mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical energy is poured into knowing God through his word, laws, statutes, precepts and decrees. The object that is sought is never abstracted from the person of God. The psalmist never masters the object of his desire, but seeks to be mastered by the Lord and his word. To embrace the living Word impacts one’s whole being. The heart is a metaphor for one’s true self – the inner soulful self. The lips represent the relational self – the social soulful self.

In the middle of this grace-inspired effort the psalmist breaks out in praise, “Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.” The psalmist is convinced that nothing can be done apart from God’s initiative and instruction: “Do not let me stray from your commands. . . .Teach me your decrees.” The final three assertions are emotive. The psalmist is hardly a passive consumer of biblical truth nor a reluctant participant in worship. Obedience to God’s statutes is cause for real joy and inner delight. The mental work of understanding God’s precepts and paying attention to God’s ways is accompanied by a deeply satisfying emotional experience. Mind and heart rejoice together. The stanza concludes with a vow: “I will not neglect your word.”

The psalmist offers a counter-cultural path to wisdom. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls this generation in their 20s and 30s a generation of tinkerers. They put life together “by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else.” They have a “do-it-yourself” mentality, as they cobble together a customized lifestyle.¹¹⁰ But the follower of Christ is not his or her own best authority. They are not in charge of piecing together a customized world-view that works for them in a pluralistic culture.

Embracing the wisdom of God counters the various ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 109.

¹¹⁰ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 14.

in the culture. Instead of rummaging through the junk yard of pop culture or relying on the traditions and trends of the academy, the believer seeks God with her whole being. Like the psalmist, she articulates God's laws, rejoices in the Lord's statutes, meditates on his precepts and delights in his decrees. She lets the word of Christ dwell in her richly as she teaches and admonishes herself and others with all wisdom (Col 3:16). Our heavenly Father answers the prayer of his Son on our behalf, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

3. Resident Aliens

*Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.
I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.
My soul is consumed with longing
for your laws at all times.
You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed,
those who stray from your commands.
Remove from me scorn and contempt,
for I keep your statutes.
Though rulers sit together and slander me,
your servant will meditate on your decrees.
Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors.*

Psalm 119:17-24

The abundant life is God's doing, not ours. The premise of the third stanza is not that we defend God, but God defends us. God's servants are resident aliens in their home culture. They are surrounded by people who willfully stray from God's commands. The psalmist pleads, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Words such as "law," "commands," "statutes," and "precepts," may imply to some "necessary but soon-learned rule of life, about which there is not much more to think, to say, or to be amazed at."¹¹¹ But nothing could be further from the truth. All revelation points to the living the Lord Jesus Christ. "The great wonder in the law of God," wrote Bonhoeffer, "is the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through him what is written comes alive, contradictions are resolved, and the revelation is given its unfathomable depth. Lord, open my eyes."¹¹² The apostle Paul may have had this verse in mind when he wrote to the church at Ephesus and said, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18-19). God's answer to the psalmist's prayer came in the person of the living Word and in the revelation of the New Testament. "Concerning this salvation. . . Even the angels long to look into these things" (1 Pet 1:10,12).

¹¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 119.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

The wonderful things in God's law refer to the supernatural truths that cannot be known apart from God's revelation. Eugene Peterson writes, "At some point we realized the immensity of God and of the great invisibles that socket into our arms and legs, into bread and wine, into our brains and our tools, into mountains and rivers, giving them meaning, destiny, value, joy, beauty, salvation."¹¹³ The wisdom of the world is sensible and reasonable and does not concern itself with the wisdom of God. The gospel speaks of truths that the world finds utterly inexplicable, such as Creation, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Ascension, and the Second Coming. Divine revelation is the determinative factor for human destiny. God has spoken and is speaking and this makes all the difference in the world. God breaks in with compelling, convicting truth and we yield.¹¹⁴

The wisdom of God makes us strangers on earth, but instead of shunning our strangeness we embrace it. We elect exiles in our home culture, because "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The wisdom of this age is coming to nothing, but the wisdom of God "searches all things, even the deep things of God" (1 Cor 1:18; 2:10). We re-enter our home culture as chosen outsiders who for all practical purposes are strangers without status in our home culture. We are resident aliens by virtue of our faith in Christ and the sheer contrariness of the good news of Jesus Christ. We have been given new birth into a "living hope," into "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." We live into a new reality and we eagerly await "the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet 1:3-5).

4. *Grief Sanctified*

*I am laid low in the dust;
preserve my life according to your word.
I gave an account of my ways and you answered me;
teach me your decrees.
Cause me to understand the way of your precepts,
that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.
My soul is weary with sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
Keep me from deceitful ways;
be gracious to me and teach me your law.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I have set my heart on your laws.
I hold fast to your statutes, Lord;
do not let me be put to shame.
I run in the path of your commands,
for you have broadened my understanding.*

Psalm 119:25-32

The first line sends a chill up the spine. A grief observed is a hard reality to face. The dreaded,

¹¹³ Peterson, "Lashed to the mast," 56.

¹¹⁴ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 24.

“don’t go there, don’t even think about it,” echoes in my brain. Yet we have all been laid low, as low as the dust, and we face the crisis of grief. Do we run from the darkness, or do we run through the darkness to the light? Do we escape our sorrow with pills or porn or pleasure? Anything to distract us from our pain. We have choices. The psalmist chooses prayer. He clings to the word of God. He does not seek to manage grief but to sanctify grief. He looks to God to grow his soul, to make it stronger and more resilient.

The psalmist’s experience recalls Job on an ash heap, feverish and friendless, homeless and hounded, scraping his sores and mourning his losses. Job’s journey from despair to devotion, from weakness to strength, reminds us that a deepening understanding of God and his ways is costly. Job persevered in his integrity, by clinging to his God-centered understanding of righteousness. He persevered in his freedom, by remaining true to God when he had no humanistic reason for doing so. He persevered in his lament, by insisting on making his case before God. Like the psalmist he sought to give an account of his ways (Ps 119:26). By allowing Job to walk on his own in the midst of pain, without the benefit of soothing answers, God let him acquire powerful new strength. Job knew that he had no other place to turn but to God and his word. By faith—by sheer, naked, teeth-gritting, soul-clinging faith, Job remained faithful to God.¹¹⁵

In the tradition of Job, the psalmist expresses his passionate determination to stay true to the word. His deep desire is for spiritual renewal – a transformation from the inside-out. “Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law” (Ps 119:29). He renews his commitment to faithfulness with four definitive statements: “I have chosen, I have set, I hold fast, and I run” (Ps 119:30-32). The initial image of being laid low in the dust is eclipsed by the psalmist’s passion for the word. The psalmist anticipates the poetry of the prophet Isaiah: “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. / Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; / but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. / They will soar on wings like eagles; / they will run and not grow weary, / they will walk and not faint” (Isa 40:29-31).

5. Teachable

*Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.
Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.
Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.*

¹¹⁵ See, Yancey, *Where is God When It Hurts*, 84.

*Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.
How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.*
Psalm 119:33-40

The longing for wisdom is intense. The psalmist's imperatives are personal, "Teach me. . . . Give me. . . . Direct me." His forceful demands are best heard as humble pleas, "Turn my heart. . . . Turn my eyes. . . . Preserve my life. . . . Take away the disgrace I dread." When we pray this way we are yearning to understand and obey the will of God with our whole being. "We are not to seek this blessing that we may be famous for wisdom," wrote Spurgeon, "but that we may be abundant in our love to the law of God. He who has understanding will learn, remember, treasure up, and obey the commandment of the Lord. The gospel gives us grace to keep the law; the free gift leads us to holy service; there is no way of reaching to holiness but by accepting the gift of God."¹¹⁶

The psalmist is eager to abandon himself to the Lord's decrees, laws, commands, statutes, and precepts. When we pray, "Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law," do we mean, "Give me information, so that I may debate your law" or "Give me scholarship, so that we may conceptualize your law?" The teachers of the law in Jesus' day failed to see the purpose of the law. They valued the law as an end unto itself. Jesus said, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). For only in him is our life truly lived. We believe that "whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom" will turn their "eyes away from worthless things" (James 1:25; Ps 119:37). The psalmist implies a costly either/or decision that forces the Christ-follower to choose between the way of the world and way of God. We cannot fixate on "worthless things" and focus on the word of God.

The psalmist describes God's pedagogical method three ways:

- 1) Logistical – "Direct me in the path of your commands." We are walking and conversing with him along the way marked by the cross. We are like the two disciples who encounter the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus who exclaimed, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).
- 2) Personal – "Turn my heart toward your statutes." If our heart is in it, we'll get it. All believers need to seek the word of God the way a newborn cries for her mother's milk (1 Peter 2:2). There is more to this craving for nourishment and growth than hearing sermons and attending Bible studies. It is not about exposure, as much as it is about the whole person engaged and growing in the word of God. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." He then added, "The eye is a lamp of the body" (Matthew 6:21-22).
- 3) Practical – "Turn my eyes away from worthless things." We need God's help to turn our

¹¹⁶ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, 91.

naturally covetous eyes away from the enticing “visibles” that corrupt the soul. If the treasure is a metaphor for ambition, the eye is a metaphor for vision. “If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar” (Matthew 6:22-23, The Message).

Even the list of synonyms for the word of God cited seven times in this stanza implies a specificity of meaning and a practicality of obedience that resists spiritualizing and sentimentalizing. If we want to equivocate on what the word says about love and lust, fidelity and infidelity, chastity and promiscuity, reconciliation and revenge, and honesty and dishonesty, we will have to pretend that the clear word of God is confusing and ambiguous. It is not. “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

6. *Confident Witness*

*May your unfailing love [hesed] come to me, Lord,
your salvation, according to your promise;
then I can answer anyone who taunts me,
for I trust in your word.
Never take your word of truth from my mouth,
for I have put my hope in your laws.
I will always obey your law,
for ever and ever.
I will walk about in freedom,
for I have sought your precepts.
I will speak of your statutes before kings
and will not be put to shame,
for I delight in your commands
because I love them.
I reach out for your commands, which I love,
that I may meditate on your decrees.*

Psalm 119:41-48

The sixth letter in the Hebrew alphabet is *waw*, a conjunction, which can be translated as “and” or “but.” The shape of the Hebrew letter looks like a tent peg or hook (Exod 38:28). It is intriguing to think that what appears to be a repetitive conjunction without poetic value may suggest and symbolize to the psalmist’s original readers the wilderness tabernacle that housed the ark of the testimony.¹¹⁷ Each of the eight verses begins with this *waw* conjunction which connects and compounds the meaning of the sixth stanza until it concludes with the delight of meditating on God’s decrees.

This beautiful prayer for confidence in sharing God’s word is based on the Lord’s steadfast love (*hesed*). The believer knows that her trust, hope, obedience, and freedom depend on the word of

¹¹⁷ Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, 61.

God. The reason the believer has the freedom and boldness to speak of God's binding statutes and eternal truths even before kings, is because she loves God's commands and meditates on God's decrees. She can bear witness to the word because "first of all the word is appropriated (Ps 119:41), trusted (42b, 43b), obeyed (44), sought (45) and loved (47f)."¹¹⁸

Internalizing the word of God leads to freedom. Our identity is in the triune God and it cannot be stolen. Our eternal salvation, experienced now and in the future, cannot be taken from us. Our destiny cannot be diverted. This is the hope that "does not close doors to relationship with other people out of either fear or hate. It turns, rather, in openness to others just as it turns to God."¹¹⁹ Setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts is evident in how we have internalized the word of God and how we have learned to live for Christ in a hostile world. Effectiveness is measured not in eloquence or brilliance, much less in manipulation or coercion, but in gentleness, respect, and a clear conscience. The medium for effective gospel communication is gentleness, respect, and good behavior.¹²⁰

7. *Comfortable Words*

*Remember your word to your servant,
for you have given me hope.
My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise preserves my life.
The arrogant mock me unmercifully,
but I do not turn from your law,
I remember, Lord, your ancient laws,
and I find comfort in them.
Indignation grips me because of the wicked,
who have forsaken your law.
Your decrees are the theme of my song
wherever I lodge.
In the night, Lord, I remember your name,
that I may keep your law.
This has been my practice:
I obey your precepts.*

Psalm 119:49-56

The seventh stanza begins with hope and ends with obedience but in-between the psalmist struggles. His faithfulness is mocked by the arrogant who provoke his indignation. Fear and anger threaten to undo him, but remembering the Lord's promise sustains him. Comfort is rooted in the soil of the word of God. Hope is not optimism or a wish-dream, but based on the sure word of God. Jesus answered our need for comfort when he said to the disciples in the upper room, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1). When we entrust ourselves to God and his word we are empowered to obey the command, "Don't be

¹¹⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 425.

¹¹⁹ Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 243.

¹²⁰ See Cormac McCarthy's drama *The Sunset Limited* as a one-act play capturing the spirit of Psalm 119:41-48.

troubled.” The promise of Jesus’ coming defines the deep meaning of his comfort. Four distinct comings shape Jesus’ theology of comfort: his final coming, the Parousia; his gift of the Spirit, the Paraclete; his death and resurrection, the Passion; and his abiding fellowship, the Presence. These four comings are the ways in which Jesus draws near to us. These are the promises that shape the relational expectations of Christ’s followers and give our lives meaning and purpose.

The apostles rework the message of this psalm with a redemptive trajectory marked by the cross. Even when the arrogant mock the believer unmercifully, the believer does not turn away from obeying the word of the Lord. Peter wrote, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12). The apostles believed that “suffering puts goodness into bolder relief.”¹²¹ Paul made a similar appeal when he praised the God of all comfort, “who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ” (2 Cor 1:4-5).

Even when indignation grips the believer because of the wicked, she does not grow resentful and bitter. By the grace of God she turns her anger into praise; her sorrow into a song. “Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge” (Ps 119:53). She sets God’s word to music and sings them as she walks this pilgrim way (Ps 119:53, *The Message*). The comfortable words of the gospel have taught us to sing, “Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God. Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to depend upon His Word” (Andrae Crouch).

8. *All In*

*You are my portion, Lord;
I have promised to obey your words.
I have sought your face with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.
I have considered my ways
and have turned my steps to your statutes.
I will hasten and not delay
to obey your commands.
Though the wicked bind me with ropes,
I will not forget your law.
At midnight I rise to give you thanks
for your righteous laws.
I am a friend to all who fear you,
to all who follow your precepts.
The earth is filled with your love, Lord;
teach me your decrees.*

Psalm 119:57-64

¹²¹ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 237.

The phrase, “You are my portion,” is grandly inclusive of everything the psalmist wants and needs. It recalls Asaph’s testimony, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps 73:26). “The metaphor signifies that everything he possesses is bound up in his relationship with the Lord.”¹²² In the eighth stanza the psalmist’s emphasis shifts from determination to demonstration. Reverencing the word of God is coupled with the responsibility to obey the word. He prays, “be gracious to me according to your promise.” These two words *portion* and *promise* sum up the gift of grace and between them the psalmist states with conviction, “I have promised to obey your words.” The rest of the stanza dwells on what it means for those who revere the word of God to promise obedience.

Honest self-examination is the psalmist’s first priority. The sign of repentance is to turn away from sin and turn toward God. We acknowledge our vulnerability to pride and apathy. As John Chrysostom wrote in his fourth century *Treatise on the Priesthood*, “I know how weak and puny my own soul is.”¹²³ Richard Baxter hammered away at spiritual complacency in *The Reformed Pastor* (1656). He singled out pastors when he wrote, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Baxter called for self-examination, saying, “Take heed to yourselves lest your example contradict your doctrine . . . lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues.”¹²⁴ He insisted, “We must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well.”¹²⁵ What Baxter said to pastors goes for the priesthood of all believers. We are all equally responsible to follow the Lord Jesus as committed disciples.¹²⁶

The psalmist is passionate about obedience, declaring, “I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.” He pledges that nothing will interfere with his faithfulness even if he is challenged by serious opposition. Bind him by ropes. Shake him awake in the middle of the night. No matter what he is determined to obey the Lord’s precepts. His reference to “midnight” recalls Paul and Silas singing hymns and praying in a Philippi jail even though they were bound and imprisoned (Acts 16:25). The psalmist distills the basics for meaningful obedience in just a few, quick poetic lines: personal self-examination, a sense of urgency, a commitment to perseverance, and a twenty-four-seven gratitude for God’s word. His final attribute of obedience is the fellowship of believers: “I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.” Herein lies the relational support and encouragement that is necessary for sustained biblical obedience. Luke captures this truth in his description of the early church (Acts 2:42). The key to the success of the early church was their devotion to the word of God, the fellowship of believers, heart-felt worship, and prayer. The psalmist is seeking God’s will with all his heart in the company of all who fear the Lord.

9. Pedagogy of Pain

*Do good to your servant
according to your word, Lord.
Teach me knowledge and good judgment,*

¹²² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:516

¹²³ Chrysostom, *Six Books On the Priesthood*, 77.

¹²⁴ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 63.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²⁶ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol. 1:124-129.

*for I trust your commands.
 Before I was afflicted I went astray,
 but now I obey your word.
 You are good, and what you do is good;
 teach me your decrees.
 Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies,
 I keep your precepts with all my heart.
 Their hearts are callous and unfeeling,
 but I delight in your law.
 It was good for me to be afflicted
 so that I might learn your decrees.
 The law from your mouth is more precious to me
 than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.
 Psalm 119:65-72*

The psalmist credits affliction with helping him to confront his aimlessness and apathy. The apostle James echoes the meaning of the ninth stanza when he writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4). The psalmist and the apostle are convinced that suffering is a useful spiritual formation tool. Affliction builds character one trial at a time. Instead of devising ways to escape suffering, we need to grow through suffering. If Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), we should expect his pedagogy to become our pedagogy. His learning curve is our learning curve, because the way to know Christ is to become like Jesus.¹²⁷

The psalmist emphasizes God’s goodness in five different ways in eight verses: the Lord is good to his servant; his judgments are good; the Lord is good in his being (“You are good”) and good in his actions (“What you do is good”); and in the providence of God the psalmist confesses that affliction has been good for his understanding and growth. When we suffer it may be a struggle to see the goodness of the Lord, but the psalmist encourages us to reflect on the Lord’s goodness even when we are troubled. The impact of his affliction-filtered understanding on his obedience to God’s word is more precious to him “than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Ps 119:72). This is tantamount to saying that there is no amount of money that he would give in exchange for God’s personal revelation and its impact on his life.

10. Friends of the Word

*Your hands made me and formed me;
 give me understanding to learn from your commands.
 May those who fear you rejoice when they see me,
 for I have put my hope in your word.
 I know, Lord, that your laws are righteous,
 and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.*

¹²⁷ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 161.

*May your unfailing love [hesed] be my comfort,
according to your promise to your servant.
Let your compassion come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight.
May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without excuse;
but I will meditate on your precepts.
May those who fear you turn to me,
those who understand your statutes.
May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees,
that I may not be put to shame.*

Psalm 119:73-80

The psalmist revels in the fact that he is made in God's image and that his entire being, body, mind, and soul, is designed to resonate with the will of God. The psalmist continues to reflect on the role that affliction plays in spiritual growth. He acknowledges to the Lord, "in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (Ps 119:75), but even as he highlights this truth, he prays for the Lord's comfort and compassion in the midst of the affliction. Only the Lord's unfailing love will sustain him and he knows that one of the chief ways the Lord's steadfast love is experienced is through true friends in the word. "May those who fear you rejoice when they see me. . . . May those who fear you turn to me" (Ps 119:74, 79). Our fallen, sin-twisted human condition makes obedience impossible apart from God's redeeming grace, but we can be born again, "not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).

The psalmist prays, "May those who fear you turn to me." The blessing of friends is a great gift. They share with us a deep desire and love for God's word. We need their company. The psalmist celebrates our life together centered in the word of God. He contrasts those who fear the Lord with the arrogant who seek to harm him. Anyone who has ever been attacked by arrogant wrongdoers can identify with the psalmist's longing for friends who rejoice in his company and turn to him for wisdom. Many believers endure nit-picky criticism and obnoxious personalities and thrive when they were surrounded by friends who fear the Lord and share their desire to honor the word of God in faith and practice. One of the ways God has designed to shame the arrogant is through the solidarity of those who fear him and love his word. The psalmist pledges himself to the Lord. "May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame" (Ps 119:80).

11. Resilient

*My soul faints with longing for your salvation,
but I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes fail, looking for your promise;
I say, "When will you comfort me?"
Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke,
I do not forget your decrees.
How long must your servant wait?
When will you punish my persecutors?*

*The arrogant dig pits to trap me,
contrary to your law.
All your commands are trustworthy;
help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.
They almost wiped me from the earth,
but I have not forsaken your precepts.
In your unfailing love [hesed] preserve my life,
that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.*
Psalm 119:81-88

In spite of his suffering, which he attributes to God's delay and his adversaries' unrelenting persecution, the psalmist affirms his uncompromising commitment to the word of God. His eyes are failing as he looks and longs for the salvation of God, but his hope in God's promises persist. He feels like a shriveled up old wineskin, blackened and smokey from being hung by the fireplace. He's been close to the fire for too long. The image is especially apt for us aging believers whose bodies are wasting away. Like the psalmist we want to be faithful to the end, but it feels like our health and strength are fading.

The psalmist does not question God's steadfast love or the trustworthiness of his commands, but he laments, "When will you comfort me?" He asks, "When will you punish my persecutors?" His convictions are firm, deliberately stated in prayer, "I have put my hope in your word. . . I have not forsaken your precepts" (Ps 119:81,87). What the psalmist questions is not the word of God, but his ability to persevere in the face of persecutors who would like nothing better than to wipe him off the face of the earth. The psalmist is bone-weary with longing for salvation and frustrated with waiting for vindication. He questions his resilience in the face of resistance. The psalmist makes a vital distinction in this eleventh stanza between God's reliability and his own weakness and vulnerability. The psalmist echoes the conviction of Job who said, "My joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One" (Job 6:10).

Those who read their Bibles for a nice spiritual "pick-me-up" are not reading the Bible the way the psalmist is reading the Bible. Nor are they identifying with the psalmist's angst, because they are not looking and longing for the salvation of the Lord. The Bible is a dangerous book but only for those who take it seriously. The word of God when it is received in the Spirit leads the person into a life-transforming relationship with God. Everything is shaped by the grace of God in obedience to God's commands and precepts. Those who limit faith to positive sentiments and good ideas cannot identify with the psalmist.

The eleventh stanza applies to all of Christ's followers in all situations. It is not easy being faithful to the word of God when the culture opposes "the reason for the hope you have," and speaks "maliciously against your good behavior in Christ" (1 Pet 3:15,16). The Bible endangers an old way of living that draws fire from those who resent God's truth and the Jesus way.¹²⁸ The cause of the psalmist's "sad trouble" was his faithfulness, not disobedience. He pays a high price for his resilience. Spurgeon wrote, "Whatever the command might cost him, it was worth it; he

¹²⁸ Webster, *The Living Word*, 9.

felt that God's way might be rough, but it was right; it might make him enemies, but still it was his best friend."¹²⁹

12. *Eternal Word*

*Your word, Lord is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures.
Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.
If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.
I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have preserved my life.
Save me, for I am yours;
I have sought out your precepts.
The wicked are waiting to destroy me,
but I will ponder your statutes.
To all perfection I see a limit,
but your commands are boundless.*

Psalm 119:89-96

The eternal word of God that created the heavens and established the earth is the same enduring word that saves us and directs our steps. The word of God with its laws, precepts, and statutes fit the life we were designed to live. We live to obey and we obey to live. The Author of life is the same as the Savior of the world. The history of nature and the history of redemption are revelations of the same God. All of life is of God and belongs to God.¹³⁰ There is order, beauty, meaning, and joy woven into the very nature of creation, because all things serve the Lord (Ps 119:91). Everything points to a significance that is neither random nor lucky. There is an inherent revelatory quality in all aspects of life. The world is called into existence by the will and word of God.¹³¹ In Hebrew, "word" and "deed" are expressed by the same noun. "This is a consequence of the fact that what God says he does (see Gen 1:3,5; Luke 1:37). This is so with regard to both the creation of the world and the redemption of his people (see Psalm 33:4-9)."¹³²

The twelfth stanza of the psalmist's prayer focuses on our response to the *forever* quality of God's revelation and the eternal nature of God's faithfulness. As real and as enduring as the visible physicality of God's material world appears to be, creation only lasts because it is sustained by God's powerful word (Heb 1:3). "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Heb 11:3). Nature's glory is a reflective glory pointing to the glory of God. The temporal glory bows to the eternal glory: "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures

¹²⁹ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, 179.

¹³⁰ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 113, 120.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹³² Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, 95.

forever” (Isa 40:8).

There is an emotional intensity embedded in the psalmist’s repeated references to “your word,” “your faithfulness,” “your laws,” “your precepts,” climaxing in the psalmist’s exclamation, “Save me, for I am yours!” The divine possession is not cause for resentment or resistance but cause for celebration. In the presence of Jesus, the Living Word, Peter discovered the truth that all Christ’s followers must come to: “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 6:68-69). The path of freedom is found in Jesus and his laws, precepts, and statutes: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The secret of human flourishing is found here: “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The psalmist embraces this truth and so should we.

The psalmist states his commitment explicitly: “I will never forget your precepts. . . . I am yours. . . . I have sought out your precepts. . . . I will ponder your statutes.” He acknowledges that without the guidance of the word of God he would have perished in his affliction and he would have been destroyed by the wicked. The word that lasts *forever* is his delight and his never-to-be-forgotten focus. It is his top priority. If we expect to understand the word, we must go beyond mental assent and intellectual effort, and grasp the truth experientially and emotionally. “When we have felt the quickening power of a precept,” wrote Spurgeon, “we never can forget it. . . . Experience teaches, and teaches effectually.”¹³³ The psalmist’s concern corresponds with the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

There is an end to all things, but of the word of God there is no end. The psalmist sings to God, “I see the limits to everything human, but the horizons can’t contain your commands!” (Psalm 119:96, *The Message*). Jesus echoes this same truth in his Sermon on the End of the World when he says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). We should not be surprised to hear that “every earthly enterprise has its day and comes to nothing” and “only in God and His commandments do we get beyond these frustrating limits.”¹³⁴ God inspires us to explore music, math, and mountain climbing, but always with the realization that these spheres of meaning can never be life’s goal. They can never substitute for the one thing necessary that gives comprehensive and centered meaning to all that we do. We are called to a life of faithfulness, fellowship, and fidelity. Only then can we embrace life’s challenges and endeavors as an act of worship to the triune God.

13. You Yourself Taught Me

*Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.
Your commands are always with me
and make me wiser than my enemies.*

¹³³ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, 188.

¹³⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 426.

*I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.
I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.
I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.
I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.*

Psalm 119:97-104

At first glance, you may not be impressed with the psalmist's self-assessment. He claims to be smarter than his enemies, to have more insight than all his teachers, and to have more understanding than his elders. Moreover he has kept his feet from every evil path and remained faithful to the word of God. Today's believer suspects that the psalmist thinks too highly of himself (Romans 12:3). Our first reaction may be to judge the psalmist. Hasn't he overestimated his devotion to God and inflated his obedience to the law. As one seminary professor said, "The purpose of an education is to help students move from unconscious ignorance to conscious ignorance." Does the psalmist think too highly of himself?

The thirteenth stanza requires discernment. The reader is asked to distinguish between a confidence based on acquired knowledge and natural intelligence and a confidence based on humble submission to the word of God. G. K. Chesterton observed a shift in how people think about humility. In the past people were humble about themselves and confident in the truth, but now they promote themselves at the expense of the truth. "A man was meant to be doubtful about himself," wrote Chesterton, "but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason."¹³⁵

The key line in the stanza that sanctifies the psalmist's ego and puts everything in perspective is the psalmist's statement, "for you yourself have taught me" (Ps 119:102). He uses the pronoun "you" twice, once as part of the verb and then by itself, so as to emphasize the fact that the Lord is his teacher.¹³⁶ Everything the psalmist says about his love and devotion to the law flows from his conviction that he is being taught by the Lord. His confidence lies not in his ability but in the Lord's wisdom. He boldly asserts his devotion and faithfulness as a credit to the word of God and the pedagogy of his Teacher. His boldness is without bravado; his confidence is without conceit. H. Richard Niebuhr captures the psalmist's perspective when he refers to the unique character of the kind of humility derived from Jesus. He calls it a kind of "proud humility and

¹³⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 31.

¹³⁶ Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, 101.

humble pride” because, “the humility of Christ is not the moderation of keeping one’s exact place in the scale of being, but rather that of absolute dependence on God and absolute trust in Him.”¹³⁷

The psalmist’s unfettered love and devotion to the word of God fills him with a sense of meaning and purpose that is unlike anything the world has to offer. With the Lord as his teacher, he has utmost confidence in what he is being taught. He praises God for the gift of wisdom. It is not to his credit, but to the Lord’s, that his wisdom is superior to his enemies, that his insights are greater than his teachers, and that his understanding is greater than the elders. The psalmist’s confidence is in the Lord, “for you yourself have taught me.” No wonder he keeps his feet from the evil path; no wonder he has determined to obey the Lord’s precepts. The apostle Paul’s description of the wisdom of God resonates well with the psalmist’s thirteenth stanza. Paul writes, “What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. . . .The person with the Spirit makes judgment about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, ‘Who had known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ (Isa 40:13). But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:12-16).

14. Faithfulness to the End

*Your word is a lamp unto my feet,
a light on my path.
I have taken an oath and confirmed it,
that I will follow your righteous laws.
I have suffered much;
preserve my life, Lord, according to your word.
Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth,
and teach me your laws.
Though I constantly take my life in my hands,
I will not forget your law.
The wicked have set a snare for me,
but I have not strayed from your precepts.
Your statutes are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
My heart is set on keeping your decrees
to the very end.*

Psalm 119:105-112

In the praying imagination of the Christian the psalmist’s light metaphor is transposed into a higher key. Jesus is the light of the world. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4). To believe in the Light is to walk in the light. The apostle John summed up the meaning of the fourteenth stanza when he wrote, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to

¹³⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27.

have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:5-7).

The psalmist clarifies what it means to walk in the light as Christ is the light. We begin with a solemn resolve to obey the word of the Lord. This resolution is based on the grace of Christ. We are committed to the righteous ways of the Lord, because we have been empowered to do so by the Spirit of Christ. We believe that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The disciplined habit and rhythm of obedience invokes from the psalmist a freewill offering of all-out praise. It inspires a genuine desire to learn more: “Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your law” (Ps 119:108). This is true even when obedience gives rise to opposition and resentment. The psalmist states, “I have suffered much; preserve my life, Lord, according to your word . . . I constantly take my life in my hands” (Ps 119:107, 109). If we remain faithful, we should expect it to be true for us what was true for the apostle Paul, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Fallen human nature cannot resist retaliation. “The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts” (Ps 119:110). The prophet Daniel’s faithfulness provoked envy and jealousy from among the ruling class in Babylon. His administrative colleagues could find “no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.” They gave up trying, saying, “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God” (Daniel 6:8). But they couldn’t resist setting a trap. They petitioned the king to issue an edict that made prayer “to any god or human being during the next thirty days,” except to Darius, punishable by death in the lion’s den” (Dan 6:7). The edict did not change Daniel’s commitment to prayer nor his confidence in the law of the Lord.

The psalmist is resolute and joyful. He acknowledges that the statutes of the Lord will last forever. His confidence is echoed in Peter’s resolve, when he said to Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life and we have to come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68). The final word of the fourteenth stanza affirms the psalmist’s faithfulness to the end: “My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end” (Ps 119:112). The end in “faithfulness to the end” may be a long way off but it is the only end worth pursuing, because faithfulness to the end proves faith from the beginning.¹³⁸

15. The Love/Hate Tension

*I hate double-minded people,
but I love your law.
You are my refuge and my shield;
I have put my hope in your word.
Away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commands of my God!*

¹³⁸ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol. 2:204-208.

*Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live;
do not let my hopes be dashed.
Uphold me, and I will be delivered;
I will always have regard for your decrees.
You will reject all who stray from your decrees,
for their delusions come to nothing.
All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross;
therefore I love your statutes.
My flesh trembles in fear of you;
I stand in awe of your laws.*

Psalm 119:113-120

In each stanza the psalmist develops a critical idea that underscores what it means to devote ourselves to the word. The fifteenth stanza focuses on the tension between loving and obeying God's word while living among people who are double-minded. The description of the double-minded fits the nominal Christian who has one foot in the world and another foot in the word and invariably the world wins. When the psalmist says, "I hate double-minded people," he doesn't have in mind pagan secularists as much as regular church-going believers. His concern lies with those who claim to follow the law of God but don't. Their passive aggressive rejection of God's decrees may be subtle and discreet. Instead of open rebellion, the double-minded "stray" from the Lord's decrees. They hold delusional opinions about their faithfulness and goodness. Instead of paying attention to the word of the Lord, they drift away. Instead of loving the law, they debate the meaning of the law. Instead of obeying the commands of God, they follow the spirit of the times. The prophet Elijah's response to the people of Israel is a classic confrontation with double-mindedness: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." And as if to confirm their double-mindedness, "the people said nothing" (1 Kings 18:21).

The apostle James explored the either/or challenge of this love/hate tension. He wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do" (James 1:5-8). If we are not careful, we may find ourselves caught between two worlds. An old Chinese proverb captures the predicament. It likens the double-minded person to someone trying to balance with a foot in two boats. We vacillate between the mind of Christ and the mind of the world. The value system of the world has permeated every pore and seeped into our bloodstream. Success and pleasure seem far more important to us than easily quoted but challenging-to-obey biblical commands. We are tempted to spiritualize our worldly desires and rationalize away biblical truths. When Jesus prayed Psalm 119 he must have had the Pharisees and teachers of the law in mind. He accused them of nullifying the word of God for the sake of their tradition. He said, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules'" (Matthew 15:7-9; see Isa 29:13).

The psalmist is not shy about equating the double-minded with “evildoers” and the “wicked” who will be discarded like dross (Psalm 119:115,119). Obedience draws fire, even if it is only resentment and envy. The conflict and the struggle to obey the word of God runs through every church. Two statements come toward the beginning and end of this stanza. First, “You are my refuge and my shield,” which can be translated, “You are my hiding place and shield,” followed by, “My flesh trembles in fear of you, I stand in awe of your judgments” (Ps 119:114, 120). Although these two statements may appear contradictory they are true to anyone who is serious about following the word of the Lord. Christ’s followers can identify with the psalmist, because Christ is both our “hiding place” and “a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28). We live in the abiding tension of Christ’s redemptive love and the call to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

16. Our Pledge

*I have done what is righteous and just;
do not leave me to my oppressors.
Ensure your servant’s well-being; [Give a pledge of good to your servant]
do not let the arrogant oppress me.
My eyes fail, looking for your salvation,
looking for your righteous promise.
Deal with your servant according to your love [hesed]
and teach me your decrees.
I am your servant; give me discernment
that I may understand your statutes.
It is time for you to act, Lord;
your law is being broken.
Because I love your commands
more than gold, more than pure gold,
and because I consider all your precepts right,
I hate every wrong path.*

Psalm 119:121-128

Obedience alone cannot sustain the servant’s hope and ensure his well-being. Only the Lord can ease his fear and sustain his well-being. Zeal alone is not enough. We need the Lord’s loving protection. At the heart of the sixteenth stanza is the confession, “I am your servant.” Three times the psalmist refers to himself as the Lord’s servant (Ps 119:122, 124, 125). He has done “what is righteous and just” (Ps 119:121). He loves the Lord’s commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and he considers all the Lord’s precepts to be right (Ps 119:127-128). In effect, he declares, “I am yours, I belong to you.”

In face of his oppressors, the psalmist pleads for reassurance. He implores the Lord, “Deal with your servant according to your love.” He begs, “It is time for you to act, Lord.” When we pray the sixteenth stanza today, it is important to remember that the Lord has acted: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory” (John 1:14). In Christ we are the recipients of a guarantee, the promised Holy Spirit, that ensures the believer’s well-being (Psalm 119:122).

In the upper room Jesus pledged, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. . . . When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of Truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me” (John 14:18-19; 15:26). The Holy Spirit is God made personal, our Advocate, in the daily struggle of obedience and faithfulness. The Holy Spirit is our “Comforter” from the Latin root *confortare*, which means “to strengthen.” The Spirit of Truth strengthens the fellowship of disciples by inspiring biblical insight and faithful obedience. The Spirit helps make obedience possible: “When you love me, you will be keeping my commands.” The Spirit encourages believers through theological understanding and ethical discernment (Ps 119:125).

17. Kept by God

*Your statutes are wonderful;
therefore I obey them [therefore my soul keeps them].
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
longing for your commands.
Turn to me and have mercy on me,
as you always do to those who love your name.
Direct my footsteps [Keep steady my steps] according to your word;
let no sin rule over me.
Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may obey your precepts.
Make your face shine on your servant
and teach me your decrees.
Streams of tears flow from my eyes,
for your law is not obeyed [because people do not keep your law].*
Psalm 119:129-136

The psalmist is persuaded completely. The statutes of the Lord are amazing.¹³⁹ He treasures them above all else; he doesn’t need convincing. But to his deep sorrow not everyone shares his enthusiasm for the law. To him the commands of God are priceless because they are light and life to the soul, but for others the law is despised and disobeyed. He is convinced that these commands, statutes, and precepts are essential for society to flourish. In keeping God’s decrees the darkness of human depravity and the sin of human oppression is overcome. The psalmist has a “Go for the Gold!” philosophy of life. He is like the man in Jesus’ parable who finds a treasure hidden in a field and when he found it, “he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44). “Jesus knows that the human heart hankers after a treasure,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “and so it is his will that we should have one. . . . Jesus does not deprive the human heart of its instinctive needs — treasure, glory and praise. . . .”¹⁴⁰ The psalmist has found that treasure in the law of God.

¹³⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:568.

¹⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 195.

The psalmist likens his longing for God's word to an insatiable hunger and an unquenchable thirst: "I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands" (Ps 119:131). The image invokes in the Christian's mind the fourth beatitude in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). He links his physical longing for water to his spiritual longing for living water (John 4:14). The psalmist causes us to ask ourselves if our appetite for God and his word is as real as physical hunger and thirst? Our thirst for life cannot be met in any other way than through Jesus Christ, who made this clear when he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink" (John 6:53-55).

The psalmist's high view of the word of God is not enough. It is one thing to value the law, it is another thing to keep it. He has not fooled himself into equating his beliefs with his practice. The statutes of the law are wonderful, but the psalmist is hesitant and doubtful about himself. He needs God's help and he spells out the help he needs in four specific ways:

(1) "Turn to me and have mercy on me" – The psalmist requests the active, personal attention and companionship of God himself;

(2) "Keep steady my steps according to your promise" (ESV) – He looks to God for immediate, daily guidance from his word to sustain his faithful obedience;

(3) "Redeem me from human oppression" – The psalmist pleads for God's redemptive grace to forgive him and free him from the grip of systemic sin so that he can obey God's precepts.

(4) "Make your face shine on your servant and teach me your decrees" – The word "shine" is translated as "light" in Psalm 119:130, and knits the stanza together. The psalmist's request recalls the blessing of Aaron: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num 6:24-26). Whoever confesses a high view of Scripture ought to pray for these four things right along with the psalmist. The key to living well is to be kept by God. As Luther sang, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word."¹⁴¹

The seventeenth stanza concludes emotionally, "My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law" (Ps 119:136, ESV). These are not self-righteous tears, nor indignant tears. They are tears of compassion. His deep sorrow is for those who are lost and helpless. He sheds tears of remorse and sadness for those whose lives are ruined because of their ignorance or rebellion or resentment of God's word. The psalmist does not weep over the indignity suffered by God and his word. He weeps for those who refuse to come to God.

Jesus may have had this psalm in mind when he wept over Jerusalem. He was moved to tears because he saw judgment looming over the city. He said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now is hidden from your eyes." He prophesied judgment because they did not recognize the time of God's coming to them (Luke 19:41-44). Jesus wept tears of compassion because the people were "harassed and helpless, like sheep

¹⁴¹ Luther, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word," 598.

without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, not out of frustration with the people, nor out of sorrow for Lazarus, but because of the desperate hopelessness of the human condition without faith in God and his word. Those who have friends and loved ones who refuse to honor God know what it is to cry “rivers of tears” (Ps 119:136). The prophet Jeremiah cried, “Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!” (Jeremiah 9:1). The psalmist is heart-broken over the sins of God’s people, and we should follow his example.

18. Lived Righteousness

*You are righteous, Lord,
and your laws are right.
The statutes you have laid down are righteous;
they are fully trustworthy.
My zeal wears me out,
for my enemies ignore your words.
Your promises have been thoroughly tested,
and your servant loves them.
Though I am lowly and despised,
I do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is everlasting
and your law is true.
Trouble and distress have come upon me,
but your commands give me delight.
Your statutes are always righteous;
give me understanding that I may live.*

Psalm 119:137-144

The psalmist declares, “You are righteous, Lord,” and “Your righteousness is everlasting.” God alone defines righteousness because only he is the Righteous One. Who God is and what God has done is altogether righteous, but we are not. Try as we might we cannot set things right. “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). Only God in his mercy can make us righteous. “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). Only Christ in and through his atoning sacrifice can make us righteous. “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). Jesus made the truth, “You are righteous, Lord,” come alive in person. Not only did he give us his righteousness, but he leads us in the way of righteousness. His imputed righteousness revolutionizes our lives. The apostle declared, “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus defines righteousness in a specific and definite way.

Jesus identified with this stanza in three ways. First, he is the Righteous One. The description doesn’t fit us, but it fits him. Jesus is the Holy and Righteous One. He is one with the Father. Second, Jesus fulfilled the law. He embodied, taught, and practiced the “fully trustworthy” statutes of the Lord. He proved his love and delight for God’s life-tested promises. Thirdly, he experienced adversity and opposition in a sin-twisted world. The psalmist prayed, “My zeal

wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.” But no one fits this description better than Jesus, who was consumed by his zeal for the Lord (John 2:17; Ps 69:9). And who better than Jesus to say, “Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts”? The psalmist prayed, “Trouble and distress have come upon me,” and then we hear Jesus pray, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ‘Father, glorify your name!’” (John 12:27-28).

We pray this eighteenth stanza today because of the righteousness of Christ. We identify with Jesus in these three ways. Since he is our righteousness we are called to embody, teach and practice the “fully trustworthy” and “thoroughly tested” statutes and promises of the Lord. And as result, we experience opposition from a world bent on ignoring and disobeying the word of God. Like our Lord, we may feel worn out, humiliated, and distressed, precisely because we have taken up our cross to follow him, but in the end we pray as the psalmist prayed, “Your statutes are always righteous; give me understanding to live” (Ps 119:144). For we know that lived righteousness is the only true way to live.

19. Spirit-Formation

*I call with all my heart; answer me, Lord,
and I will obey your decrees.
I call out to you; save me
and I will keep your statutes.
I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
that I might meditate on your promises.
Hear my voice in accordance with your love [hesed];
preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.
Those who devise wicked schemes are near,
but they are far from your law.
Yet you are near, Lord,
and all your commands are true.
Long ago I learned from your statutes
that you established them to last forever.*

Psalm 119:145-152

Grace-based obedience has its roots in a personal relationship with the Lord that is whole-hearted and all encompassing. Prayer is the subject of the nineteenth stanza, but not the type of prayer that is piously perfunctory. On the contrary, the way the psalmist calls on the Lord is intimate and deeply personal. His whole heart is in it. His “save me” prayer is intense and passionate. He rises before dawn to cry for help and throughout the day he affirms his hope in God’s word. He is alert through the night meditating on the promises of God. The psalmist proves his passion for obeying, keeping, hoping, and meditating on the word of God by how he prays: “I call with all my heart. . . I call out to you; save me. . . I rise before dawn. . . I meditate on your promises.”

In previous stanzas the psalmist has expressed his need for God's help to keep his statutes, decrees, and commands. But in this stanza he describes how he goes about seeking God's help. The description of his devotion, passion, and discipline is consistent with his quest for obedience and ought to inspire our own. Obedience does not come without a deep desire and a disciplined struggle. Some Christians labor under the false impression that the Christian life takes shape automatically, without our effort. "Live-and-let live" is their motto. "Just-be-yourself" is their counsel. The thinking seems to be that Christians will do the right thing spontaneously without any effort or discipline. The Holy Spirit is often credited with a "be-yourself" ethic, as if the indwelling presence of the Spirit will automatically cause Christians to do the right thing.

To think and act Christianly about sex and intimacy, leisure and sports, success and money, will not happen if we are fed a steady diet of pop Christianity. The challenge to take "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5) involves real prayer, the kind described by the psalmist.¹⁴² The psalmist prays to the Lord, "Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws." For the psalmist love and law are in a dynamic relationship. God's love for us and in us makes obedience to God's law possible. The apostle Paul understood the synergy between love and law in his prayer for the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:9-11).

The psalmist warns that "those who devise wicked schemes are near," as if to say the pressure to conform to the world and squelch the passion for Christ and his will is always near at hand. Excuses, temptations, and distractions are never far away and they come from people who "are far from the law" (Psalm 119:150). "Those who devise wicked schemes are near," but God is nearer. The psalmist prays emphatically, "Yet you are near, Lord, and all your commands are true." But the Lord is nearer because the Lord is answering the psalmist's whole-hearted, around-the-clock, ever-trusting, quest for the Lord. As the psalmist says, "Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever" (Ps 119:152).

20. Give me Life

*Look on my suffering and deliver me,
for I have not forgotten your law.
Defend my cause and redeem me;
preserve my life [give me life] according to your promise.
Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek out your decrees.
Your compassion, Lord, is great;
preserve my life [give me life] according to your laws.
Many are the foes who persecute me,
but I have not turned from your statutes.
I look on the faithless with loathing,
for they do not obey your word.
See how I love your precepts;
preserve my life [give me life], Lord, in accordance with your love [hesed].*

¹⁴² Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 41.

*All your words are true;
all your righteous laws are eternal.*
Psalm 119:153-160

We are nearing the end of this great psalm and we sense in this stanza a tone of personal desperation. As he has done throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist expresses his complete confidence in the revelation of God which he describes in various ways as, law, promise, decrees, statutes, and word. The rich fullness of God's life-giving word is set in contrast to the psalmist's acute sense of vulnerability and danger. His life is in jeopardy. He feels persecuted and reviled. He is in need of rescue, redemption, and reviving.

The themes of the previous stanza are woven into this stanza. The "save me" prayers given previously take on a specific plea for salvation in this stanza. We are given a deeper understanding of what the psalmist was praying for and in need of. The Lord is nearer than the nearness of his many foes (Ps 119:151), but he is in trouble. He pleads for deliverance on the basis of his long obedience to God's laws. His faith and faithfulness are bound together in his life. The preservation he calls out for is according to God's covenant promise, God's unfailing laws, and God's steadfast love.

The psalmist has a clear view of the opposing culture that has forgotten the law of God and turned away from God's statutes. The edges of his faith are sharp and distinctive. He faces real opposition and persecution for his faithfulness to God's word. If we follow his example we will not compromise the faith and "gradually sand down all the sharp edges of the gospel."¹⁴³ We cannot afford to confuse the American Dream with the Kingdom of God. We do not want to suffer an "alien alienation" in the name of Christendom because we are unwilling to follow the path of Christ. True alienation comes from following the word of God.

Under threat from his foes, the psalmist lashes out at his persecutors. He tells God, "I look on the faithless with loathing for they do not obey your word" (Ps 119:158). Is there any justification for showing our disgust, even our loathing, toward those who casually, even flippantly, disobey God's word? I doubt that the psalmist had any intention of giving us a verse that could be construed as a justification for hate. Nor did the psalmist intend to encourage a self-righteous disdain for the lost. This line does not justify anger and outrage against evildoers, but it does reveal the psalmist's deep passion for God and his word. The apostle Paul wrote, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9). We don't want to equivocate on God's revelation. We want to love the good and hate the evil, but we also want to "bless" our persecutors; "bless and not curse" (Rom 12:14). We don't want to repay anyone evil for evil. But as far as it depends on us, we want to live at peace with everyone and leave judgment to God (Rom 12:17-19).

The phrase, "Give me life" is repeated three times in the stanza. It is a single word in Hebrew that is translated in a variety of ways: "preserve my life," "revive me," "restore my life,"

¹⁴³ Timothy Tennent, blog post: <http://timothytennent.com/2017/10/16/on-the-need-to-be-prophetically-irenic/>

“quicken me,” and “give me back my life.” “The verb is the causative stem (piel) of ‘to live.’”¹⁴⁴ Spurgeon on the psalmist’s plea to be quickened wrote, “It is a desire which cannot be too often felt and expressed.” The psalmist wants “more life,” and more life means “more love, more grace, more faith, more courage, more strength; and if we get these we can hold up our heads before our adversaries.”¹⁴⁵ The basis for the psalmist’s threefold request, “give me life,” is not based on his faithfulness and diligence but on God’s promises, on God’s law, and on God’s love. To be revived by God is to be renewed in our inner being. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).

When Christians sing, “Give me Jesus” they ought to be mindful of the psalmist’s prayer, “Give me life.” For the God-given revival envisioned by the psalmist is neither shallow nor sentimental but deeply rooted in the costly grace of God’s salvation and in the redemptive love of God’s compassion and in the living, eternal word of God that lasts forever. The principles of revival contained within these eight verses correspond beautifully with the promise of Jesus, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The psalmist’s hope resonates with the apostle’s testimony, “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 2:20).

21. *Shalom*

*Rulers persecute me without cause,
but my heart trembles at your word.
I rejoice in your promise
like one who finds great spoil.
I hate and detest falsehood
but I love your law.
Seven times a day I praise you
for your righteous laws.
Great peace have those who love your law,
and nothing can make them stumble.
I wait for your salvation, Lord,
And I follow your commands.
I obey your statutes,
for I love them greatly.
I obey your precepts and your statutes,
for all my ways are known to you.*

Psalm 119:161-168

The psalmist’s love for God’s word overrules every form of persecution. Stanza twenty-one is the psalmist’s poetically crafted liberation theology. The psalmist takes what could be a defining lament, “rulers persecute me without cause,” and turns it into an occasion for praise. He trembles

¹⁴⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:582.

¹⁴⁵ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, 272.

before God because of his word (Ps 119:168). His heart stands in awe and he rejoices in the promise of God. The whole stanza becomes an expression of joy grounded in obedience to God's commands, statutes, and precepts in all he does.

The psalmist reduces the opposition to their method of operation, "falsehood," before launching into a recital of praise. He doesn't let the world's opposition get to him. He refuses to be discouraged and disoriented by those who seek to oppress him. He drives out the fear of worldly powers with the fear of the Lord and his word. He likens his joy to a soldier rejoicing in a military victory. Echoes of the psalmist's praise are reflected "in Christ's triumphal procession" spreading "the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2 Cor 2:14).

Seven times a day, which is to say, all day every day, he expresses gratitude in his heart to the Lord (Col 3:16). In spite of threats and obstacles, he experiences "great peace" because it is "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Phil 4:7). This is the only time "shalom" is used in Psalm 119, and it foreshadows the peace of the Messiah. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). The peace of shalom is Christ's "great peace." This is the peace of the loving Father and the peace that empowers our loving obedience.¹⁴⁶

The psalmist offers one more reason for his passionate devotion and faithful obedience. He concludes, "I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you." The knowledge that we are fully known and kept by the grace of God motivates our faithfulness to God's word. "Now I know in part;" wrote Paul, "then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). We are not alone and we are fully known. Our self-understanding takes shape in relationship with the three-person God, who leads us on a journey of confession and commitment based on the word of God. Like the psalmist we are ever-mindful of living before God, knowing "that from him and through him and for him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

22. *Help me, I'm Yours!*

*May my cry come before you, Lord;
give me understanding according to your word.
May my supplication come before you;
deliver me according to your promise.
May my lips overflow with praise,
for you teach me your decrees.
May my tongue sing of your word,
for all your commands are righteous.
May your hand be ready to help me,
for I have chosen your precepts.
I long for your salvation, Lord,
and your law gives me delight.
Let me live that I may praise you,
and your laws sustain me.*

¹⁴⁶ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 63.

*I have strayed like a lost sheep.
Seek your servant,
for I have not forgotten your commands.*
Psalm 119:169-176

A humble and needy supplicant cries out to God for help. In the previous stanza the psalmist boldly announced his commitment to God's word, but in this final stanza, he pleads for deliverance. The two stanzas appear contradictory but back-to-back they express the daily experience of sincere believers who confidently seek to obey God's word and who humbly depend on God's help to do so.

We live in the positive tension between commitment and vulnerability. We can confidently say with the apostle, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13) and in the next breath say, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor 12:9). The twenty-second stanza is a reminder of our strength and our weakness in Christ. If the Master said, "The Son can do nothing by himself" and "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:19, 30), then how much more should we confess our complete dependence on the Lord. We join the psalmist in seeking the Lord for understanding, deliverance, and inspiration.

The range of need articulated by the psalmist corresponds to every aspect of our being: understanding for the mind, assurance for the soul, fellowship in the spirit, and inspiration for the heart. The psalmist needs what we all need from the Lord, instruction, companionship, love, and wisdom. We are not self-made, self-sufficient, men and women who measure the value of our lives by what we achieve. We are creatures made in God's image who measure the value of life by what we receive. By God's grace we are situated in a universe designed for discovery and worship, and endowed with the capacity for love and reason, intelligence and creativity, purpose and meaning. We are "hard-wired" for communion with God and community with one another. Our fallen and sinful human nature makes praising God difficult but with God's help we can embrace our mother-tongue and break into song. This is why the psalmist prays, "May my lips overflow with praise," and "May my tongue sing your word for all your commands are righteous" (Ps 119:171-172).

Throughout Psalm 119 the psalmist compares his passion for obedience to his foes who have no regard for God's law and who seek to persecute him for his faithfulness. But in this last stanza his attention is turned to the Lord. His true and bold passion for God's word is juxtaposed with deep feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. No matter how deeply spiritual and biblically wise we may become by God's grace, we never rise above this plea: "Let my cry come right into your presence, God; provide me with the insight that comes only from your Word" (Ps 119:169, The Message). So when the psalmist says, "I have strayed like a lost sheep," he is not lamenting his lostness as much as he's picturing his neediness before God. He is not like the lost sheep in Jesus' parable nor is he harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd" (Luke 15:1-7; Matthew 9:36). By God's grace the psalmist is a faithful, devoted, obedient, lover of God's word. He is a wise, disciplined, and resilient servant of the Lord. But that doesn't change the fact that

he stands in need of God's sustaining grace. Luther commented on this concluding verse, "This verse is extremely emotional and full of tears, for truly we are all thus going astray, so that we must pray to be visited, sought, and carried over by the most godly Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed forever. Amen."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, vol. 11:534.

Psalm 119's twenty-two stanzas challenge Christ's followers to engage the word of God. These expository prayers are followed by fifteen pilgrim psalms that prepare the people of God for expository worship. Word and worship are bound together in the praying imagination. The word of God studied, obeyed, sung, prayed, memorized, internalized and enjoyed, is conjoined with the worship of God that is rooted, real, reverent, rigorous, personal, communal and centered. Taken together these two sections guide the believer into the word and into worship.

Tradition holds that the "Songs of Ascents" (Psalms 120-134) were sung by the people of God as they went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual festivals. The psalmist may have used the plural form of "ascents" as a simple plural to refer to the quarterly pilgrimages to Jerusalem to keep the feasts of the Lord, or the plural of majesty, meaning "The Great Ascent" may have been used to magnify the liturgical significance of this sequence.¹⁴⁸ These short, terse, poetic psalms, with their quick transitions and artistic brevity, transformed travelers into worshippers-on-the-way. The Psalms of Ascents can be memorized more easily because of their brevity. They often accent a particular word that helps to focus the meaning. We picture the pilgrims singing these songs as they journeyed to Jerusalem.

"Pilgrim" is an excellent word to describe the person who sang these songs, but the word itself does not appear in the Bible.¹⁴⁹ Some translations may use the word "pilgrim" or "pilgrimage" (Gen 47:9; Exod 6:4; Psalm 119:54), but the better word is "sojourner" or "sojourning." The Hebrew conveys the idea of temporary guest or resident alien. The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "sojourn" in Psalm 120:5 is *paroikia* which is the root of our English word "parish." This "congregation of pilgrims," writes Patrick Reardon, "is the Church that is in exile, on pilgrimage, here in this world, encompassed by calumny and malice."¹⁵⁰ The apostle Peter's letter to the God's elect exiles or chosen outsiders picks up on this theme and develops the discipleship profile of the world's resident aliens. Reardon sees First Peter as a kind of commentary on Psalm 120.¹⁵¹

As we meditate on these sojourner psalms we will find a deep affinity with the apostle Peter's spiritual direction. Peter wrote to the followers of Christ scattered over five rural Roman provinces. Their newfound faith in Christ literally changed their social standing. Because of Christ they were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. The challenge we face today is similar to what the people of God have faced throughout salvation history.¹⁵² In the eyes of the world we are outsiders, resident aliens. We are strangers in our home culture, but we have a spiritual house built by Christ. We may not be crossing political and ethnic borders, but we are foreigners nevertheless. Language, food, and many customs are the same, but the word of God, Eucharistic fellowship, and Jesus' Kingdom ethic make all the difference. We

¹⁴⁸ Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 240.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 12.

become sojourners in our familiar culture for the sake of Christ.

My Distress

*I call on the Lord in my distress,
and he answers me.
Save me, Lord,
from lying lips
and from deceitful tongues.
Psalm 120:1-2*

The catalyst for the believer's journey to God is the mess of the human condition. Evil is the reality confronted by the psalmist's soulful resistance to the ways things are and were never meant to be. Righteousness is the quest for the way of life as God intended it to be. It is inevitable that we should set out for Jerusalem in lament. The Bible knows no other pilgrimage than the journey we begin in distress, crying out to the Lord, "Save me." Those who find Psalm 120 an odd way to begin this worship series of ascent psalms have opted for a starting point outside salvation history. Repentance, conversion, and transformation are key to setting things in motion. The trip to Jerusalem and Mount Zion always begins this way – with the Lord's salvation. The whole myth of self-sufficiency is simply foreign to the pilgrimage. The idea of working to impress is out of place and has no traction along this path. No true sojourner sets out as a hero ready for a great adventure. If we were climbing Mount Everest, maybe, but certainly not Mount Zion. The believer is neither a tourist nor an adventurer. Christians today who pray this psalm have taken up a cross. They are following Jesus and like their Lord they have set their face to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). They are learning to pray this psalm the way Jesus prayed.

The entire sequence of psalms is framed by the Lord's response to the psalmist's cry for help. Psalm 120 begins with a confident declaration. The Lord has answered, is answering, and will answer his call. It is here and now, in the continuous present. We pray this psalm with the psalmist. We are in need of salvation and only the Lord can save us. The world is a distressful place and what makes it that way are "lying lips" and "deceitful tongues." The fall of humanity into sin and depravity was caused by a lie. Satan asked, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat fruit from any tree of the garden?'" And proceeded to refute Eve's clear understanding, saying, "'You will not certainly die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen 3:1-5). Ever since evil has been striving to gain the upper hand through deceit ("lying lips"), deception ("deceitful tongues"), and denial ("They are for war").

The prophet Jeremiah identified with this psalm and agreed with the psalmist that the underlying cause of apostasy, adultery, and idolatry was lies and deception. People use their tongue "like a bow, to shoot lies." Jeremiah warned, "'Beware of your friends; do not trust anyone in your clan. For every one of them is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer. Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning. You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me,' declares the Lord" (Jer 9:3-6). Lies can be told and lies can be lived. The psalmist is up against a world that

despises the truth, and he calls on the Lord, “Save me, Lord.” Psalm 120 marks the turning point “from a dreamy nostalgia for a better life to a rugged pilgrimage of discipleship in faith.”¹⁵³

Judgment

*What will he do more to you,
and what more besides, you deceitful tongue?
He will punish you with a warrior’s sharp arrows,
with burning coals of the broom bush.*
Psalm 120:3-4

The sojourner’s song is poetically terse and swift in transition. Like the pilgrim on the path the psalm can turn on a dime. The psalmist speaks out loud to his deceitful enemies who are nowhere to be found within earshot. But he reinforces his soul with the truth. Don’t be fooled, he sings to his children and his elders along the way, God will judge liars. “God’s arrows of truth and coals of judgment” will answer the liar.¹⁵⁴ The psalmist says in effect, “Do you know what’s next, can you see what’s coming, all you barefaced liars? Pointed arrows and burning coals will be your reward” (Ps 120:3-4, *The Message*). This is the self-talk in prayer that strengthens the soul, because it embraces the divine perspective and relies on the truth for encouragement. We can insist to ourselves that we are nothing and we’re all alone. Our inner monolog can be like Elijah’s prayer under the broom bush, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). Or with the psalmist we can acknowledge the fate of those who insist on living a lie and double-down on the truth.

“Woe is Me!”

*Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek,
that I live among the tents of Kedar!
Too long have I lived
among those who hate peace.
I am for peace;
but when I speak, they are for war.*
Psalm 120:5-7

The psalmist is not a literalist. He captures the truth by painting a picture rather than taking a picture. He envisions two far off places, Meshek and Kedar, Meshek is far to the north in southern Russia (Ezek 38:2; 39:1) and Kedar is far to the south in the wilderness of Arabia (Isa 21:16-17; Ezek 27:21). If you were an Israelite, these two places represented cultures that were hostile to everything an Israelite longed for. It would be like suggesting that living in America was no better than living in North Korea or Somalia. That’s how alien the psalmist felt in his home culture.

Shortly after I moved to the South I was ordering a cup of coffee when the waiter said, “You’re not from here, are you?” I explained that I grew up in New York and that I had most recently had

¹⁵³ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 24.

¹⁵⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 430.

come from California. She quipped, “Oh, you’re from all those pagan places.” Since I couldn’t just leave it at that, I explained to her that I was a pastor and that I found it easier to preach in those “pagan places” than in the South, because Christian identity and commitment seemed more clearly defined and meaningful. She shrugged and sighed like I didn’t know what I was talking about, but I think the psalmist would have understood. The sojourner who wrote this pilgrim song felt like a foreigner in his home culture. He lived among liars who paid lip service to God, but they we’re really for war. They were at war with themselves and with others.

In spite of the psalmist’s weariness (“too long have I lived among those who hate peace”), he unites in his praying imagination what the world cannot fathom. He links salvation (“save me, Lord”) with shalom (“I am for peace”). The first phrase in the last verse is simply “I peace,” meaning, “I am all about peace,” or “I’m all for peace.” It is not easy being for peace when the culture around you is for war. The apostles picked up on this theme. God’s grace produces peace, peace with God and the peace of God. We are called to be a people of peace, to cultivate inner peace and to make peace even with those who may despise us, because “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).

Not only must believers refrain from doing evil, “they must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet 3:11; see Ps 34:14). Since God has taken the initiative to bring about our reconciliation, we who have been reconciled in Christ can take the initiative and humble ourselves. We are freed up to pursue peace because “from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5:16). We have not only been reconciled to God in Christ but we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Peter’s emphasis is in full accord with the apostle Paul’s exhortation: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,” and “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:18). Because of the grace of Christ it is possible to “Let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, since as members of one body [we] were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 107.

Distress is the catalyst for devotion. We are in trouble and we need help. We cry out to the Lord for his salvation, because we live in a culture of lies and deception (Psalm 120). So we set out on a journey of faith. We are sojourners on the way, seeking the Lord in the company of God's people, but it doesn't take long before we realize that there is a whole new set of dangers. The journey is not safe. We have escaped Egypt only to end up in the wilderness. One night out under the stars with the threat of lions and robbers and one day under the blistering heat of the sun is enough to convince us that we need the Lord's protection. To underscore this truth the psalmist repeats the Lord's personal name, Yahweh, five times and describes the Lord as our "keeper" six times. In eight short verses all those who have embarked on this journey of discipleship know that the Lord their savior is their daily guardian, their protector, their keeper. The apostles will grasp this truth as well and reassure believers that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35-39).

My Help

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains –
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 121:1-2

The opening question shakes off the naivete of denial and the carelessness of indifference. The journey is fraught with danger and only someone either pollyannaish or narcissistic fails to ask it. "I lift my eyes" is a way of saying that the whole person is involved in asking this question. We picture the sojourner setting out, looking up, seeing the far distant landscape, and stopping dead in his tracks. The pilgrim's plodding with one foot in front of another requires something more than the will to travel, the fellowship of fellow travelers, and the excitement of the adventure. The way forward is not made possible on the basis of human fellowship alone nor in the "can-do" spirit of "I can do this." The psalmist is right to ask this question and we're eager for the answer.

The psalmist uses the hills and mountains metaphorically to represent a range of dangers. They stand for the physical challenge of making it over them and the spiritual challenge of what they represent in the surrounding pagan religion. They are as literal as a slippery path and a narrow gap haunted by thieves and robbers. And they are as symbolic as the pagan high places, dotting the landscape with shrines to Baal and Asherah. Disciples today face the same range of physical and spiritual challenges. Every time we look up we face some new diagnosis or deception that threatens to up-end the journey and fill us with anxiety.

However, the sojourner's pause to look up and ask his question is only momentary, just long enough, to remember: "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The answer dwarfs the mountains and those diagnoses and deceptions that the mountains represent.

The all-encompassing nature of this reassuring answer puts the daily traumas and extended life troubles in perspective. The apostles pick up on this answer and expound its meaning. They root our lives in the sovereign supremacy of the Lord our Savior. Paul writes, “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.” The psalmist saw the climax of his pilgrimage in the faithful worship of Yahweh in the temple in Jerusalem. The apostle saw the climax of our pilgrimage in the very presence of the Lord. Paul writes, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:16-23). The Anglican missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin was asked if he was an optimist or a pessimist. He answered, “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.” Likewise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer centered everything in Christ. “The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I shall die, and the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the sole ground of my hope that I, too, shall be raised on the Last Day. . . . I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁶

Reassurance

*He will not let your foot slip –
 He who watches over you will not slumber;
 indeed, he who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
 The Lord watches over you –
 The Lord is your shade at your right hand;
 the sun will not harm you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
 The Lord will keep you from all harm –
 he will watch over your life;
 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
 both now and forevermore.
 Psalm 121:3-8*

There is an antiphonal response to the psalmist’s confident answer. He is in the company of like-minded pilgrims who hear his answer with delight and respond with words of assurance. Oh, the blessing of this kind of life together. Question raised. Answer given. Songs of comfort and assurance sung as the company of committed move along the path.

The metaphoric picture of the Lord who neither slumbers nor sleeps recalls the prophet Elijah’s show-down with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The prophet proved that there was no comparison between the never-sleeping, ever-alert, and always responsive Guardian of Israel and Baal, the god who was prone to nod off. After spending the whole day calling on the name of

¹⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 54.

Baal, the prophets shouted in desperation, “Baal, answer us!” When nothing happened Elijah began to taunt them: “Shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:26-27). And in the end, Baal never did wake up. Elijah’s water soaked bull-sacrifice was totally consumed along with the rock and sand when the fire of the Lord fell and burned everything up. This exceptional miracle only served to prove the rule. “Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4).

The psalmist does not intend to convey that God’s people live trouble-free lives without sprained ankles and skin cancer. We are as vulnerable to cancer and car accidents as the next guy. We live in a world where conquest, famine, starvation and death run rough shod over humanity. There are just as many Christians taking heart medication as non-Christians. The difference Christ makes is that in the midst of evil the Lord will keep us. “All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside,” writes Peterson. “Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets within us.”¹⁵⁷ We agree with the apostle “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). None of these troubles can separate us from the love of Christ.

We set out on this journey of discipleship knowing that salvation and shalom are bound together (Ps 120). They are gifts from God, “so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:9). But we are no sooner on our way than we’re confronted by a host of troubles that threaten to undo us. The promise of protection implies anything but a trouble-free life. “The Lord will keep you from all harm,” assumes a battle the Lord aims to win. Danger is expected when the believer is told, “he will watch over your life” (Ps 121:7). The psalmist offers the Lord’s practical daily assurance of sure-footed grace and shade-protected companionship. But the promise of protection does not stop there. The Lord promises personally to be our “keeper” in every facet of life. Although we do not come close to meriting his loving attention, the Lord in his mercy promises to care for everything about us. For the Lord to watch over our “coming and going both now and forevermore” means there is no time or place outside of his loving protection. “This is our God; this is the God of our pilgrimage. This is the God of unfailing, unending watchfulness and keeping grace, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 39.

¹⁵⁸ Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 36.

The Psalms of Ascents come in five sets of three psalms each.¹⁵⁹ Within the first four sets, the three psalms follow a sequence: the first psalm begins with the distress of the human condition; the second psalm focuses on the theme of the Lord's protection in spite of the dangers along the way; and the third psalm brings the pilgrimage to a conclusion in Zion. The sojourners were equipped morning, noon, and night with psalms to sing and prayers to pray. In the morning, they confronted reality: lying lips (Ps 120:2), contempt (Ps 123:3), tears of sorrow (Ps 126:5), and oppression (Ps 129:2). At mid-day they focused on God's provision: protection from all harm (Ps 121:7), life-saving help (Ps 124:1), security and rest (Ps 127:1-2), and forgiveness (Ps 130:4). In the evening they looked forward to Zion. They celebrated the peace (Ps 122:6), justice (Ps 125:4), prosperity (Ps 128:2), contentment (Ps 131:2), and blessing (Ps 134:3) of Jerusalem. Each psalm uniquely prepares the sojourner for worship and when taken together they move the company of the committed into the presence of God.

The House of the Lord

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,
 "Let us go to the house of the Lord."
 Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.
 Psalm 122:1-2*

The antiphonal encouragement heard by the psalmist sweeps aside the loneliness of the earnest sojourner and places him – places her – in the fellowship of believers. Our individualistic spiritual aspirations are challenged by the blessing of others who insist on including us. "Let us go to the house of the Lord," provides the incentive we need to enter into the joy of the Lord. Christ's followers hear this positive exhortation in concert with the refrain that runs through the Book of Hebrews: "Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. . ." (Heb 4:14); "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. . ." (4:16); "Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity. . ." (6:1); "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart . . ." (10:22); "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. . ." (10:23); "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. . ." (10:24); "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. . ." (Heb 12:1). For believers all of these exhortations are contained in the psalmist's exhortation, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." This is what it means to "go" to church – to belong, to enter into, to be devoted to "the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

"Let us" corresponds to a shared reality that the psalmist visualizes for us, "Our feet are standing in your gates." The crowded loneliness of western individualism is replaced by the gathered community rejoicing. The line, "Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem," evokes a certain sense of awe. We picture the sojourner looking around 360°. The long journey is over. The arrival is satisfying. The experience is inspiring. Grace has led his family home, to the house of the Lord.

¹⁵⁹ Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 19-21.

The House of David

*Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up –
the tribes of the Lord –
to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel.
There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.*
Psalm 122:3-5

The poet's description of Jerusalem's earthy, urban complexity describes a real place designed for the people of God. The fact that the buildings were "closely compacted together" meant that the city was packed with people. Jerusalem was the spiritual and political center of the people of God. This is where the tribes of the Lord came to worship. Three times a year as prescribed by the Old Testament Law people from all over Israel ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. They came to praise the Lord and to remember all that the Lord had done for them. They were thankful for God's blessings in harvest and in history. They remembered the Exodus and they praised God. The image of thrones stands for judgment and justice. Jerusalem is where you came to worship the Lord and to obtain his social justice. The pilgrim experiences a satisfying sense of congruence. This is where security, worship, and justice come together. This is the place where the many tribes become one people.

David made Jerusalem Israel's God-centered alternative to the pagan high places. "In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; and bulls will be offered on your altar" (Ps 51:16-19). David's son Solomon built the Temple and established worship in Jerusalem based on the Tabernacle and the rituals prescribed in Leviticus. Solomon was the architect for Israel's new society. He established Israel's boundaries and gave her a reputation among the nations for wisdom, wealth and power. He put Jerusalem on the map as Israel's capital. It was a time of growth and prosperity. "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy" (1 Kings 4:20). Under Solomon's rule Israel appeared to reach its highest potential. Solomon's Jerusalem was a harbinger of the shalom to come, his splendor, only a faint hint of the majesty of God. Yet Solomon was torn between the fear of the Lord and the power of his ego and conflicted soul. There is no hint of internal conflict in the "pilgrim's warmth of spiritual emotion."¹⁶⁰ He and his family experience a grateful sense of arrival. They are where they belong and they are thankful.

The invitation to go up to Jerusalem is not in our day an invitation to visit the "Holy Land" nor is it an invitation to celebrate a religious heritage nor any form of political or ethnic Zionism. The invitation is to come into the presence of God, but this "presence" is no longer defined geographically, but relationally. It is an invitation to come to Christ – and no one else. The

¹⁶⁰ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 212.

Messiah has come. We cannot pray Psalm 122 and pretend that Christ has not come and fulfilled the whole sacrificial system through his atoning sacrifice. Those who belong to Christ have been indwelt by the Spirit of God. Their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and the structural language of Jerusalem has been reworked to describe God's people who are "members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:19-22).

The Household of Faith

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

"May those who love you be secure.

*May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels."*

For the sake of my family and friends,

I will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your prosperity.

Psalm 122:6-9

When Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time he wept. He had walked all the way from Galilee (more than one hundred miles from Caesarea Philippi), but unlike the company of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, he chose to ride the last two miles in order to make a statement. The Prince of Peace approached Jerusalem in humility, riding on a donkey. With its mother by its side, the young male donkey remained calm as the processional slowly moved through the noisy crowd. In the spirit of Psalm 122 the festive atmosphere was charged with emotion and expectation. By choosing a donkey, Jesus stirred the people's imagination. Matthew draws out the meaning of the symbol by locating the image in salvation history: "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'" (Zech 9:9).

Jesus wept because the people did not recognize "the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:44). With deep sadness he said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Lk 19:42). His reference to peace is reminiscent of Psalm 122 and causes one to wonder if Jesus felt the sharp paradox between his deep sorrow and the psalmist's great joy. The psalmist urges the people to ask for peace, but the peace he has in mind is not simply the absence of war. The peace of Jerusalem is the fullness of God's blessing in every regard. It is internal well-being as well as external security. This peace is political and relational, social and spiritual. It is peace with God and man. In the upper room Jesus offered his disciples peace. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

We cannot create *shalom*, any more than we can save ourselves. We are poor candidates for peace. Our bodies break down. People fail us. Terrorists attack. Friends betray us and war breaks out. The world's strategies for obtaining peace have proven superficial and unsuccessful.¹⁶¹ Jesus distinguished the true gift of peace from worldly peace. He came into Jerusalem to do for us what only the Prince of Peace could do (Isa 9:6). "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:4-5). *Shalom* is the priceless gift that we could never earn or deserve: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Rom 5:1).

Shalom embraces the fullness of salvation, which means deliverance from "sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life." The meaning of *Shalom* is exceedingly positive, embracing "peace with God, access to God's favor and presence, hope of regaining the glory intended for humankind, endurance in suffering, steadfast character, an optimistic mind, inner motivations of divine love and power of the Spirit, ongoing experience of the risen Christ and sustaining joy in God."¹⁶²

The peace we long for is the Peace of God, for only his peace, "which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7). This is the lasting peace that survives the pain and suffering of this life and outlasts death itself. "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal" (Isa 26:3-4).¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 64.

¹⁶² White, "Salvation," 968.

¹⁶³ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 66.

The second set of three psalms follows a similar pattern to the first. We begin with distress and lament, followed by danger and dependence, and conclude with arrival and deliverance. The sojourner's journey to Jerusalem confronts the world's contempt and navigates the dangers before arriving in Jerusalem. It is right and good for Christians to track these psalms as they "press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [them]" (Phil 3:12). The physical journey to Jerusalem is analogous to the Christian's path of discipleship.

As in Psalm 120 the psalmist endures "no end of contempt" (Ps 123:3). It is as if he dwells in a strange land with people hostile to the covenant promises of Yahweh (Ps 120:5). He feels like a foreigner in his own homeland. Where he lives and works is far removed from the congruence and peace of Mount Zion. Instead of looking up to the mountains – to the spiritual high places of the pagan culture (Ps 121:1) – the psalmist's eyes look to the Lord.

"I lift my eyes to You"

*I lift my eyes to you,
to you who sit enthroned in heaven.
As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,
till he shows us his mercy.*

Psalm 123:1-2

There are many places to look. The psalmist might have looked with contempt upon those who showed him contempt. He might have looked with resentment upon those who should have worked to improve his situation. He might have looked down on those he was in a position to bully and upon whom he could take out his frustrations. There are always places to look. But the psalmist looked to the Lord God. He looked up to the one who sits "enthroned in heaven." The expression, "I lift my eyes" implies deliberation and intentionality.

In the upper room Jesus "looked toward heaven and prayed, 'Father, the hour has come'" (John 17:1). Humility and adoration provide the right posture for true spirituality. Jesus looked up to pray, not within to reflect. Like the psalmist, his prayer was not an inner dialogue, but a real conversation with the Father.¹⁶⁴ He who on bended knee looked into the eyes of the disciples as he washed their feet now lifts his eyes to heaven as he prays to the Father, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). The striking paradox, none other than God the Son in communion with the Father, in the final act of his mission: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Within this short psalm is also a striking paradox. The psalmist likens his submission before the Lord to a slave before his master. The way a slave looks to his master – the way a female slave

¹⁶⁴ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 40.

looks to her mistress – is how he looks to the Lord. The “look” says a lot about a person. The eyes don’t lie. Arrogance, envy, greed, pride, shame, and resentment can all be read in the eyes. Just as you can read respect, honor, humility, love, and compassion in the eyes. The psalmist’s eyes are on the exalted Lord and if we could see into his eyes we would see a look of confidence and trust because he was looking to the One seated on a throne high and lifted up. Surely whatever temptation to envy or resentment that he might have felt was corrected by looking up to the Lord. The psalmist emphasizes “eyes” and “hands.” “Eyes” signify the attention of the whole person to the Lord and “hands” signify God’s power and authority. The psalmist is intent on putting his whole life in the hands of God.

“Have Mercy on Us”

*Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us,
for we have endured no end of contempt.
We have endured no end
of ridicule from the arrogant,
of contempt from the proud.*

Psalm 123:3-4

However, this analogy of servitude stands in tension with the situation of oppression. Why does the psalmist who has “endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant” and “of contempt from the proud,” paint himself as a submissive slave before the majesty of God? Why doesn’t the psalmist call for justice against his arrogant and proud oppressors instead of asking three times for mercy for himself? The paradox deftly articulates that the only way to freedom for the oppressed is service to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It is significant that the apostles embraced the identity of a slave to describe their new found freedom in Christ. In *Ephesians*, Paul did not hesitate to call the followers of Jesus, “slaves of Christ” (Eph 6:6). In spite of all the cultural baggage associated with slavery, Paul co-opted the language and imagery of the slave and used it to define his relationship to Christ. Far from rendering believers passive to social pressures, Paul sought to make them immune to social pressures. “Believers are not to return to the bondage of an honor-shame culture where everything revolves round what status is achieved in human eyes.”¹⁶⁵ For Paul the bottom line is the Cross: “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings” (1 Corinthians 7:23). Ultimately the only freedom worth having is the freedom found in Christ, because only that freedom sets us free from the selfish social values of the world, from the dog-eat-dog world of cut-throat competition, and from the law of sin and death.¹⁶⁶

As justified as a call for justice might be, it would have missed the psalmist’s fundamental need for forgiveness. The psalmist’s plea, while couched in the context of oppression, had the Spirit-guided wisdom to cry for mercy. When we come before God our chief need will always be for God’s merciful forgiveness rather than God’s judgment against others. Psalm 123 offers a paradigm for the prophet Isaiah who declared the Lord’s woes of judgment against oppressors,

¹⁶⁵ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 562.

¹⁶⁶ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 168-169.

but when he himself has a vision of the Lord high and lifted up and seated on a throne all he can say is, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isa 6:1-5).

Those who ridicule the faithful and show no end of contempt for them are described by the psalmist as arrogant and proud. They pride themselves on their self-sufficiency and scorn the faithful for their dependence upon the Lord. The picture the psalmist paints looks suspiciously like upperclass Israelites who are in the evil habit of oppressing their fellow Israelites. Psalm 123 resonates with other Psalms, like Psalm 73, and with the Prophets who exposed the sinful rebellion of those who prided themselves on belonging to the house of David.

There is no resolution to this lament psalm other than to wait for the mercy of God and keep moving toward Zion. We are to keep our eyes “ever on the Lord” (Ps 25:15). The psalmist asserts, “My eyes are fixed on you, Sovereign Lord; in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death” (Ps 141:8). Psalm 123 reminds us to fix our eyes on Jesus. We are on a redemptive pilgrimage from death to life, from sin’s depravity to salvation’s deliverance. We are not following a religious tour guide or spiritual director, exploring religious sites and sharing spiritual experiences. This is not a pilgrimage from birth to death, nor a quest for spiritual enlightenment.¹⁶⁷ This is not the faith journey that many talk about in vague, existential terms. This is a journey to the cross and we fix our eyes on Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2). Jesus is not our mystical mascot, but our mediator before God, who saves completely and “lives to intercede” for us (7:25). We say with the psalmist, “Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us” (Ps 123:3).

¹⁶⁷ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 116.

The distress of the human condition (Ps 123) is followed by the certainty of the Lord's deliverance. The psalmist guides the sojourner in a thanksgiving psalm of praise. He graphically describes a litany of pilgrim dangers from ravenous beasts ready to swallow them alive, to a raging torrent threatening to sweep them away, and finally to a clever fowler's snare poised to trap unsuspecting victims. The psalmist wants us to pay attention. We are in danger from human attackers who are as threatening as wild animals, raging torrents, and hunting traps. We need the Lord on our side if we expect to make it.

Psalm 124 is an antidote to the naive optimism that refuses to see the real dangers facing the people of God. We should not be surprised by evil and its threat to swallow us up, sweep us away and stop us in our tracks. Doctors treat cancer. Police officers deal with crime. And Christians confront evil in its vast complexity and painful intensity. We have been briefed. The dimensions of evil are defined and understood. Evil is parasitic. It plays off the good. It is a pathogen, robbing health from life. Evil is a malignancy. It is the insanity of a sane mind. Evil is the love of hate and the hate of love.¹⁶⁸ But we have not only been warned, we have been comforted. Christ has conquered evil. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart!" Jesus said. "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The Lord Is For Us

*If the Lord had not been on our side –
let Israel say –
if the Lord had not been on our side
when people attacked us,
they would have swallowed us alive
when their anger flared against us;
the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
the raging waters
would have swept us away.*

Psalm 124:1-5

To claim that the Lord is on our side may seem presumptuous at first blush. There are instances of spiritual arrogance throughout Israel's history. For example, the prophet Isaiah reported, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). Yet in this case it is not a question of arrogance but of gratitude. The language is reminiscent of Joshua's surprise encounter with a man near Jericho. The stranger confronted Joshua with his sword drawn and ready to do battle. "Are you for us or for our enemies?" Joshua asked (Joshua 5:13). "Neither," the man replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." At this, Joshua "fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, 'What message does my Lord have for his servant?'" The commander of the

¹⁶⁸ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 135.

Lord's army replied, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy'" (Joshua 5:14-15). The experience recalls Moses and the burning bush. In the conversation that followed the Lord gave Joshua the specific strategy for taking Jericho. Joshua realized that it was not a matter of the Lord being on his side as if it was his battle, but of Joshua and Israel being on the Lord's side. For the battle belongs to the Lord (1 Sam 17:47). Far from implying presumption, the psalmist acknowledges with deep gratitude Israel's total dependence upon the Lord. He credits their very survival to the saving deliverance of the Lord. Clearly the psalmist's claim of divine support did not imply that Israel had a waver from suffering and danger. The battle is the Lord's and the Lord is on their side. They are in the thick of it and the Lord will deliver them from destruction, but not from danger. Courageous dependence is the order of the day – everyday.

"Oh, let Israel say!" has the ring of an joyous exclamation – the shared conviction of the people of God as they press forward in confidence on a journey filled with unknown challenges. The psalmist calls us to join our voice, our will, our faith, with his in a corporate confession of faith.¹⁶⁹

The apostle Paul's conviction corresponds to Psalm 124 when he asks, "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" The apostle points to the ultimate proof of God's deliverance, "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?" With Christ Jesus himself at the right hand of God interceding for us, what have we to fear? Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" No one can condemn us because of Christ and nothing can separate us from Christ. But the apostle clearly states that all those in Christ will face a barrage of threatening realities: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and death. As he says, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom 8:36; see Ps 44:22). However, this stark reality is met with undaunted courage. "For I am convinced," declared Paul that not "anything in all creation, will be able to separate us form the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

Blessed be the Lord

*Praise be to the Lord,
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird
from the fowler's snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
Psalm 124:6-8*

¹⁶⁹ Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 59. Motyer's summary of what it means for the people of God to say, "Oh let Israel say!" is worth quoting: "They are 'Israel', those whom the Lord adopted as his firstborn son (Exodus 4:22), the people of the blood of the Lamb (Exodus 12:12,13), the Lord's pilgrims (Exodus 12:11). They are our forebears in grace, and we who are 'Israel' in Christ (Galatians 3:29; 6:16) inherit and rest on the Israel promises of God. Those who are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:4-8) are given the guarantee of being eternally safeguarded. It was for us he gave his only Son, and with him he freely gives all things (Romans 8:32), including the unailing presence of the unchanging Jesus (Hebrews 13:5-6,8)."

The reason given for blessing the Lord has nothing to do with religious ritual and tradition and everything to do with deliverance from death. Salvation is described in graphic life and death terms. The Lord has kept us from being torn apart by predators or snared in a trap. We have escaped the clutches of our enemies because of the Lord's deliverance. The motivation for praise lies in the extremity of the crisis and in the severity of the escape. Only those who know that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23) can enter into this praise. Only those who know that they are as good as dead in their trespasses and sins, but because of God's great love they are made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1,4-5) can truly hear the imperative, "Blessed be the Lord!" If we think cancer is insidious, sin is all the more. If we think AIDS is awful, sin is worse. Until we realize in our heart of hearts that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8) we will never really appreciate the compelling nature of blessing the Lord.

The substance behind the invocation to bless the Lord lies in a singular truth: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Ps 124:8). In the first deliverance psalm, the psalmist makes a similar statement (Ps 121:2). The only addition in Psalm 124 is the reference to the "name." The name of the Lord God stands for his character and actions. Far from being a nameless, impersonal force, the God of creation chose to be known by his covenant relationship with specific individuals. His name, "I am who I am," being synonymous with righteousness, majesty, power, wisdom, and deliverance. Nothing more needs to be said. His name alone is all the credential that is needed and then some. Who better to be our deliverer than our creator. But wait there is more: "You shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). There is a striking parallel between the name of the Lord God in the Old Testament and the name of Jesus in the New Testament. Our Creator is also our Redeemer. "Salvation is found in no one else," declared the apostle Peter, "for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The imperative to bless the Lord is dearly welcomed by all those who have been delivered from sin and death. The sojourner makes her way to Zion with the deep assurance that the Lord is on her side.

The third psalm in each of the five triads anticipates the pilgrim's arrival in Jerusalem. Distress, dependence and deliverance mark the spiritual pilgrimage of the people of God, and at the end of the journey there is peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment. The road weary pilgrims celebrate the Lord's Mount Zion blessing. The sense of place was understandably important. Jerusalem centered their worship, security, justice, and economy. Home was not so much where they were from but where they were headed.

For the people of God today, regardless of their ethnicity, there is no particular geographic center for their faith in Christ. The many Old Testament promises of the land have been fulfilled provisionally in the global church and will be fulfilled ultimately in a new heaven and a new earth.¹⁷⁰ There is no holy site other than Christ's promise that where two or three are gathered in his name there he is in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20). The New Testament language of the church takes on "brick and mortar" concreteness – language that at one time was applied to the temple in Jerusalem. In Christ, "the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21). The language of sacred space becomes the language of sacred relationships.

The apostle Paul used building metaphors to capture the relational reality of the church. The foundation is made up of people—the apostles and the prophets, with Christ being the chief cornerstone. The global church becomes embodiment of the Jerusalem Temple. The relational and spiritual character of this "house" built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete than if it had been built with stone and steel. "The accent of Ephesians 2 lies not upon intangibility but upon the fact that the church of God is made of people, rather than of bricks."¹⁷¹ The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom.¹⁷² The local church has gone global. The people of God are drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9).

Mount Zion Personified

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people*

¹⁷⁰ The dispensational template interprets the Bible dualistically. Instead of seeing the promises to Israel fulfilled in the church and in the one new humanity created in Christ Jesus, dispensationalists argue that God has a separate destiny for Israel that involves reconstituting the nation, repatriating the land, and restoring the temple. God's promises to ethnic Jews will be fulfilled after the church is raptured, when Israel turns to her Messiah during the great tribulation. This interpretative template calls for two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the church; two different Last Days, one for Israel and one for the church; Christ's return comes in two stages, the rapture and the second coming; and there are two final judgments, the judgment seat of Christ and the final great white throne judgment. This dualism depends on a template imposed on the Bible, rather than a straight-forward reading of the biblical text.

¹⁷¹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 320.

¹⁷² Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 58.

both now and forevermore.
Psalm 125:1-2

Psalm 125 inspires the analogy between people and place. We have a tendency to prioritize place over people, but the psalmist saw first and foremost the relational value of place. In the final analysis it has never been about real estate. It has always been about people – beatitude-based believers who have put their trust in God. “Those who trust in the Lord” is a beautiful way to describe the people of God. The psalmist found in Mount Zion a place that symbolized the eternal security and justice experienced by the resilient saints of God. They personified what Jerusalem stood for, the people of God in the presence of God protected by the power of God. The ring of mountains surrounding Jerusalem on three sides, the Mount of Olives on the eastern side, Mount Scopus on the west, and Mount Zion situated more than two hundred feet below these two ridges symbolized Yahweh’s everlasting protection.¹⁷³ Geography became the Lord’s object lesson to those who placed their trust in him that they would be kept for time and eternity.

The effectiveness of this object lesson however was temporary by God’s design. Geography was transcended by God himself coming to us in person. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, fulfilled in himself all that the land symbolized. “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). In the upper room, within hours of his crucifixion, Jesus laid out the new order of comfort and security that replaced the ancient object lesson of rocky Mount Zion. On bended knee, Jesus pictured his atoning sacrifice by washing the disciples feet (the Passion, John 13:1). Afterwards, he spoke of his second coming (the Parousia, John 14:3), followed by the promise of the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete, John 14:16), and a vivid description of his abiding relationship with all those who trust in him (the Presence, John 15:4). It is vitally important that we keep straight the difference between symbol and substance – place and person. The church has not always done this well. We have been tempted to engineer our own version of Mount Zion.¹⁷⁴

Evil’s Temporary Rule

*The scepter of the wicked will not remain
over the land allotted to the righteous,
for then the righteous might use
their hands to do evil.*

Psalm 125:3

From this brief description it is difficult to know exactly what the situation was, except to say

¹⁷³ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 168. Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:655.

¹⁷⁴ Scotti, *Basilica*, 21. Scotti writes: “In 1450 as he lay dying, Pope Nicholas shared his dream with his cardinals of a Vatican that would be greater than any emperor’s palace: A popular faith, sustained only on doctrines, will never be anything but feeble and vacillating. But if the authority of the Holy See were visibly displayed in majestic buildings, imperishable memorials, and witnesses seemingly planted by the Hand of God Himself, belief would grow and strengthen like a tradition from one generation to another, and all the world would accept and revere it. Noble edifices, combining taste and beauty with imposing proportions, would immediately conduce to the exaltation of the Chair of St. Peter.”

that “the scepter of the wicked” was a reality within Jerusalem and that the people suffered under wicked rulers. Scholars speculate as to whether this was a foreign pagan power or one of Israel’s many evil kings. Whatever the cause and whoever presided over this rule of evil, the sojourner’s longing for justice and righteousness was frustrated. We imagine the excitement that the pilgrims felt as they ascended to Jerusalem, where they expected to experience security, justice, and worship, only to find that the evil they thought they had left behind had migrated to this very place. The psalmist is committed to giving the people of God a dose of reality. He knocks down any naive idealism that would paint a false picture of life in Jerusalem. But he does this with a firm conviction that the rule of evil is temporary, that it does not belong among God’s people, and that the righteous will not succumb to the powers that be and the spirit of the times and “use their hands to do evil” (Ps 125:3).

This picture of reality is unnerving parallel to what sincere believers experience in the church today. Like the ancient pilgrims, believers expect to find security, justice, and worship in the body of Christ, but instead they find selfishness, power struggles, and self-help entertainment. Much of the New Testament pivots on this tension between who we are in Christ and what we actually do that violates our identity. Paul’s Corinthian correspondence illustrates this tension. He wrote to Christians who lacked no spiritual gift (1 Cor 1:7), but who were torn apart by partisan spiritualities (1:12), tolerant of gross immorality (5:1-2), and casual when it came to sexual immorality (6:18). They were insensitive to new believers (8:1-3), spiritually apathetic (10:1-10), and guilty of gender confusion (11:1-16) and social class discrimination (11:17-32).

The good news is that goodness will prevail. The psalmist and the apostle are on the same page. The righteous will survive “the scepter of wickedness.” “God is faithful,” writes the apostle; “he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). It is sobering to realize that Jesus may have prayed Psalm 125 as he entered the gates of Jerusalem. No wonder he wept when he approached the city for the final time before his crucifixion (Luke 19:41). But to pray Psalm 125 is to put evil in perspective, under the sovereign reign of God. For the kingdom of God will prevail and there will be no end to the goodness of God.

Goodness Prevails

*Lord, do good to those who are good,
to those who are upright in heart.
But those who turn to crooked ways
the Lord will banish with the evildoers.
Peace be on Israel.*

Psalm 125:4-5

The psalmist concludes with an urgent prayer for justice. He prays, “Do good, O Lord, to the good [people] and to those who are upright in their hearts.”¹⁷⁵ Then he prays against those who persist in turning away from the faith. The implication is that within the walls of Zion there are good people and crooked people. The simple division corresponds to Jesus’ picture of the sheep

¹⁷⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:657.

and goats at the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) and the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). The psalmist looks to the Lord to set things right, to reward the good with goodness and the bad with banishment.

Psalm 125 acknowledges the tension between the faithful and the faithless co-existing in the same community. We continue to wrestle inside the church with “the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Nevertheless, we must not allow our frustration and discouragement to turn to despair. The peace of Jerusalem rests in the hands of God and his justice will prevail. Instead of picturing Mount Zion nestled between two protective mountain ridges, “those who trust in the Lord” are drawn to the language of Jesus when he said, “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me” (John 15:4 The Message).

The journey to Jerusalem invoked the memory of happier days when “the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.” Those were the days when Israel was filled with laughter and songs of joy. From the time of David onward Israel spoke of “the fortunes of Zion.” Pilgrims trekked to Jerusalem for the annual feasts with a keen sense of God’s redemptive history. Each travel day began and ended with stories of God’s victory, whether it was the exodus from Egyptian bondage or the conquest of the promised land or a defeat of the Philistines or a return to Zion from exile in Babylon or Persia.

For Christ’s followers the songs of Zion take in the sweep of salvation history from the song of Moses to the song of the Lamb. In our praying imagination this psalm bridges the two testaments. Allen Ross writes, “Israel’s deliverance from bondage (forgiveness and restoration) filled them with joy and a new life, and our redemption from bondage of sin (forgiveness and salvation) should fill us with joy and life as well.”¹⁷⁶

The first psalm in the previous two triads (Psalms 120; 123) emphasized distress and contempt. Hard times were felt by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem. But in Psalm 126, sounds of laughter and songs of joy overwhelm the memory. Instead of drought conditions in the Negev, life-giving streams; instead of sowing in tears, joyous harvests; instead of weeping, singing. The back story may be brutal but in the company of God’s people the psalmist is swept up in joy – communal joy. Lament gives way to laughter.

Dreamers

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.
Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.*

Psalm 126:1-3

Whether the psalmist had in mind the exodus or the exile Israel’s miraculous redemption felt too good to be true. The people of God felt like they were dreaming. Dreamers is an apt description of the recipients of God’s unmerited grace and favor. We have done nothing to engineer our release from bondage. We are helpless to save ourselves. We might as well be asleep. “Those who are saved must pinch themselves, as it were, to make sure it is really happening. God’s redemption of us from bondage and oppression is so marvelously incomprehensible.”¹⁷⁷ When the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, he had to convince them that they

¹⁷⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:666.

¹⁷⁷ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 251.

were not dreaming or seeing a ghost. So he showed them his hands and feet, but “they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement” (Luke 24:41). This is the kind of joy or rapture referred to in this psalm. We are the passive recipients of God’s amazing grace and our hearts are filled with joy.

Undoubtedly many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who were formerly Muslim will identify with this psalm in a unique way. They have come to faith in Christ through dreams and visions. God has revealed to them that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life *prophetically*. God has transcended the usual means of witness and spoken directly to the person and they have embraced the faith.

Exuberant, ecstatic joy captures the psalmist’s experience of salvation whether we follow the Hebrew text and read, “We were like those who dreamed,” or we follow the variant reading of the Greek text, “we were like those who are restored to health.” The phrase, “Our mouths were filled with laughter,” implies deep-seated, uninhibited joy. As the organ of expression, the mouth is filled with sounds and words of celebration and joy.¹⁷⁸

The redemptive trajectory celebrated in this psalm climaxes in the believer’s “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead .” We are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” wrote the apostle Peter, “for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:3, 9).

We cannot engineer our own happiness, no matter how hard we try. Deep happiness belongs to those who acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation. In the upper room Jesus revealed the open secret of true joy when he promised, “my joy . . . in you. . . “that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Our joy is tied inextricably to who God is and what God has done for us. It is because “The Lord has done great things for us” that we can be “filled with joy” (Ps 126:3). We are poor and in need of God’s riches. We are sin-sick and in need of God’s forgiveness. We are weak and resting in God’s strength. We are hungry and dependent upon God’s provision. We are holy because of God’s holy-love. True joy is as far removed from the self-made man or woman as you can imagine. We could never have created this joy. No, not in a thousand years. This joy is as Jesus says, “my joy” and belongs to us only in so far as it belongs to Jesus first.¹⁷⁹

Desert Streams

*Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,*

¹⁷⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:667.

¹⁷⁹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 106-107.

carrying sheaves with them.
Psalm 126:4-6

Augustine exclaimed that the Christian should be an “alleluia from head to toe!” There is little room here for a dour, joyless believer who knows nothing of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). “Hilarity is integral to Christian pilgrimage,” writes Eugene Peterson. “There is no question that being a Christian involves us in many sorrows, many struggles, sober hours of repentance and meditation. But there isn’t the slightest suggestion in Scripture that grim resignation is characteristic of Christian character. How could it be when God is the victor?”¹⁸⁰

The psalmist is an eschatological disciple. He anticipates the fulfillment of God’s promises and the satisfaction of his God-given longings. He navigates the arid wilderness of the Negev in southern Judah with passionate resolve. Faithfulness to the end is his commitment. His firm hope in God’s sustaining grace. Although life may feel like a long trek across a desert, the psalmist refuses to mouth a dry complaint. A sudden cloud burst revives the desert with life and beauty and inspires the psalmist with a vivid picture of God’s restoration of the fortunes of Israel. The reversal can be instantaneous. What was a dried, mud-cracked river bed suddenly becomes a powerful torrent. Streams in the desert correspond figuratively to the living water promised by Jesus: “Whoever drinks the water I will 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).

The second picture envisions the hardscrabble existence of the farmer whose work demands blood, sweat, and tears. There are times when life feels too demanding and the deferred gratification for the long-distant harvest too great to bear. When all of life seems to boil down to work and waiting. But once again the psalmist sees the promise more than he the pain. The literal sowing and harvesting is a metaphor for struggle, but it is a faithful struggle rewarded with an abundant harvest. “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy” (Ps 126:5).

The promise of an abundant harvest, one so great that it inspires songs of joy, corresponds to Jesus’ teaching in the upper room. Like the psalmist, Jesus promised the disciples that their grief would turn to joy. He drew his illustration from the prophet Isaiah: “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world” (John 16:21; Isa 26:16-21). Jesus compared his disciples then and now to a woman in labor. In “a little while” (Isa 26:20) our grief will turn to joy because we have been given “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Pet 1:3). Jesus said, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22). This lasting joy will not be seasonal but eternal because nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

¹⁸⁰ Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 47.

Solomon's simple one liner, serves as both admonition and promise, warning and blessing, and should echo through the minds and hearts of everyone in the household of faith. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." Explicit in the opening line of Psalm 127 is the emptiness of human achievement independent from the Lord. It was one of the psalms the Hebrew pilgrims prayed as they ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the special days of worship, such as Passover and Pentecost. They reminded themselves in song of God's sovereign care over every sphere of life. They were dependent upon the Living God who was their source of security and significance. They traveled to Jerusalem to worship their God, unencumbered by the myth of human self-sufficiency. These Jerusalem-bound sojourners dedicated their efforts and their relationships to God.

If Yahweh doesn't build the house,
the builders only build shacks.
If Yahweh doesn't guard the city,
the night watchman might as well nap.
It's useless to rise early and go to bed late,
and work your worried fingers to the bone.
Don't you know he enjoys
giving rest to those he loves?
Don't you see that children are Yahweh's best gift?
The fruit of the womb his generous legacy?
Like a warrior's fistful of arrows
are the children of a vigorous youth.
Oh, how blessed are you parents,
with your quivers full of children!
Your enemies don't stand a chance against you;
you'll sweep them right off your doorstep.
Psalm 127, The Message

The psalmist poetically paints a picture of wisdom that centers all of life in the Lord from city planning to having children, everything is done in him, "for from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen" (Rom 11:36).

Holy Vocation

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
the builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.
In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat –*

for he grants sleep to those he loves.
Psalm 127:1-2

When we pray this psalm today, we acknowledge from beginning to end that God's mission is our mission – God's work is our work. We can only claim it as our own to the extent that we follow God's lead. This means that in our work and effort we draw our wisdom and energy from God. What holds true for our salvation is also true for our lives as a church. "For we are God's handiwork (poetry), created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:9). Apart from God we can do nothing and the model for this dependency is Jesus who said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working...I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20). Calvin put it this way: "It is not the will of the Lord that we should be like blocks of wood, or that we should keep our arms folded without doing anything; but that we should apply to use all the talents and advantages which he has conferred upon us."¹⁸¹

The psalmist proposes a new scale of meaning that runs counter to the technological tower of Babel and the spirituality of Eastern religions. Babel and Buddha are poor alternatives for life philosophies that work, because they end up sacrificing the person on the altar of human perfection. Steve Jobs is an iconic figure in the pantheon of today's techno-Tower of Babel. As a teenager Jobs was drawn to Zen Buddhism and its quest for individual enlightenment, intuition, and minimalism. Later, he would marry Eastern spirituality with Western materialism, with the result that innovative products become the essence of salvation. He believed that our tools define us and shape our identity. They make us who we are. Ingenious devices save us from being "scattered over the face of the earth" (Gen 11:4).

The psalmist offers alternative spiritual direction. He pictures spiritual health, physical well-being and relational strength coming from communion with God. The divine defense against the emptiness of soul-draining self-effort, competitive insecurity, and restless hyperactivity is to seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness and everything we need will be given to us (Matthew 6:33). The psalmist centers home and city, work and family in God and celebrates the blessing of God's presence and provision.

The three-fold warning against vain and empty labor resonates with Solomon's message in Ecclesiastes. He delves into the emptiness of life strictly considered from a secular point-of-view and his verdict is unequivocal: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (Ecc 1:2). What others could only fantasize about, Solomon accomplished on a grand scale, "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards...I bought male and female slaves...I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man" (Ecc 2:4-8). However, Solomon's success as an architect, engineer, environmentalist, agriculturalist, rancher, financier and patron of the arts brought no satisfaction. He lamented,

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 104.

“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:11).

Solomon goes on to contrast the ego-driven, self-exalted, power broker with an ordinary person who enjoys the simple pleasures of life as a gift from God. “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (Ecc 2:24-25). The tension in Ecclesiastes lies in the contrast between a meaningless self-centered existence and a meaningful God-centered life. Solomon makes the case that the only reality that separates us from futility and meaninglessness is the fear-of-the-Lord. This is the fear that is not afraid of God, but seeks to please God. This is the fear that is best translated as faith, trust, and love. Ecclesiastes is wisdom’s critique of all ego-centric attempts to redefine the meaning of life apart from God. Solomon in all his glory did not compare to the God-fearing individuals who found satisfaction in their labor because of God. Ecclesiastes challenges our strategies for success and causes us to re-evaluate our goals and priorities. There is a striking affinity between those who are described in Ecclesiastes as able to enjoy life because of the blessing of God and the early Christian believers who made it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and work with their hands, so that they would win the respect of outsiders (1 Thess 4:11-12). The desire to shun the rat race and “live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” is a lesson right out of Psalm 127 and Ecclesiastes (1 Tim 2:2).

The believer’s work ethic is unique, because it is modeled and motivated by God. Many of us have learned how to work from our parents. Years of observation, imitation and practice instill within us a work ethic. These positive work habits are usually derived from the example and the intentional teaching of others. But believers don’t want to stop with the model of their parents and teachers. We want to take it further and learn from the Lord how to work well. “The work of God is defined and described in the pages of Scripture,” writes Eugene Peterson. “We have models of creation, acts of redemption, examples of help and compassion, paradigms of comfort and salvation. This is why we read Scripture repeatedly and carefully to find out just how God works in Jesus Christ so that we can work in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸² Calvin encouraged believers, “Let us then so occupy ourselves, each according to the measure of his ability and the nature of his office, as that at the same time the praise of the success attending our exertions may remain exclusively with God.”¹⁸³

The psalmist revels in the ordinary. Fulfillment is expressed in one of our most fundamental needs: “For he grants sleep to those he loves” (Ps 127:2). There is nothing like a good night’s rest to start the day. As the company of pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem they sang this psalm and put life into perspective. Their temptation was to see all of life as toilsome labor under the sun. We can identify with this obsession. It is easy for us to become overworked and easily stressed and to see everything in terms of our effort. This may be why God built into Israel’s routines these seasonal pilgrimages to Jerusalem, when they could not help but be reminded that the Lord’s work inspired and empowered their work. The rhythms of grace cause the faithful to examine

¹⁸² Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 104.

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 106.

their lives and renew their priorities. All too often we live as if everything depended upon us. One night I had a dream from which I awoke in a cold sweat with my heart pumping. I had dreamed that our church was performing Handel's Messiah in a Sunday evening service. The whole church was excited. The musicians had rehearsed and the director was ready. When the day came the congregation turned out along with hundreds of visitors. In my dream it was standing room only and the anticipation of the gathered crowd was great. The only problem was that there were no musicians, no soloists, no director. No one, but me! But in my dream, the congregation expected me to carry on as usual and perform the Messiah. You can imagine my relief when I woke up from that nightmare!

Children

*Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court.
Psalm 127:3-5*

This poetic picture of blessing finds its culmination and fulfillment in relationships. The pilgrimage was a family experience. This was a faith journey of families. They were not family centered, but God centered. They worshiped and served the Lord as the family of God. The metaphors paint a beautiful picture of balance, wholeness, health and happiness. We lay aside our pride and no longer boast of what we have built or done for God. Instead, we humbly declare what God has done for us, in us and through us. It is a work of grace, thanksgiving and praise. "The character of our work is shaped not by accomplishments or possessions but in the birth of relationships."¹⁸⁴

Health and holiness are meant to come together in the household of faith. At the end of this beautiful picture of blessing and holy ambition, the psalmist offers a quick sketch of familial protection and support in the public arena. In place of human self-sufficiency the psalmist bears elegant testimony of God's blessing in the family and among friends. The birth of a child causes us to marvel at the creative power and handiwork of God. Even the act of love and a difficult pregnancy does not lessen the strong feeling that we are participating in a work far beyond ourselves. The sinister deception of the new reproductive technologies is that we would somehow believe that we manufacture, control and engineer life when all we are doing is discovering in greater detail the work of God.

In keeping with the poetic metaphor of the psalmist, children are the best protection against enemies and a sure defense against shame. The psalmist compares children to arrows shot by an archer. The vivid simile projects the positive influence of children on the defense and influence

¹⁸⁴ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 106.

of parents. Children extend the testimony and ministry of their parents in a beautiful way. Like an arrow shot from a distance, the child represents the parent in various places and through time.

God provides a new generation as a sign of his blessing, who are called to defend and protect the previous generation and carry on the Faith. This interdependence is both divine and human, *communion* with God and *community* with one another. The practical implications of this short psalm are enormous. They encourage us to reexamine the clear goals of our life together as the people of God and turn to the biblical basics. We know “that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” We “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 1:3-6; 2:12-13).

Blessing and benediction frame the pilgrim's arrival in Jerusalem. The relational blessings of the previous psalm carry over into Psalm 128, the third psalm of the third triad. The psalmist celebrates the meaning of the good life by using vivid metaphors. He pictures an abundant harvest, a loving wife, and healthy children. The psalmist is skilled in painting a remarkable inscape of the abundant life and in the process offers a radical counter-cultural picture of the family.¹⁸⁵ His praying imagination is filled with organic images of fruitful vines and olive trees. He pictures children around the kitchen table and grandparents rejoicing over their children's children.

Psalm 128 reveals an extraordinarily satisfying liturgy of the ordinary by redefining prosperity and perfection according to the word of God. The psalmist's arrival in Zion celebrates the beauty of the ordinary. This psalm bears witness to the down-to-earth joys of walking in the Spirit and delighting in the word of God. The daily blessings of meaningful work, good friends, a loving marriage, and maturing children is a great gift. "Holy things are ordinary things perceived in their true light, that is, as bearers of the divine mysteries and glory to us."¹⁸⁶

Vivid biblical word pictures help us visualize the truth of God. Psalm 128 is a classic example of truth pictured rather than lectured. Wisdom is described in real-world earth tones rather than defined in idealistic platitudes. It is not a still life portrait of prosperity, but a series of action pictures that captures the essence of the good life. Faithfulness, fellowship, fidelity, and friendship can be seen in a real life scene set to a human scale.

Blessing

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord,
who walk in obedience to him.
You will eat the fruit of your labor;
blessings and prosperity will be yours.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Yes, this will be the blessing
for the man who fears the Lord.*

Psalm 128:1-4

Words like "blessing," "fear," and "prosperity" may trigger in the mind of the reader ideas unintended by the psalmist. The poetry and imagery of the psalms is vulnerable to the reader's free association and flight of imagination. This is why it is important to read the Psalms on their

¹⁸⁵ Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term "inscape" to describe the unique character of an object or subject as it relates to its environment. Landscapes give us the horizon. Inscapes give us the essence.

¹⁸⁶ Howard, *Splendor in the Ordinary*, 19.

own terms and allow the psalmist to shape our interpretation. The opening line of the psalm, “Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him,” has deep roots in the wisdom tradition of the Psalms and Proverbs. Psalm 1 comes to mind, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked . . .” The bound phrase, the-fear-of-the-Lord, invokes the theme of Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7; see 9:10). Meaning builds as we define blessing as the fear of the Lord and obedient living. This fear does not imply dread or terror. Those who fear the Lord are not living scared, afraid of what God might do to them. Nor is walking in obedience a moralistic regimen of self-justifying works. The fear of the Lord is reverential fear inspired by a true recognition of the majesty and glory of God. Instead of dread, there is delight. Instead of anxiety, there is awe. Instead of fear, there is faith.

The psalmist’s understanding of blessing leads us to Jesus’ Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. They both belong to the same redemptive trajectory. In the quest for the good life we look to God to fulfill our deepest longings, calm our fears, inspire our hope, and lead us along a path we never would have taken on our own. The pursuit of happiness guided by Jesus and the pursuit of happiness inspired by our culture are two radically different journeys. In the Beatitudes Jesus repeats the word “blessed” nine times, signaling an amazing reversal of human values. According to Jesus the American Beatitudes got it wrong: put yourself first and you will come in last, give yourself to hedonism and you will rape your soul, strive to be envied and you will end up lonely. If you hunger and thirst for the good life as it is popularly perceived you will come away empty. Apart from the grace of Christ and Jesus’ atoning work on the cross it would be impossible to live the good life. But having discovered the blessing of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and peace, who in their right mind would go back to the gods of Self, Money, Lust and Power? The psalmist’s blessing and Jesus’ beatitudes are rooted in the same theology of grace and covenant love.

To walk in obedience to the Lord takes the reader back to the message of Psalm 1 and then forward to the prophet Micah: “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). We find echoes of Psalm 128 in the apostle Paul’s admonition to “walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2 ESV). His counsel was clear, “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:16, 25).

The picture of family blessing celebrated in Psalm 128 corresponds to the picture of loving obedience described in Deuteronomy 6. Parents are instructed in how to impress their children with the commands of God. The well-known counsel given by Moses describes just how simple, good, and solid parental spiritual direction can be. According to Moses there is no “secret” to becoming an effective mother or father. It doesn’t take much to figure out what to do, but it does take humility, integrity, patience, love, and submission to the word of God to be the kind of parent Moses pictured: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut 6:5-7).

Family bliss is the psalmist's defining image for the good life. Three crucial factors are poetically sketched: a prosperous work ethic, a loving wife, and the joy of children. The fear of the Lord inspires a sustainable work ethic that rewards "the labor of our hands." The simple line, "You will eat the fruit of your labor," represents a complex promise. Because of the curse of the fall, labor has a weighty measure of disappointment and drudgery, but because of God's grace it is possible to rise above the curse and enjoy our labor and reap its benefits. To be able to eat and drink and find satisfaction in our "toilsome labor under the sun" is a "gift from God." When God keeps us "occupied with gladness of heart" we are defended against discouragement and depression (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20).

The second image of blessing alludes to the shared work of marriage: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the innermost chambers of your house."¹⁸⁷ This simple line speaks volumes. She is a picture of grace and beauty and human flourishing. Everything positive is included here: tenderness, respect, praise, good sex, and the blessing of children. The meaning behind this description corresponds to the apostle Paul's admonition to husbands "to love their wives as their own bodies," to love her "as he loves himself" (Eph 5:28,33). Mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ," which is another way of saying the fear of the Lord, applies the principle of the cross, my life for yours, to every facet of the marriage relationship. The contrast between a marriage shaped by the realities of God's choosing, purifying and loving, and a marriage that is a self-made relational arrangement, are profound. The blessing of God brings a married couple into a large world of immense realities that are completely unknown to a self-centered couple.¹⁸⁸

Children at the family table make up the third image of blessing. They are likened to olive shoots. "The picture is of young olive trees springing up from the parent stem, fresh, vibrant, and full of promise."¹⁸⁹ The psalmist uses vital organic imagery to underscore the meaning of human flourishing and to emphasize the down-to-earth reality of true spirituality. We often squeeze spirituality into a corner of life reserved for pious devotions and church services, but God intended spirituality to be at the center of our ordinary, every-day life together. Table fellowship here and elsewhere in the Bible stands for food for the body, mind, and soul. It is a metaphor for nourishing physical strength, nurturing communion with God, and developing spiritual maturity. Eating is serious business, but in a well-defined way.¹⁹⁰ Table fellowship is a metaphor for where life makes up its mind, where the basic skills of worship and prayer, comfort and caring are meant to be modeled and taught. Edith Schaeffer observed, "The family is the place where loyalty, dependability, trustworthiness, compassion, sensitivity to others, thoughtfulness, and unselfishness are supposed to have their roots. Someone must take the initiative and use imagination to intentionally teach these things."¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:695.

¹⁸⁸ Webster, *Soulcraft*, 154-155.

¹⁸⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:695. Ross continues, "The olive tree was an emblem of vigor and vitality in the Old Testament, and naturally a symbol of long endurance since they last for such a long time. They also were very productive, the oil being used for many important things."

¹⁹⁰ Webster, *Table Grace*, 18.

¹⁹¹ Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?* 83.

We don't have to look far for sacred space. The kitchen table will do. Jesus said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20). We are tempted to spend considerable energy trying to win the favor of people in general, rather than the people we know. Fame is name recognition by the nameless masses. It does not compare to the blessing of family. Family is life together. It is knowing we are loved by those closest to us. For those who feel it is more important to love and to be loved, the measure of life is not in what is achieved, but in what is received. They value blessing over success and know that popularity never substitutes for the intimacy of two or three gathered in the name of Christ.

Benediction

*May the Lord bless you from Zion;
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
May you live to see your children's children –
peace be on Israel.*

Psalm 128:5-6

Psalm 128 beautifully portrays the prosperity gospel, not the gospel that confuses American materialism and hedonism with spirituality, but the gospel of grace that sanctifies the ordinary and reveals the glory of God in every aspect of life. True prosperity is found close to home in the blessing of meaningful and rewarding work, the love of family and friends, and in the joys and challenges of nurturing sons and daughters and grandchildren in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also obvious that Psalm 128 cannot be confused with the modern American disorder of perfectionism. The conception of family life sketched here has nothing to a compulsive self-preoccupied performance. But it has everything to do with the perfection Jesus had in mind when he admonished, "Be perfect. . .as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). This is the perfection of organic spiritual growth and maturity. As Kathleen Norris writes, "To 'be perfect,' in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse."¹⁹² Cultural perfectionism triggers envy, but the picture of perfection in Psalm 128 inspires growth. The image painted by the psalmist is inviting, not intimidating. If one of our goals in Christ is to live to be a grandparent and to see the faith take root in the next generation we will know the difference between the blessing that comes from the fear of the Lord and the success that comes from self-service.

¹⁹² Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 55.

In keeping with the themes of the three psalm sequence (distress, danger, and deliverance), Psalm 129 focuses on the dangers and trials of the people of God and the Lord's faithfulness in the midst of intense oppression. The journey to Jerusalem was long enough for the people of God to remember a long history of oppression. The repeated reference to "my youth" at the beginning of the psalm sends most commentators back to Egyptian bondage and the Exodus when the nation in its infancy was formed under the leadership of Moses. But when the author of the Book of Hebrews reviewed Israel's history of struggle he went all the way back to Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain, and to Enoch who pleased God in a world that had rejected God, and to Noah who was delivered out of a world that had been condemned, and to Abraham, the father of the nation, who made his home in the promised land although he was a stranger in a foreign country.

Salvation history reveals a pattern that persists to this day. The people of God are chosen outsiders, resident aliens in a world that more often than not hates and oppresses them. But that's not all, they are resilient saints who say with the psalmist, "They have not gained the victory over me. . . [because] the Lord is righteous; he has cut me free from the chords of the wicked." The people of God should be inspired to cultivate the mind-set of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, but by the grace of God, Joseph was able to say to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:20).

Unconquered

*"They have greatly oppressed me from my youth,"
let Israel say;
"they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,
but they have not gained the victory over me.
Plowmen have plowed my back
and made their furrows long.
But the Lord is righteous;
he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked."*

Psalm 129:1-4

The multiplicity and magnitude of the persecution is great and it has gone on for a long time. Nevertheless the oppressor has "not gained the victory over me." Although the people of God as a whole have been persecuted "ruthlessly and cruelly, physically and emotionally,"¹⁹³ the psalmist draws attention to the personal nature of suffering. The oppression has been experienced "from my youth," but the oppressor has "not gained the victory over me." The plowmen have plowed "my back" and the Lord has "cut me free" from the harness of oppression. The first personal singular experience of cruelty and redemption is emphasized. The psalmist captured the intensity of the suffering by comparing it to a farmer's heavy wooden plow cutting long furrows

¹⁹³ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:703.

in his back. We may assume that only a person's whose daily grind had become nearly unbearable would be drawn to use the farmer's plow as an instrument of torture. In spite of all the pain and suffering that lies behind the image, the psalmist boldly announces, "They have not gained the victory over me." His hope and courage lies in the fact that the Lord is righteous and will not allow the oppressor to go on unchecked. Judgment is inevitable because the Lord will eventually set things right. The psalmist stays with the image of the farmer's plow and describes God's saving action as an intervention. God renders the plow useless by cutting the harness straps. The instrument of torture is taken out of the hands of the oppressor.

Undaunted

*May all who hate Zion
be turned back in shame.
May they be like grass on the roof,
which withers before it can grow;
a reaper cannot fill his hands with it,
nor one who gathers fill his arms.
May those who pass by not say to them,
"The blessing of the Lord be on you;
we bless you in the name of the Lord."
Psalm 129:5-8*

Hate is an uncomfortable topic for many and signals for some the difference between Old Testament judgment and New Testament gospel. How can Christ's followers call down shame on those who hate Zion and still obey Jesus's command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). "We can't excuse the psalmist for getting angry on the grounds that he was not yet a Christian," argues Peterson, "for he had Leviticus to read: 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart. . . . You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:17-18; see Exod 23:4-5; Prov 24:17)."¹⁹⁴ What we can say is that the psalmist identifies passionately with the holy and righteous Lord God. His plea to God to put down the wicked is in line with the truth expounded in the Old and New Testaments of the just judgment of God. There is no place for vigilante justice, but there is justification for siding with God and sharing God's perspective on evil and injustice. The psalmist and the apostle agree that God has given people over to shameful lusts and a depraved mind (Rom 1:26, 28). Paul had no qualms about describing the horror of the human condition and the certainty of God's wrath, even though he knew that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." But because of God's great love "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24).

Jesus dealt with the subject of hate in the upper room less than twenty-four hours before he was crucified. Hate is a strong word suggesting a vehement and vindictive spirit. It is vividly portrayed in the contorted face of rage and in the guttural voice of anger, but it also can be expressed in subtle and covert ways. Hate is a four letter word encompassing malice, contempt, resentment, bitterness, spite, and blame. It can be blatant or hidden, but hate is painfully real. To

¹⁹⁴ Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 126.

hate is to detest, loath, abhor, ridicule and condemn. Hate in the abstract is bad enough, but to be hated in person triggers an adrenaline rush that causes our heart rate to quicken. We tend to avoid the word hate. It sounds too extreme. We don't like using the word, but Jesus used it to describe the world's reaction to his followers.¹⁹⁵

Jesus sought to prepare his disciples by explaining the roots of hate: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Jesus gave the disciples' a heads-up so they would not be blind-sided by persecution. "All this I have told you so that you will not fall away" (John 16:1).

Jesus gave three reasons why the world hates his disciples and each reason relates to believers everywhere (John 15:18-16:4). First, the world hates believers because they don't belong to the world. Jesus has chosen them out of the world. Second, believers are hated because of the exclusive truth claim of Christ. The world is not willing to accept that Jesus was sent by the Father and is one with God. Third, the world hates believers because of the convicting power of the gospel of grace. The gospel provokes rejection and rebellion. On the basis of these three reasons the grounds for hate are fundamentally theological even though the surface reason for the world's reaction may have to do with sexual practices or lifestyle convictions.

Prayerful recognition of evil is the first step in dealing with the enemy. Jesus does not conceal the fact that the gospel draws enemy fire. By naming the enemy, Jesus lays bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone. Our deep concern and prayer should be that it is truly the Word of God that draws enemy fire and not our obnoxious and offensive ways.

The psalmist's description of "all those who hate Zion" takes on a specifically Christian meaning for the people of God today.¹⁹⁶ William Temple wrote, "The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself."¹⁹⁷ John Chrysostom chalked it up to "the natural course of things," because Christian virtue "engenders hatred." "Let us not grieve," Chrysostom wrote, "for this is a mark of virtue." This is why Christ said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own."¹⁹⁸ Dale Bruner's reflection on the world's hate is especially helpful. The world's hate for the Word and the Church is "a great mystery" stemming from the fact that believers are rooted "in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission." The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: "an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission."¹⁹⁹

The psalmist prays for a shameful defeat for "all who hate Zion." He compares the wicked to

¹⁹⁵ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 114.

¹⁹⁶ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 97.

¹⁹⁷ Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 322.

¹⁹⁸ Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 302.

¹⁹⁹ Bruner, *John*, 991.

rooftop grass that dries out in the sun as fast as it springs up. There is nothing for the reaper to harvest. It is only so much waste. Psalm 129 is not an easy psalm and it is susceptible to misuse by our vindictive selves, but Alec Motyer has the right idea when he says, “Don’t be afraid of such vigorous, realistic prayers! This is the way to commit life-threatening situations to God. . . . To balk at praying for a similar fate to befall an oppressor is to reveal either that one has never been in danger of one’s life, or that one lacks the imagination to feel what it would be like.”²⁰⁰ With that said, the psalmist leaves us with one more image drawn from farming. We have had plowing, withered grass, and now a harvest blessing. It was customary for harvesters to be greeted with a blessing (Ruth 2:4), but the psalmist warns against it. “May those who pass by not say to them, ‘The blessing of the Lord be on you; we bless you in the name of the Lord’” (Ps 129:8). The world does not need nor should it have our blessing to do what the world does. It is not our place to bless those who hate Zion so that we can ingratiate ourselves to the enemies of the gospel. We must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us without becoming hypocrites.

²⁰⁰ Motyer, *Journey*, 103.

The greatest danger we face is our sinful selves and the only one who can rescue us is the Lord. The world, the flesh, and the devil have their part to play in a broken and sinful world, but ultimately I am to blame for my sinful self. The second psalm in the fourth triad is an anguished cry for mercy and a desperate plea for forgiveness. The psalmist's raw emotional appeal is deeply personal and completely transparent, proving that "even the deepest depths of sin constitute no barrier to praying."²⁰¹ There is no hint of self-defense. It is the poetry of honest confession and utter dependence on the Lord for his mercy, forgiveness, unfailing love and redemption.

Self-Betrayal

*Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
 Lord, hear my voice.
 Let your ears be attentive
 to my cry for mercy.
 If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
 Lord, who could stand?
 But with you there is forgiveness,
 so that we can, with reverence, serve you.*

Psalm 130:1-4

There comes a time on life's journey when we cannot go any lower. We hit bottom. We come to the end of ourselves, and from our fox hole we raise a white flag. We cannot hide the fact that we are sinners, that we are broken, addicted, sin-twisted miserable offenders, and we know deep down that this is true. John Calvin railed against "the barbarous ignorance of the Papists" because they "mumbled" Psalm 130 over the dead and refused to pray this psalm for the living.²⁰² Calvin was right of course. Psalm 130 does not apply to the souls of the dead, but it does apply to the dead souls of the living. For we are all dead in our transgressions until we are saved by the grace of God. We all gratify the cravings of the flesh and follow its desires and thoughts until we are made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-5). And even then the struggle persists because of the dogged nature of our sinful human condition. Those of us who have experienced God's great love and rejoiced in the richness of his mercy over many years yet find our way back to Psalm 130 time and again. We use this psalm to utter our heartfelt plea for forgiveness. The apostle John wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

One of the greatest preachers in the early church, John Chrysostom, ended his ministry focused on the danger of self-betrayal. His controlling thought was simple: nothing can destroy you but yourself. Your own worst enemy is not the devil or disease, but your sinful self. Your greatest

²⁰¹ Motyer, *Journey*, 110.

²⁰² Calvin, *Psalms*, 128.

danger is self-betrayal. Your greatest weakness, littleness of soul. John held that any and all sins perpetrated against a follower of Christ, no matter how evil, must never become an excuse for believers to sin. John contended that “no one who is wronged is wronged by another, but experiences this injury at his or her own hands.”²⁰³ Nothing can ruin our virtue or destroy our soul, that is not self-inflicted. John argued that poverty cannot impoverish the soul. Malignancy cannot malign the character. The lack of health care cannot destroy a healthy soul. Famine cannot famish one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. No! Not even the devil and death can destroy those who live sober and vigilant lives. The devil robbed Job of everything but could not rob Job of his virtue. Cain took Abel’s life, but could not take away his greater gain. Only those who injure themselves are injured. “Don’t confuse the argument,” John insists, “I did not say that no one injures, but that no one is injured.”²⁰⁴ John drove his message home:

“No one will be able to injure one who is not injured by himself, even if all the world were to kindle a fierce war against him. For it is not stress. . .nor circumstances. . .nor insults. . .nor intrigues. . .nor catastrophes. . .nor any number of ills to which humankind is subject, which can disturb even slightly the person who is brave, and disciplined, and watchful. . .”²⁰⁵

John Chrysostom’s warning drives home the truth of our personal responsibility before God. Sin requires redemption, not excuses, forgiveness, not finger-pointing. This brings us to the main focus of the psalm which is on the Lord’s mercy, forgiveness, unfailing love, and full redemption. The psalmist insists on dwelling on God’s grace, but he does so without minimizing his sin. His rhetorical question implies his grave spiritual state and his need for God’s mercy. “If you, O Lord [Yah, the abbreviation for Yahweh], should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?”²⁰⁶

Within the first four verses of the psalm there is a dramatic shift from crying out to the Lord for mercy to a settled and confident embrace of the Lord’s forgiveness. The adversative “but” in verse four pivots the pilgrim from supplication to service. There is a similar dramatic transition in the apostle Paul’s description of salvation in Ephesians. Paul pivots from dead-in-our-sins realism to the positive, powerful reality of the gospel with an adversative “but:” “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (2:4-5). In Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul describes the fallen human condition, but but in the next six verses, God is the subject of love and salvation. The stark contrast between sin and salvation heightens our appreciation for the gift of God’s grace.

Hope

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,*

²⁰³ Chrysostom, “To Prove That No One Can Harm The Man Who Does Not Injure Himself,” 272

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 273

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 279

²⁰⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:713.

*more than watchmen wait for the morning.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.*

Psalm 130:5-8

The psalmist's two definitive statements, "I wait for the Lord with my whole being" and "I hope in his word," emphasizes the psalmist's personal commitment as a motivation or inspiration for the people of God. The psalmist is speaking not just for himself alone but for Israel as whole. His waiting and hoping embodies and emboldens the spirit of the people of God. The individual is never sacrificed for the sake of the community and the community is never sacrificed for the sake of the individual. What is good for the individual is good for the body and what is good for the body is good for the individual.

The psalmist uses the image of watchmen to describe the collective identity of the people of God. All who wait on the Lord and all who hope in the Lord are like watchmen stationed on the wall eagerly waiting sunrise. Their responsibility is limited but important. They are to stay alert and pay attention. The image captures the believer's faithful presence and willed passivity. This special waiting measures life's meaning not in what is achieved through self-effort, but by what is received at the hand of God. Mercy, forgiveness, hope, unfailing love, and full redemption are all received by grace. Waiting is no claim to fame; waiting is the eager anticipation of the Lord's promise.

The psalmist exhorts the whole body of believers: "Israel, put your hope in the Lord." The reason given for putting our hope in the Lord is threefold. For with the Lord there is unfailing love, full redemption, and the forgiveness of all our sins. The arch of faith is dramatic. The psalmist has gone from crying for mercy to exhorting the people of God to put their hope in the Lord. The psalmist's theme corresponds well with the apostle Peter's description of salvation. By God's great mercy we have been given "new birth into a living hope," a lasting inheritance, and a coming salvation (1 Peter 1:3-5). And like the psalmist, Peter weaves together redemption's provision with redemption's purpose. We are never very far from the "reason for the hope [we] have" in Christ (1 Pet 3:15), which is always best revealed in a transformed life – a holy life. We are forgiven "so that we can, with reverence serve" the Lord.

Full redemption captures the fullness and completeness of salvation and recalls Jesus' promise, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Psalm 130 reminds pilgrims "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). John Calvin wrote, "God not only begins, but conducts to the end, the work of salvation, that his grace in us may not be useless and unprofitable. As he opens up the way, so he paves it, and removes obstacles of every description, and is himself the leader during the whole journey."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Calvin, Commentary on Isaiah, www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom15.iv.i.html.

Full redemption comprehends all that we have been given in Christ. We are saved from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.”²⁰⁸ We are saved for a purpose, to love God, others, and ourselves. We are saved for freedom, mission, and community.

Salvation changes our relationship with God giving us acceptance with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, reception of the Spirit, and everlasting life. Salvation changes us emotionally giving us confidence, peace, courage, hopefulness, and joy. Salvation changes us spiritually giving us prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication and service. Salvation changes us personally giving us new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment. Salvation changes us socially giving us a new community in Christ, a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ White, “Salvation,” 968.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

The Psalms of Ascents place peace (Ps 122), justice (Ps 125) and prosperity (Ps 128) right alongside contentment as one of the main blessings of Mount Zion. Sojourners sang their way to Jerusalem from all over Israel several times a year. They prepared their hearts and minds for worship by praying these fifteen psalms which form a pattern, a three psalm sequence repeated five times. Each triad deals with distress, dependence, and deliverance. The conclusion of the sequence always ends on a delightfully positive truth: peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment. The people of God all over the world continue to pray these psalms as they gather together as the body of Christ in their households of faith. On the journey of discipleship these psalms help us “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil 3:12). Psalm 131 is good training in the wisdom of self-awareness. It is an antidote to our natural bent toward pride and selfish ambition.

Humility

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.*

Psalm 131:1

The psalm is attributed to David the king, the very one whom everyone looked up to and who routinely dealt with great matters. If the king is not above humility neither are we. We cannot speculate on how this psalm shaped Jesus’ self-understanding except to say that no one lived and modeled humility better than the King of kings and Lord of lords. “Who, being in very nature God . . . 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 2:6-8).

David bases his humility on three things: his heart is not proud, his eyes are not haughty, and his actions are not beyond his abilities. The king’s brief enigmatic statement invites meditation and reflection. How can he say something so profound and hard to learn so easily? How can a lifelong challenge be expressed in a psalm the size of a tweet? Spurgeon noted the paradox: “It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn. It speaks of a young child, but it contains the experience of a [adult] in Christ.”²¹⁰ Allen observes, “This state of spirituality has been attained only by struggling with his headstrong self.”²¹¹

The weight of David’s firm resolve lies behind these words. He boldly announces to the Lord, “My heart is not proud.” Yet we know how notoriously difficult it is to control the impulses of the heart, the unconscious look of superiority, and the thinly concealed will to power. Our fallen human nature thrives on inner pride and selfish ambition, but the tone of this terse psalm is

²¹⁰ Spurgeon, “Psalm 131,” *Treasury of David*.

²¹¹ Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 199.

nothing if not self-determined. The psalmist claims responsibility: “my heart,” “my eyes,” “myself,” and “I have calmed and quieted myself.” He distances himself from anything that would rationalize away or mitigate against his responsibility to shun pride, superiority and vain ambition. He does not spiritualize the discipline of humility by hiding behind prayer. He is fully responsible for his heart, his eyes, and his concerns.

David’s self-description emphasizes humility as a deliberate act of the will that reflects the believer’s state of grace. Contrary to popular opinion, humility is not an unconscious act of good will. One of my professors used to say that the moment you thought you were humble you were guilty of pride. While this is a valid warning, David claims humility is a learned discipline of the will. Humility is not a natural gift nor a serendipitous feature of personality. Humility is an intentional commitment of the will in relationship to God and others. It is a chosen and cultivated quality of character that matures and deepens with the experience of Christ. Humility is the resolute self-emptying or surrender of the will to the commands of God and the needs of others.²¹²

Humility is the chosen awareness of our needy dependence on the mercy and wisdom of God. It is not to be confused with humiliation, the feeling of shame, inadequacy, and disappointment that comes from our sinful self-reliance. Humiliation involves trusting in ourselves; humility involves trusting in God. Humiliation rejects God; humility bows before God. Humiliation leads to discouragement, disorientation and despair; humility leads to hope. Humiliation thrives on self-promotion; humility frees us from the pressure to make a name for ourselves. Humiliation is our enemy, we feel it in our soul; but humility is our friend, whether we know it or not. For there is no other way to deal with humiliation, than through humility.²¹³

Any form of spirituality that plays down the believer’s responsibility and separates him or her from personal discipline, determination and diligence is foreign to the work of the Spirit of Christ. To be filled with the Spirit causes all believers to embrace the challenge profiled in Psalm 130. It is our responsibility to be faithful, wise, obedient and open to the work of the Spirit *for the sake of others*. The part of us that is self-conscious was meant to be concerned with humility, sacrifice and faithfulness.²¹⁴ The apostle Peter shared David’s emphasis on personal responsibility. In his letter Peter used a unique verb to describe putting on humility (ἐγκομβώσαθε). It meant to put on “a garment or apron a slave tied over other garments in order to perform certain menial tasks.”²¹⁵

Psalm 130 lines up beautifully with the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3). The apostles embraced humility as the strategic mind-set for the people of God. Humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη) meant “lowliness of mind” and was used by Paul in *Philippians* to describe the attitude of mind that was in Christ Jesus, who “humiled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:3-8).

²¹² Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 154-155.

²¹³ Ibid., 156.

²¹⁴ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 138.

²¹⁵ Achtemeir, *1 Peter*, 333.

Humility was not considered a human virtue in the Greco-Roman world so you might say that Christians invented the term. Paul took an attitude commonly used of slaves and servants and applied it to the Christian to profile a strength of personality that did not have to assert itself. All of this was consistent with the Lord Jesus' beatitude-based character, foot-washing humility, and cross-bearing discipline.²¹⁶ If we were looking for a parallel New Testament text to go alongside Psalm 130 we could find no better one than the preface to the Christ hymn in his letter to the church in Philippi: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had" (Phil 2:1-5). The humility Paul has in mind has nothing to do with passivity or subservience, but rather with obedience and faithfulness.

David's personal disavowal of great projects runs against the grain of our vision casting Promethean age. We instinctively want to encourage personal ambition. We react defensively to the very idea of anyone downplaying a great undertaking. We've been told to dream big and the sky is the limit. The mantra of the age is "you can achieve whatever you set your mind to." Best selling Christian authors have no qualms about drawing their examples of successful leaders from the secular arena; the CEOs, sport's stars, generals, and politicians who put together winning teams, make things happen, focus on the big picture, cast the great vision, pay the high cost of success, inspire confidence, hold hope high, make the difficult decisions, and help others realize their potential. All of this is challenged by David's simple line, "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me" (Ps 131:1).

When David penned Psalm 131 he may have had the temple building project in mind. After years of fighting for his life, "the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him" (2 Sam 7:1). The ark was in Jerusalem and life was good. David was ready for a royal project—something important, *a big hairy audacious goal [BHAG]*.²¹⁷ No more Goliaths to contend with. Saul was dead. He was no longer on the run hiding out in the wilderness, living in tents and caves. His desire to build a house for the Lord even had Scriptural backing (Deut 12:11-14).

For David, living in a beautiful cedar house didn't square with parking the ark under the canopy of a travel-worn tent. David's intentions impress us as pure, in line with the promises of God and consistent with his passionate worship of Yahweh. For Nathan the prophet, David's desire to build a temple may have been long overdue. His reply to the king was immediate, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." His first reaction to David's BHAG was all positive, but he spoke too soon, and that night the Lord said to him, "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. . . .

²¹⁶ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 93.

²¹⁷ Burke, *Less is More Leadership*, 116. Motivators tells us to dream big and cast a grand vision. Business guru Jim Collins in his best seller *Good to Great* challenges every company that aspires for greatness to have a BHAG (pronounced beehag, short for "Big Hairy Audacious Goal"). A BHAG "is a huge and daunting goal — like a big mountain to climb. It is clear, compelling, and people 'get it' right away. A BHAG serves as a unifying focal point of effort, galvanizing people and creating team spirit as people strive toward a finish line." Pastor Dale Burke writes, "I encourage every church or organization to always have one BHAG on their list of dreams."

Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (2 Sam 7:5-7). Walter Brueggemann calls it “one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith.”²¹⁸ God’s enduring, unconditional promise to David paves the way for the fulfillment accomplished in Jesus the Messiah. David will not build a house for the Lord; the Lord will build a house for David. David’s personal effort pales in significance to what the Lord has done, is doing, and will do. No human works project will be allowed to displace the priority of God’s initiative. David’s “not doing” is strategic, symbolic of salvation by faith, not by works, lest anyone should boast. Along with this important truth, the Lord’s “no” to David drives home the theological truth stressed by the prophet Isaiah long after Solomon had built the temple, when he said, “This is what the Lord says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all things, and so they came into being?” (Isa 66:1-2).

From David’s perspective, the Lord’s answer is unmistakable: “It’s not about what you can do for me; it’s all about what I can do for you.” Nathan is instructed, “Tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone. . . . I have cut off your enemies. . . . I will make your name great. . . . I will provide a place for my people. . . .’” The message is emphatic: David is not a self-made man. The issue has never been, what can David achieve or how much can David accomplish. The focus has always been on receiving from God, not achieving for God. David may have been about to cross the line from being full of God to being full of himself. Had his success and acclaim convinced him that he was in a position to do something significant for God—because God had done so much for him? If so, David was on dangerous ground, as we all are when we think we can do something special for God. Beware of being so full of what you can do for God, that you forget about God.²¹⁹

Contentment

*But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.*

Psalm 131:2

David’s picture of contentment is of a child old enough to be in her mother’s lap without needing to be nursed but thankful to be in her mother’s arms. She neither clambers to be feed nor clings dependently. She is calm and content. She makes no demands. She is delighted to be present for no other purpose than to feel her mother’s love. The scene is reminiscent of the time Jesus asked the disciples, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a little child to him and placed the child among them. He said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4). Contentment and greatness have the same source: a calm and trusting dependence on the Lord. It

²¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Interpretation: First and Second Samuel*, 253.

²¹⁹ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol. 1:168-172.

is ironic that David and Jesus would use the trusting, dependent child as a picture of spiritual maturity. Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a crucial perspective when he writes, “Christian childlikeness and Christian maturity are not in tension with one another. Even at an advanced age, the saints enjoy a marvelous youthfulness.”²²⁰ The more mature in Christ that we become the more we see ourselves as the contented children of God. We cry, “Abba, Father,” because the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children (Rom 8:14-16). To be able to say with the apostle Paul, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil 4:11) requires us to be weaned off of all those false dependencies that we are tempted to cling to.

Hope

*Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.
Psalm 131:3*

The concluding admonition encourages the people of God to put their full trust and reliance in the Lord both now and forever. Psalm 130 and 131 repeat the same admonition : “Israel, put your hope in the Lord.” Both psalms are deeply personal, dealing with forgiveness and contentment, with a focus on the individual until just at the end when the scope opens up and reaches out to encompass everyone. Two observations can be drawn. The person who has the privilege and joy of encouraging hope and admonishing trust is the person who has experienced forgiveness and contentment in Christ. The second observation is that such a person embodies what it means to put our hope in the Lord. Forgiveness and trust, redemption and rest, are grounds for hope in the Lord.

²²⁰ Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 41.

The Psalms of Ascents (Ps 120-134) were prayed by the people of God as they ascended up the rugged terrain of Palestine to Jerusalem. They came together to worship Yahweh and celebrate the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The journey was a physical challenge that ran parallel to Israel's spiritual challenge. We have identified a sequential pattern of five sets of three psalms, which may have served as morning, noon, and evening prayers. Each set of three psalms broadly covers in order: the distress and challenges of life; the people's dependence on God; and the Yahweh's saving deliverance. The final triad concludes the Psalms of Ascents and celebrates three key blessings from the Lord, covenant faithfulness, life together, and faithful servants.

Psalm 132 reminds the people of God that their pilgrimage was not only over land but through time. The arduous geographic journey is analogous to Israel's salvation history, the journey from Abrahamic covenant to Mosaic Law to Davidic throne. The two journeys parallel one another and converge in Zion. Place and time matter to the psalmist as they do today to the followers of Christ. The structure of Psalm 132 is built around two vows: David's costly vow to the Lord to secure a permanent dwelling place for the ark of the covenant and the Lord's solemn promise to David to establish his royal line through the coming of the Anointed One who will be adorned with a radiant crown. Psalm 132 compares the far lesser vow to the far greater promise to deepen the joy of our salvation.

David's Vow

*Lord, remember David
and all his self-denial.
He swore an oath to the Lord,
he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:
"I will not enter my house
or go to my bed,
I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
till I find a place for the Lord,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."
We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:
"Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
'Arise, Lord and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
May your priests be clothed with your righteousness;
may your faithful people sing for joy.'"
For the sake of your servant David,
do not reject your anointed one.*

Psalm 132:1-10

The psalmist asks the Lord to remember David, Israel's deeply flawed but earnestly faithful king, who desired above all else to find a permanent place for the ark of the covenant, a place that the Lord might call home. The hope behind the psalmist's plea is that the Lord will remember all David's "self-denial" and his passion for the presence of God and then act on that remembrance and fulfill his promises to David. Surprisingly, the David story is summed up in this singular act of worship and devotion, namely his tireless effort to find a permanent place for the ark of the covenant. Undoubtedly, David made the vow. He "swore an oath to the Lord" that he would not rest until the ark found a permanent dwelling place. However there is no record of such an oath in the biblical narrative. Yet what slipped below the historical record rises here to great significance.

The psalmist makes much of what the ark symbolized, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob, but of the ark itself he says very little and what he does say is inauspicious.²²¹ The ark is referred to as an "it", an object rumored to be in one place, Ephrathah (the region of Bethlehem), but found in the fields of Jaar. The history of the ark is spotty at best. During the reign of Saul no one paid any attention to it (1 Chron 13:3). Years before, during the days of Eli, the Philistines captured the ark as a war trophy but they soon lived to regret it and they sent it back to Israel where it found its way to Kiriath Jearim where it stayed under Eleazar's guardianship for twenty years (1 Sam 4 - 7).

David recognized the ark as a holy symbol for the Lord God and as act of devotion to the Lord he sought to retrieve the ark and bring it to Jerusalem. But David's first encounter with the ark ended in tragedy. David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord when Uzzah put out his hand to steady the ark because the oxen stumbled. We read, "The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act and therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Sam 6:7). Understandably, David was angry "because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah" and he was "afraid" of the Lord (2 Sam 6:8-9). He put his plans on hold for three months before resuming the processional. Only this time with far greater care and reverence. The narrator tells us that as the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, King David, dressed in a linen ephod, leaped and danced before the Lord. And after the ark was set in the tent that David had pitched for it and the sacrifices were finished, David gave each person a loaf of bread and cakes of dates and raisins. Everyone in the city of Jerusalem rejoiced, everyone but one, Michal David's wife. She was mortified at David's undignified display of holy abandon and she despised David in her heart (2 Sam 6:12-20). One wonders if this was not the singular act of self-denial that the psalmist asks the Lord to remember!

²²¹The Ark of Testimony in the wilderness Tabernacle was the most important symbol of God's presence. Although it was lined and covered with pure gold, and it was not to be touched by human hands but moved by specially made poles, it was but a box. And not a very big box at that. It measured three feet, six and a half inches long and two feet, two and a quarter inches wide and high. Its lid was called the atonement cover and its contents included a copy of the commandments. From its name, shape, and contents, the Ark of Testimony symbolized Yahweh's presence and pointed to the divine work of redemption and revelation necessary for the salvation of God's people. It was never thought of as a substitute for the invisible reality of God nor as an object of worship and devotion. At the center of Israel's worship life, in the Most Holy Place, the Ark was not a sacred relic, but a symbol of the Presence of God. The Ark of Testimony pointed away from idolatry to the invisible reality of the God who is.

The Samuel narrative may describe the joyful celebration accompanying the psalmist's petition, "Arise, Lord, and come to your resting place, you are the ark of your might." The experience of the past becomes the shadow of the future when the coming of the Anointed One will clothe the priesthood of all believers in righteousness and all the faithful will sing for joy. David, the servant of the Lord, is a type pointing forward to the ultimate Son of David whose kingdom will endure forever and whose throne will be established forever (2 Sam 7:16).

The Lord's Vow

*The Lord swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:
"One of your own descendants I will place on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever."*

*The Lord has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling, saying,
"This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.
I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.
I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.
"Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
I will clothe his enemies in shame,
but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown."*

Psalm 132:11-18

To compare David's vow of self-denial to the Lord's vow of sacrifice is like comparing the ark (merely an "it") to the real presence of Yahweh. There is no comparison, but the Lord in his great mercy enters into a relationship with David for the sake of all humanity. Once again it is important to say that the measure of David's life was not in what he achieved but in what he received from the hand of God. Like David, the Lord takes us from nowhere and makes our names great, "like the names of the greatest people on earth" (2 Sam 7:9). He gives us a new home, a place of rest, free from oppression, and promises that "my love will never be taken away" (2 Sam 7:15).

The Lord vowed to establish the house of David forever and he fulfilled that vow in person, in the coming of Jesus Christ the Anointed One, the Son of David. This is where the Psalms, Jesus' prayer book, begin. The Lord declares, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." And how shall this come about? By none other than God's very own Son: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Ps 2:6). As David prophesies, "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" (Ps 110:1). The fulfillment

of these promises is what makes the first Advent such a source of joy and celebration. The angel of the Lord said to Mary, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31-32). The Lord honors his vow to David even though the sons of David are faithless. He has chosen Zion for his dwelling and he, as only he can do, will establish his real presence among his people. This is the reality that the apostle described when he declared, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (tabernacled) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The Lord takes the small scale self-denial of his frail and faithful servant David and matches it with his suffering Servant who “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5). The Lord God invaded the mess of the human condition in the most personal and costly way imaginable. Into our crisis of sin and death, God sent his one and only Son “in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (Rom 8:3). This is the Son of David who achieved the resting place that David earnestly sought for “the Mighty One of Jacob.” It is the “rest” that encompasses time and place and is secured for eternity. The Lord declares, “This is my resting place forever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it” (Ps 132:14). This is why Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

Psalms 132 concludes with a vision of the abundant life (John 10:10) and a description of the Anointed One who makes all of this possible. The people of God are blessed with “abundant provisions,” the poor are well fed, the priests are clothed with salvation, and the faithful “ever sing for joy” (Ps 132:15-16). The future of this new Davidic covenant is guaranteed by the Lord in four ways. It will come about through his strength and power as symbolized by the horn. This strength is not static but dynamic. It grows and sprouts. The choice of verb is related to the word for “branch” that suggests a Messianic symbol used by the prophets Zechariah (3:8; 6:12) and Jeremiah (23:5).²²² Secondly, it will come about because the Lord will be a true guide to his people. The image of the lamp stands for guidance and revelation. The Anointed One is “the true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). Thirdly, it will come about because the Lord will be victorious over all his enemies. He will clothe them with shame, an image of utter defeat and of a conquered people. Fourthly, it will come about because the Lord rules and reigns in righteousness for eternity. The symbol of the radiant crown adorning the head of the Son of David assures Mount Zion everlasting salvation.

²²² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:742.

This beautiful three verse psalm celebrates the meaning of God’s ordained covenant community. The psalmist paints two powerful images that are distinct in meaning and comprehensive in scope. The first represents God’s redemptive provision – the moment of Aaron’s holy consecration. The second signifies God’s sovereign plan and purpose – the dew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion. This psalm of assent was sung and prayed by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to worship God. Today we pray this psalm in the Body of Christ, the Church, in thanksgiving for our salvation in Christ, our great High Priest, and in gratitude for his promise of the abundant life – everlasting life. The portrait of Aaron is personal and intimate; the landscape of blessing from Hermon to Mount Zion is social and public. Both vivid images are meant to inspire worship, unite believers, and sanctify the people of God by the power of the Spirit of God.

Blessing In Community

*How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!*

Psalm 133:1

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together* to guide twenty-five young pastors in their understanding of Christian community. The year was 1938 and the place was the Confessing Church’s illegal clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde, Germany. At a time of great uncertainty and danger, Bonhoeffer meditated on the privilege of Christians living together in unity. It was a gift, not to be taken for granted. He wrote, “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”²²³ He stressed that Christian community is a “divine reality,” not a human ideal. It is based on “the clear, manifest Word of God in Jesus Christ,” rather than the “dark, turbid urges and desires of the human mind.”²²⁴

Bonhoeffer reflected on the practical meaning of life together. He took the psalmist’s description of “good and pleasant” and elaborated on it in concrete terms. He envisioned believers praying the Psalms, showing hospitality at the kitchen table and the Lord’s Table, forgiving one another, working and playing together. This “goodness” goes all the way back to creation “when God saw that it was good.” It is a goodness that is productive and life-fulfilling. This “pleasantness” enhances the whole of life with delight and joy. These two words, “good and pleasant,” are the essence of human flourishing and recall the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is worthy – think about such things” (Phil 4:8).

Blessing Running Down

It is like precious oil poured on the head,

²²³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 19.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

*running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.*

Psalm 133:2-3a

The priestly consecration of Aaron and his sons is described in Exodus 29. There is a detailed description of priestly garments, ceremonial cleansing, and sacrifices. The sacred anointing oil was “a fragrant blend” of myrrh, cinnamon, calamus, and olive oil (Exod 30:22-25). The psalmist gives poetic expression to the sacred moment when Moses obeyed the word of the Lord, “Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head” (Exod 29:7). The oil running down on Aaron’s head, running down on his beard, and running down on his collar, is a picture of the blessing of God descending upon his people.²²⁵ The image symbolizes the essence of God’s ordained community. Life together is a gift based on the mercy of God. The atoning sacrifices made by priests were a reminder of our sins and the need for God’s mercy. The whole sacrificial system was an object lesson pointing forward to Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

Aaron foreshadowed Jesus Christ our great High Priest in whom we have become a kingdom of priests. The word of the Lord through the patriarch Moses, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6), is now fulfilled in Christ. “You are a royal priesthood,” declared the apostle Peter (1 Pet 2:9). The followers of Christ are holy and set apart for priestly service to the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no higher calling than this; no special designation that ranks anyone higher than this God-ordained responsibility. The biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers stresses the equality and body-life of the church as a whole. The Book of Hebrews roots our priesthood in the priestly sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” He “learned obedience by the things that he suffered.” (Heb 4:15; 5:8). Instead of the blood of sacrificial animals, he offered himself as a once for all perfect sacrifice. His blood “cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, rendering the old covenant obsolete, putting an end to the old sacrificial system, and giving us all the confidence “to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb 8:13; 10:1-4, 19).

Community depends upon our vertical relationship with God in Christ. To speak in figurative terms, the blessing comes down from above. “Grace, like water, always flows downward, to the lowest place.”²²⁶ And we all embody this principle. We cannot achieve this unity; we must receive it. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ,” wrote Bonhoeffer. “No Christian community is more or less than this. . . . The Christian no longer lives of himself, by his own claims and his own justification, but by God’s claims and God’s

²²⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 266. Reardon makes a great deal of the beard. He writes, “The high priest’s beard is mentioned twice in connection with this bountiful anointing, portraying the accumulated saturation of the blessing into this supreme symbol of his manhood. (Indeed, Holy Scripture is very strict on the point. The priest may not shave his beard, and the man who can’t grow a beard cannot be a priest.)

²²⁶ Quoted in Aitken, *John Newton*, 11.

justification.”²²⁷ The global impact of Bonhoeffer’s Life Together is in itself a testimony to the priesthood of all believers. What was intended for a small group of pastors-in-training has resonated with the priesthood of all believers around the world. We can identify with Aaron’s consecration. We are the holy possession of God in Christ, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God’s people, recipients of God’s grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit.

“The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. The Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community.”²²⁸ Believers know nothing of a “secret, individualized faith.” “Christ is not seen apart from the gathered, listening, praying, believing, worshipping people to whom he is Lord and Savior. It is not possible to have Christ apart from the church.”²²⁹ Following Jesus without being in the church is like a soccer player without a team, an actor without an audience, a symphony conductor without an orchestra, a teacher without students—you get the point.

David’s second simile lifts our imagination from the shared act of priestly consecration to the miraculous breadth of God’s blessing. Images of redemption and creation converge. Propitiation and providence are in concert. At nine thousand feet Mount Hermon is the tallest peak in Israel. It is located over one hundred miles north of Mount Zion which is in Jerusalem. Hermon is known for its alpine climate with its cool, moist air, in contrast to the dry arid climate of Jerusalem. The climatic impossibility of the dew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion triggers the praying imagination and opens up poetic possibilities. The proverbial heavy dew of Hermon is a metaphor for God’s blessing that extends from the heights to the depths (“High and low drink in the same sweet refreshment” (Perowne)).²³⁰ “The unity of God’s people,” writes Tim Keller, “brings opposites together, symbolized by tall Hermon in the rural north and the little hill of Zion in the urban south. For Hermon’s dew to fall on Zion would be a miracle – and so is the supernatural bond that brings people far divergent in culture, race, and class together in the Lord.”²³¹

The blessing of God coming down reaches its climax in the descent of the Son of Man. This is the crucial coming down out of heaven into history that is absolutely critical to the Gospel.²³² Bruner writes, “‘*No one has ever gone up into heaven except the Son of Man who has come down out of heaven.*’ Jesus is the exclusive *personal* bridge between heaven and earth, between God and human beings.”²³³ Our Savior’s coming down is highlighted throughout the fourth gospel. Jesus is the Bread of God “that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33).²³⁴ And the Spirit of Christ comes down to lead us “upward to and through Jesus ‘*the*

²²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21-22.

²²⁸ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 42.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²³⁰ Quoted in Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 453.

²³¹ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 340.

²³² Bruner, *John*, 191.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 192.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

Truth to *the Father* into *true worship* (John 4:16-26) and then will lead us outward immediately into authentic mission in the neighborhood and the world (John 4:27-42).”²³⁵

Blessing On Command

*For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

Psalm 133:3

These two distinct images share a common place. “For there” knits these metaphors together. “The immediate reference would be to Mount Zion, the place of the sanctuary and the Aaronic priesthood, and by implication the place where the unity of the people would be the most noticeable.”²³⁶ The promise of redemption and the promise of the land converge in Jerusalem. The psalmist leaves no doubt as to the means and meaning of God’s blessing when he writes, “For there the Lord bestows his blessing.” By God’s command salvation is rooted in a specific time and place. Christians see the “for there” promise of the sacrificial system and the promise of the land fulfilled in Christ. The image of “running down” is echoed in the apostle John, when he wrote, “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” The people of God have become the bride of Christ and the temple has become the holy city. These two metaphors establish an inclusion that runs from the intensity of relational intimacy to the full extent of human flourishing in community. John’s vision of the New Jerusalem is deeply personal and fully relational. What comes down out of heaven is not just a place, but a people. Human flourishing and everlasting life are not up to us on our own. The Lord commands his blessing which only he can give. To God be the glory. Amen.

²³⁵ Ibid., 257.

²³⁶ Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 3:751.

Every third psalm has drawn special attention to the blessing of Mount Zion. We have celebrated the peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment of Mount Zion. Therefore it is fitting that the Psalms of Ascents conclude on a final note of unceasing praise emanating from the Jerusalem Temple. The protocol of praise is twenty-four seven, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. As the psalms remind us there is never a poor time to praise the Lord: “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips” (Ps 34:1). Psalm 134 is a reminder to praise the Lord moment by moment, day or night. Most commentators envision priests working the night-shift in the Temple. While the city sleeps the priests continue to praise the Lord.

Luke refers to the prophet, Anna, the eight-four year old widow, who never left the temple. She worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, she was right there. Anna was led by the Spirit of God to recognize the Christ child. “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Psalm 134 corresponds well to the apostle Paul’s concluding admonition to the church at Thessalonica. Paul asked “brothers and sisters to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” He went on to say, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:12-13, 16-18).

With the special feast days over, it was time for the pilgrims to return home. Spurgeon imagined pilgrims setting out on their long journey home at the break of day. But before they departed they requested one final blessing from the night-shift priests. “The retiring pilgrims stir up the holy brotherhood of those who are appointed to keep the watch of the house of the Lord. Let them look around them upon the holy place, and everywhere ‘behold’ reasons for sacred praise.”²³⁷ If Spurgeon is right the final act before leaving Jerusalem at sunrise was a praise service.

If we envision ourselves returning to the harsh conditions of Meshek or Kedar or some place in between (Ps 120) we know we need the blessing of God. We long for the Lord to enter into our need and respond to our distress with his deliverance – his blessing. This longing does not stop as we reverse our steps and travel back to our daily routine. Pilgrimage in reverse is just as important as the pilgrim advance toward Jerusalem. It is easy to think of the pilgrims singing and praying the Psalms of Ascents as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate covenant and community, but not so easy to pray and sing on the return journey.

A Call to Bless

*Praise the Lord [Behold, Bless the Lord], all you servants of the Lord
who minister by night in the house of the Lord.*

²³⁷ Spurgeon, “Psalm 134,” *Treasury of David*.

*Lift up your hands in the sanctuary
and praise [bless] the Lord.
Psalm 134:1-2*

How can we who are needy and sinful bless the Lord who is all-sufficient, the Maker of heaven and earth? Truly, we can add absolutely nothing to God. The Lord is not in anyway needy for praise. It is we who stand in total need of God's blessing. Our self-sufficiency is in every way a myth. The Lord God's all-sufficiency is in every way absolute. We need the Lord's blessing to meet our needs, but when we bless the Lord we humbly acknowledge and reverently bow before his glorious, life-giving presence. Some translators have exchanged "praise" for "bless" to distinguish the Lord's blessing of us to meet our needs and our blessing of the Lord to worship him. While the distinction is important, the biblical text insists on using "bless" to describe our action toward God and God's action towards us. The word "bless" is the keynote of the psalm but the exchange, notes Derek Kidner, "is quite unequal: to bless God is to acknowledge gratefully what He is; but to bless man, God must make of him what he is not, and give him what he has not."²³⁸

"Behold, bless the Lord," is a call to worship, a call to bend the knee, to stand in awe, to lift our hands in praise, and to exalt in the name of our God. Worship is simply telling the truth about God, who God is and what God has done. "To bless the Lord, therefore, is to call to mind the glorious things he has revealed about himself, as well as the glorious things he has done, and to bring ourselves low, to kneel, in worship and adoration. This is the climax of pilgrimage."²³⁹

Who are these "servants" who are called to bless the Lord? The context of the psalm indicates Levitical priests and singers (1 Chron 9:33; 23:30), but the term for "servants" can be used for "worshippers in general."²⁴⁰ The psalmist was most likely referring to priests from the tribe of Levi, but by using the more general word for worshipers (Ps 135:1) the psalmist opens up the meaning of the psalm for Christians today to the possibility of the priesthood of all believers. Christ's followers "have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way" (Heb 10:19-20). We do not worship vicariously through an ordained group of pastors. We do not look to a pastor for the feeling of reassurance that the Christ-life is being lived out. The pastor is not a surrogate living the life of faith on our behalf. The pastor does not pray in our place or worship for us. We are all called to worship the Lord "in the Spirit and in truth, for [we] are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

The challenge to the Levites to lead in worship was perceived by Calvin as a gentle rebuke aimed at those priests who felt they had met their responsibility when they executed their liturgical and ritual requirements. "The psalmist would show that merely to keep nightly watch over the Temple, kindle the lamps, and superintend the sacrifices, was of no importance, unless they served God spiritually, and referred all outward ceremonies to that which must be considered the main sacrifice – the celebration of God's praises."²⁴¹

²³⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 454.

²³⁹ Motyer, *Journey*, 147.

²⁴⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:756.

²⁴¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 168.

The call to “lift up your hands in the sanctuary” is a call to enter into worship with our whole being, not only body, mind, and soul, but with all the emotional baggage and heart ache that we carry around with us. The invitation is to the whole person. We are not asked if we feel like worship; we are commanded to worship. Athletes tend to do this better than worshippers. They put their whole bodies into what they are doing. We were meant to exercise our soul when we kneel, stand, lift up our voice, and lift up our hands. If we only worshiped when we felt like it, when we were in the mood, we would worship far less. But worship is not subject to our whims. We are commanded to worship. The invitation is an imperative, calling our whole being before God. We were not meant to feel our way into worship but worship our way into feelings. Body language modifies our behavior and allows our souls to catch up where they need to be – in reverential awe before the Holy One in the sanctuary.²⁴²

A Priestly Benediction

*May the Lord bless you from Zion,
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.
Psalm 134:3*

Having blessed the Lord (Ps 134:1,2), the psalmist turns his attention to the Lord’s blessing of the people. The priestly blessing is in the tradition of Aaron, Israel’s first High Priest. The Lord gave Moses specific directions: “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.’” The source of the blessing is the Maker of heaven and earth and the blessing comes from Zion. Through the coming of Jesus Christ we have a far deeper, richer understanding of the Maker of heaven and earth. We cannot speak of our Creator without thinking of our Redeemer.

The apostle Paul wrote, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . .He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . .For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:15-20). Christians today cannot think of the blessing of Jerusalem without rejoicing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of grace. We bless the Lord because we have received the blessing of God: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:3-4).

We have discussed the importance of Zion as the place where Israelites could go and be blessed in Psalm 14. Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. Zion as a *place* “formed the nucleus for a rich gathering of images, symbols, promises, and visions that express God’s sovereign purposes worked out on the hard, inhospitable ground of our lives.”²⁴³ Until

²⁴² Motyer, *Journey*, 148. Motyer writes: “The word ‘sanctuary’ in the Old Testament does not have the meaning ‘a place of safety’, in the sense in which we use it now, but always ‘a place of holiness’, and, very frequently, the simple noun ‘holiness’ is used.”

²⁴³ Peterson, *Leap Over the Wall*, 133.

Jesus Christ came *place* rather than *person* summed up the meaning of God's presence. But when the Incarnate One came he fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding the ultimate future of God's people."²⁴⁴ Instead of the holiness of *place*, "Christianity has fundamentally. . .substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space."²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.

²⁴⁵ Quoted in Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.

The Psalms of the Great Ascent (Psalms 120-134) end on a note of praise. Psalm 134 works as both a conclusion to the psalms of ascents and as an introduction to the Great Hallel psalms. Having journeyed from all over Israel to Jerusalem, the pilgrims now head back home. I hesitate to say that they are bound for home, because Zion is their true home and the gathering in Jerusalem is a high point to their worship and family life. Having prayed and sung their way to Jerusalem, they will pray and sing their way back to their ordinary routines and daily labor. The centering reality of worship, with its spiritual disciplines of repentance, sacrifice, thanksgiving, prayer, and praise are juxtaposed with the challenges of making a living, shepherding sheep and cattle, harvesting wheat and barley, pressing olives, tending vines, building homes, digging wells, and weaving cloth. The festival reunions are over and it's back to the daily grind. But these pilgrims are changed and renewed. They are not as they were; they are transformed. They have added another spiritual growth ring to their life with God. They are returning to their homes and farms, stronger and wiser than they came.

The setting of Psalm 134 captures the early morning mood of the pilgrims as they head out, thanking the Levites for their service and praising “the Maker of heaven and earth” as they go. Psalm 135 develops these themes and helps set the tone and agenda for the psalms to follow. The Psalms of the Great Ascent finish and the Psalms of the Great Hallel commence. Jesus’ prayer book carries you to Jerusalem on a melody of deep meaning and then brings you back home with songs of praise. This coming and going is vital to the people of God. True spirituality does not end with the end of the Feast days. The return journey down home is just as important as the journey up to Jerusalem. The general tenor the Great Hallel Psalms guide the returning pilgrims in praise and gratitude, in resilience and endurance. The drum beat of praise pulsates through Psalms 135-150, but true to the character of the Psalms such praise issues out of the depths of pain and the yearning for the very presence of God.

Call to Praise

*Praise the Lord [Hallelujah!]
Praise the name of the Lord;
praise him, you servants of the Lord,
you who minister in the house of the Lord,
in the courts of the house of our God.
Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good;
sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.*

Psalm 135:1-3

The psalmist’s “Hallelujah” chorus pervades our coming and going. Vigorous, knowledgeable praise frames not only the psalm but our lives. Psalm 135 begins and ends with a call to praise and in between celebrates the reason for praise and critiques the alternative to praise – idolatry. The psalm is a mosaic of Scripture fragments drawn from the Psalms, the Law, and the Prophets. The poet-psalmist aims for impact, not originality. He crafts the psalm in such a way as to gather

up the fullness of the Word of God so as to bring it to bear on the today's experience of devotion and daily life. To praise the name of the Lord is to praise everything about the Lord – who he is and what he has done. Yahweh's actions and character are worthy of all praise. The Name is short-hand notation for the fullness of God, even as "servants of the Lord" refers to all the people of God, past, present, and future, and not just the official priests. We are called to praise, not to debate or critique or sit in judgment. The psalmist speaks to our skeptical mind and our troubled heart and says, "Praise the Lord." His message is clear, begin with doxology, not doubt. Rather than a cool empathy with the cynic, let the skeptic witness the genuineness of your worship. Worship your way into feelings for God; don't feel your way into worship. We set aside our self-preoccupation in order to make room for adoration and praise. Spurgeon wrote, "We ought to be always at it; answering to the command here given—Praise, Praise, Praise. Let the Three-in-one have the praises of our spirit, soul, and body. For the past, the present, and the future, let us render threefold hallelujahs."²⁴⁶ Our praise neither adds nor subtracts from the Lord who is above all, "the unchangeable One." He is neither greater if we praise him nor less if we reproach him.²⁴⁷

True worship leaders follow the example of the psalmist. They refuse to call attention to themselves. They do not worship for the sake of others, as if the congregation is vicariously worshipping through them. They are servants of Yahweh. In the first instance they are not musicians or artists, much less performers or professionals. They are servants worshipping with other servants. Praise is not a matter of technique or hype, but a declaration of who the Lord is and what he has done. We seem to forget so easily that praise is not a performance show casing our talent. Calvin warns against a "misguided zeal" that motivates "too many" to spend time and energy on "trifles." They weary "themselves with ridiculous attempts to invent additions to the service of God," while they neglect what is most important.²⁴⁸

In the tension between the unadorned altar (Exod 20:22-26) and the golden calf (Exod 32:1-35) we are tempted to give up and give people what they want. We may call it "a festival to the Lord" (Exod 32:5) but it amounts to idolatry. Whether the musical style is classical or contemporary the impulse to entertain and impress is very real. Praise is the antidote to tailoring the gospel to meet consumer demand. We cannot praise the Lord and cater to self-interest, self-centeredness, and self-justification.

The returning pilgrims have just come from a rich time of praise in the house of the Lord. Augustine picks up on this household language and asks, "Is it a small benefit, that we stand in the house of the Lord?" How can we be anything but thankful? We used to stand on the outside, but now we stand within. And we have nothing to repay God for such great benefits other than praise and thanksgiving. The gospel of Jesus Christ, prefigured in Israel's salvation history, makes it possible for us to stand in the household of faith. "It belongs to the very act of thanksgiving," writes Augustine, "to 'receive the cup of the Lord, and to call upon His name.'"²⁴⁹ His Eucharistic interpretation hints at how Jesus himself might have prayed this psalm. Everything celebrated in this psalm, Yahweh's election of Jacob, his sovereignty over creation

²⁴⁶ Spurgeon, "Psalm 135," *Treasury of the Psalms*.

²⁴⁷ Augustine, *Psalm 135*, 624.

²⁴⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, vol. 5:171.

²⁴⁹ Augustine, *Psalm 135*, 624.

and history, his over-powering plagues of judgment, and his conquest of Canaan, all depend ultimately on who Jesus is and what Jesus did and will do. His Name, “the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9) is the name of the Lord to be praised. We cannot think of the Israelite standing in the courts of the house of God without praising the Lord for we who were “once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” We are “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household. . .” (Eph 2:13, 19).²⁵⁰

Reason for Praise

*For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own,
Israel to be his treasured possession.
I know that the Lord is great,
that our Lord is greater than all gods.
The Lord does whatever pleases him,
in the heavens and on the earth,
in the seas and all their depths.
He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth;
he sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.
He struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
the firstborn of people and animals.
He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.
He struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings –
Sihon king of the Amorites,
Og king of Bashan, and all the kings of Canaan –
and he gave their land as an inheritance,
an inheritance to his people Israel.
Your name, Lord, endures forever,
your renown, Lord, through all generations.
For the Lord will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants.*

Psalm 135:8-14

The reason for praise begins with the Lord’s sovereign election of his people: “the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own.” Rather than perceiving election as an unacceptable intellectual dilemma or a burden of conscience, the psalmist sees being chosen as a cause for great rejoicing. The opposite of being chosen is the horror of abandonment. There is no hint in this dynamic action of anything other than the grace and mercy of God. To be included – to be chosen – is to

²⁵⁰ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57. With the literary care of a poet, Paul orchestrated a word play on the Greek word for “house” (οἶκος). In Christ we are no longer *aliens* (πάρρηκοι), but members of God’s *household* (οἰκεῖοι), *built on* (ἐποικοδομηθέντες) a sure foundation, and the *building* (οἰκοδομή) is *built together* (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) into a *dwelling place* (κατοικητήριον) of God. Paul’s intentional selection of the household of faith language underscores the relational nature of the church (see Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 137).

be privileged as God's treasured possession (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; Mal 3:17; Ps 114:2). The divine decision has nothing to do with Jacob meriting or deserving God's favor. There is no way human rights or initiative could be so construed as to leverage God's favor. This choosing is all of God's doing for the sake of the redemption of the world.

The psalmist accepts the fact of election as grounds for praise without attempting to justify the divine decision. Jesus says much the same thing to the grumbling crowd at the feeding of the more than five thousand, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day" (John 6:44). To his disciples, Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit. . ." (John 15:16). In his letter to the church at Ephesus, the apostle Paul may have Psalm 135 in mind when he gives his opening eulogy (Eph 1:3-12).

The psalmist rests in the most profound truth, Israel is God's treasured possession, even as the followers of Jesus Christ rest in this same truth. The apostle Peter used the same language to draw on this reality, when he wrote, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession (Exod 19:5; Ps 135:4), that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

Secure in the knowledge that the Lord had chosen Jacob, the psalmist confidently declares, "I know the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods." His words echo Jethro the father-in-law of Moses "who was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord has done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians" (Exod 18:9-11). But the psalmist does not begin with the Exodus, he begins with creation. "The Lord does whatever pleases him." He has no limitations other than his pleasure. His will is sovereign over the cosmos from the stars to the seas and from the wind to the rain. This is what impressed the disciples when Jesus "rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39). The Creator of all that ever was, is, or will be, is also the Lord of history. The poet tersely sketches the power of the Lord to shape the nations, to raise up and put down, by citing the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the defeat of the Canaanite kings (Num 21:21-24; 21:33f; Deut 2:30-33; 3:1-6). It was the Lord who gave the land of Canaan to Israel and not because of any power or merit of her own.

The poet breaks into praise and once again extols the name of the Lord. "The renown, the fame, of the Lord, increases with every intervention. . . . God's compassion for his people motivates him to vindicate them by delivering them from their enemies, now and finally at the end of the age."²⁵¹ Commenting on these verses, Calvin wrote, "The whole world is a theater of the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice and power, but the Church is the orchestra, as it were – the most conspicuous part of it; and the more intimate and condescending the communication of his benefits, the more attentively are we called to consider them."²⁵²

²⁵¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:768.

²⁵² Calvin, *Psalms*, vol. 5:178.

Alternative to Praise

*The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
nor is there breath in their mouths.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.*

Psalm 135:15-18

The return journey confronted pilgrims once again with the reality of living in an idol-saturated, anti-Yahweh world. The people of God have always felt the anguish and the antagonism of being in the world but not of the world (John 17:16). The psalmist repeats here what was said in Psalm 115:4-8 about man-made idols being inarticulate, sightless, and inaudible. “Chiseled mouths that can’t talk, painted eyes that can’t see, carved ears that can’t hear – dead wood! Cold metal!” (Ps 135:16-17, *The Message*). Every idol is the object of a thousand human stares, but without a trace of any recognition. The idol sees nothing, knows nothing. “Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand” (Isaiah 44:18).

We are enticed through a slow and incremental process that erodes convictions, inculcates habits, and impacts priorities to enter idolatry through the back door. When the immortality symbols of the culture determine our self-worth and significance, then the danger of idolatry is very real. The gods of business do not require that we pay homage at a shrine, but they can require extreme devotion, displacing all other priorities. The gods of fashion do not have holy days, but they transform the narcissistic “me” into an idol to be adorned and adored. The gods of sport give meaning and escape to my intolerably boring life. Idolatry in our culture is a far greater concern than we often acknowledge. Tim Keller writes, “The biblical concept of idolatry is an extremely sophisticated idea, integrating intellectual, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual categories. There are personal idols, such as romantic love and family, or money, power, and achievement; or access to particular social circles; or the emotional dependence of others on you; or health, fitness, and physical beauty. Many look to these things for hope, meaning, and fulfillment that only God can provide.”²⁵³ If my definition of the good life is my latte ritual, my state-of-art-gourmet kitchen in my starter-castle, my children—successful student-athletes, my oversized SUV, my addiction to Apple products, then chances are I’m struggling with idolatry, and I don’t even know it.²⁵⁴ I have become like my idols, spiritually deaf and dumb.

Call to Praise

*All you Israelites, praise the Lord;
house of Aaron, praise the Lord;
house of Levi, praise the Lord;*

²⁵³ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xix.

²⁵⁴ Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 9.

*you who fear him, praise the Lord.
Praise be to the Lord from Zion,
to him who dwells in Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 135:19-21

Psalm 135 is a fitting introduction to the Great Hallel Psalms with its eleven-fold variations of “Hallelujah!” The psalm opens and closes with a five-fold drum beat of praise, followed by the finale, “Praise the Lord.” All of Israel is summoned to praise. This psalm serves as a welcome resource for the journey down the mountain and back into the daily routine. Pray this psalm as you return to university or to a corporate office or as you hit the road as a sales rep. Let this psalm remind you to praise the Lord; let it encourage you that the Lord is sovereign; let it warn you of the dangers of idolatry. This well-crafted mosaic of Scriptures forms a beautiful picture of praise. The reference to the house of the Lord at the beginning is matched with the house of Aaron and the house of Levi at the end. By using the metaphor of “house” the psalmist stresses that the people of God are a family of families coming before God to sing out their “Hallelujahs!”

Psalm 136 is a companion psalm to Psalm 135 and celebrates the same themes found in the preceding psalm: the sovereignty of God over creation and redemption and Yahweh's compassion for his people. The theology of Psalm 135, drawn from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, is transformed into antiphonal worship in Psalm 136. The psalm opens and closes with a call to thanksgiving and repeats the centering theme, "His love endures forever," twenty-six times. Derek Kidner argues that our English translations make the refrain more cumbersome than it needs to be. Gelineau translates the six Hebrew syllables tersely, "for his love has no end."²⁵⁵ Eugene Peterson translates the theme, "His love never quits" (Ps 136:1-26, Message). Allen Ross renders it, "for his loyal love endures forever."²⁵⁶

Whether or not the refrain feels repetitive may depend on the worshiping congregation and the musical setting. We can imagine Anna, who "never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37), praying this refrain and never tiring of its truth. To see everything from creation to redemption in the light of God's love is not boring, but inspiring.

We can picture Jesus praying this psalm as a prelude to his upper room discourse on love. The covenant, redemptive love of the Lord, the love that never quits, becomes the basis for our love for one another. Jesus said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). It is this Trinitarian love, the love between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this love that never quits that is the love that makes our relationship with God and others possible. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:9-10). Jesus knew when he prayed Psalm 136 that the Son's love is always a reflection of the Father's self-sacrificing, truth-keeping, life-giving love. He also knew that the love that never quits would lead him to the cross (John 15:12-15).

Call to Thanksgiving

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever,

Psalm 136:1-3

It may be to our advantage that we don't know the specific occasion for Psalm 136. It may have been prayed in the temple at one of the feasts or it may have been prayed on any day of the week around the family table. The psalm fits with Solomon's dedication of the temple of the Lord. The

²⁵⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 457.

²⁵⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:773.

people “worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, “He is good; his love endures forever” (2 Chron 7:3,6). King Jehoshaphat, sixth king of the Davidic kingdom, echoed the refrain on the day of battle, “Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.” Jehoshaphat led the people of God in a model prayer against fear. In the shadow of the temple he prayed, “Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you” (2 Chron 20:6-12). Jehoshaphat courageously led the army of Israel into the desert to confront a massive army threatening to drive Israel from the land. On the morning of the battle, Jehoshaphat appointed men “to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever’” (2 Chron 20:21). The miraculous victory to follow was joyfully attributed to the Lord whose love never quits.

Following the Babylonian and Persian exile, the refrains of the psalm were sung at the dedication of the second temple. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord the priests “with praise and thanksgiving” sang to the Lord: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever” (Ezra 3:11). Psalm 135 appears to mark special occasions when the people of God marked significant milestones. But it is not only a psalm for Israel to dedicate the Lord’s temple or celebrate military victories, it is also a psalm for the people of God today. The high point of salvation was reached in the death and resurrection of Christ and the Lord has proven that “his love never quits.”

Reason for Thanksgiving

*to him who alone does great wonders,
His love endures forever,
who by his understanding made the heavens,
His love endures forever,
who spread out the earth upon the waters,
His love endures forever,
who made the great lights –
His love endures forever,
the sun to govern the day,
His love endures forever,
the moon and stars to govern the night;
His love endures forever,
to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt
His love endures forever,
and brought Israel out from among them
His love endures forever,
with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;
His love endures forever,
to him who divided the Red Sea asunder
His love endures forever,
but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;*

*His love endures forever,
to him who struck down great kings,
His love endures forever,
and killed mighty kings –
His love endures forever,
Sihon king of the Amorites
His love endures forever,
and Og king of Bashan –
His love endures forever,
and gave their land as an inheritance,
His love endures forever.*

Psalm 136:4-22

The poet swiftly moves from the creation of the cosmos to the history of redemption. The God of gods, the Lord of lords, is responsible for the sun and stars and for liberating Israel from Pharaoh's bondage. The Lord of the universe is the hope of the world. Creation and redemption are bound together in the understanding of God. Truth unites what the modern academic experience divides.²⁵⁷ Meaning is a gift, revealed in the Ultimate-Knower.

The ideological captivity of modern culture by scientism sees the origin of the cosmos as an accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment.²⁵⁸ The psalmist sees reality differently. The universe has its origins in God, *who* alone does great wonders, *whose* understanding made the heavens, *who* spread out the earth upon the waters, and *who* made the great lights.

Biology is awed that human beings are so closely related to fruits and vegetables and that over 60 percent of human genes are the same as those in fruit flies. The scientific view of the human person is inevitably and understandably reductionistic, breaking down the person into component parts, reading DNA, mapping genomes, and discovering proteomes. This effort is true as far as it goes. The old biology aims to explain the *what*, *where*, *when*, and *how*, but it doesn't come close to explaining the *who*. Meaning has no casual connection to molecular structure, but there would be no molecular structure without it. For the psalmist there is a dynamic synergy between creation and redemption. Separately and together they inspire thanksgiving to the One who alone creates and to the One who alone redeems.

We are in a position today to behold the wonder of creation and redemption in a way that the psalmist could never have imagined. Yet from his limited trajectory along the arc of salvation he has given us a psalm in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that never has been more true. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and history. As *history* moved toward the cross, *creation* moves toward the Resurrection. If the history of God's revelation points to the cross, the nature of God's creation points to the resurrection. We are prepared for the resurrection through the "big

²⁵⁷ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 15.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

bang,” the language of DNA, the human quest for knowledge, the Periodic Table, mathematical patterns and formulas, the human capacity for beauty, the anthropic principle of the universe, the incredible complexity of the living cell, and the meaning of the human drama. The divine necessity of the resurrection is hidden in the mystery and complexity of nature. Philosophical commitments to reductionism and materialism preclude the possibility of even entertaining the notion that the beauty, complexity, and meaning of creation can be derived from anything other than “a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents” reaching back in time.²⁵⁹ Yet to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear *creation* testifies to the logical coherence and meaningful power of the resurrection. *God’s revelation declares its meaning in the context of nature’s wonder and human need. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and history.*²⁶⁰ We are not cosmic orphans alone in the universe. We are God’s holy possession, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God’s people, recipients of God’s grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit.²⁶¹ Michael Wilcock sums it up beautifully, “From the beginning of creation to the climax of redemption, from the first making of the heavens to the final inheritance of the saints, all is to be seen against the background of the love of God. That love is both indestructible, because it is covenant love, and boundless, because it endures forever.”²⁶² *The Lord’s love never quits.*

Call to Thanksgiving

*He remembered us in our low estate
His love endures forever,
and freed us from our enemies,
His love endures forever,
He gives food to every creature,
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of heaven,
His love endures forever.*

Psalm 136:23-26

Psalm 136 inspired the seventeenth century poet John Milton to write a hymn that is sung today in Anglican churches. Milton’s hymn begins, “Let us with gladsome mind, praise the Lord for he is kind, for his mercies ay endure, ever faithful, ever sure.”²⁶³ But somebody more famous than Milton may have been inspired by Psalm 136, when she wrote, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of *the humble state* of his servant. . . *His mercy extends to those who fear him* from generation to generation. . . . He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:46-55). Mary’s *Magnificat* resonates with the psalm’s themes. The Lord of the cosmos “remembers us in our low estate” and meets even our most basic needs. Against all the challenges and worries of life, we are reminded to give thanks to the Lord and remember that his love never quits. The more we meditate on

²⁵⁹ Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes*, 154.

²⁶⁰ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 125-126.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁶² Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 251.

²⁶³ Milton, “Let us, with a gladsome mind, praise the Lord,” *The Hymnal 1982*, 389.

Psalm 136 the easier it is to see its influence on the apostles and the early church. Psalm 136 echoes in the apostle Paul when he writes, “Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:8). We hear its melody in the apostle John’s encouragement, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

The final admonition, “Give thanks to the God of heaven,” is unique in the Psalms, although it can be found on the lips of Jonah (1:9), Cyrus king of Persia (Ezra 1:2), and Nehemiah (1:4). This designation is an affirmation of the Lord’s absolute sovereignty over all. It is stated in such a way that a pagan or pluralistic culture could understand. Yahweh is God of gods (Ps 136:2), Lord of lords (Ps 136:3), and the God of heaven (Ps 136:26). His covenant love endures forever. Or, as the apostle Paul said, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

There was no place as far removed from Zion as sitting under poplars on the banks of the Euphrates. The prophets had warned the people that the day was coming when Babylon would lay waste to Israel and carry her people into exile. But no warning could ever have prepared them for the utter devastation of Jerusalem and the nine hundred mile trek from Zion to Babylon. Yet with each mile walked the determination grew to remember the Lord and Zion. The Psalter pivots from praise to lament.

In 597 BC, 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). This first group included Jehoiachin, who succeeded Jehoiakim, and other notables, such as Daniel and Ezekiel (Dan.1:1-6; Ezek.1:2). They crossed the barren wasteland from Jerusalem to Babylon on foot and under armed guard. We would be naive if we thought this was not an ordeal of great suffering and privation. King Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for this cruel oppression and evil captivity. He was God's instrument of judgment to punish Judah for her spiritual apostasy and disobedience. And in turn, Jeremiah declared publicly that Babylon would be judged harshly for their oppression of Israel (Jer 50:1f). Exodus and exile have their place in God's salvation story.

Psalm 137 is found in a sequence of pilgrim psalms intent on keeping the big picture of God's sovereignty in view. The psalms of descent encourage pilgrims to return to their ordinary lives and normal routines in heartfelt praise and glad thanksgiving (Ps 135:1; 136:1). It is these positive psalms of descent that set the context for the most unwelcome descent of all – the Babylonian exile. Psalm 137 is a devastating and resilient communal lament. Its white hot passion is driven by a deep desire to remember the Lord in the midst of exile. There is not a hint of despair, only resolve. The God of gods and Lord of lords is not a tribal deity without jurisdiction in Babylon. The God of heaven is just as real in Babylon as he is in Zion. The people of God know this to be true and they are serious about remembering the Lord.

We Wept

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

Psalm 137:1-4

The poet deftly sketches a poignant scene and lets our imaginations paint the story. It is as if the exile can be summed up in a moment, in a single incident. Images of trees and rivers are symbols

of delight, but the exiles can only think of Zion. The beauty of this strange land means nothing to them when they remember Zion. They are ruled by the world's most impressive superpower, but Yahweh is their King and Zion is their home. They sit down in grief and weep. They are heartsick for what they have left behind and their captors only add to their misery by asking for songs. They hang up their lyres (more like a guitar than a modern harp) in the trees, because they didn't have it in themselves to sing. We envision the mockery and ridicule of their tormentors who demand "songs of joy." We imagine a whole people belittled by oppressors. Then, the poet pictures for us a small group of Babylonian bullies demanding some entertainment. "Sing us one of the songs of Zion! Put on a show," they say. "Snap out of your woe-is-me attitude. There's nothing half as beautiful in your dry and dusty land as the beautiful tree-lined Euphrates."

The mockery leaves them with an ache in their hearts and a question, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" The tenor and tone of the question implies a refusal. They can't possibly respond to their tormentors by singing a song of Zion. To sing as if nothing had happened, that they were not under judgment by the Lord or to pretend that their were not prisoners or to refuse to see their tormentors as oppressors, was impossible. They needed to remain true to who they were as the people of God, true to their identity in Zion.

This is all true, but Jeremiah, who was led by the Lord to remain in Jerusalem, counsels the exiles to make a positive contribution to Babylonian life. The prophet sent an open letter to the first wave of exiles in 594 BC to challenge them to accept the hard work ahead and to warn them against delusional alternatives. His letter must have impressed them as counter-intuitive. The strategy exemplified God's redemptive counter-cultural strategy. Instead of resisting their Babylonian oppressors, the Lord called the Israelites to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer 29:7). Jeremiah delivered a message of hope to the exiles (Jer 29:11-14).

Jeremiah's counsel, given about 600 years before Christ, gave the people of God a hint of the Gospel ethic to come. The apostle Peter wrote, "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires. . . .Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. . . .But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 2:11-12; 3:15-16). Given the counsel of Jeremiah we might imagine the exiles learning to sing their songs of Zion!

We Remember

*If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
If I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.*

Psalm 137:5-6

Jeremiah's prophetic word of encouragement and hope may help account for the psalmist's shift from lament to confidence. Speaking personally and emphatically, the psalmist insists that he will always remember Jerusalem, which represents everything about Yahweh and his covenant love. In a word Jerusalem is a metaphor for the Name of Yahweh, Mount Zion, the City of God, and the New Jerusalem. Not to remember Jerusalem would be to forsake the Lord God. He vows his commitment and loyalty in the strongest terms, even "invoking upon himself the penalty of physical handicap (cf. Matt 5:28-30)."²⁶⁴ Even as a foreign exile in Babylon, the psalmist pledges his passionate fidelity to the God of Zion. If Jerusalem is his "highest joy" one wonders how he can keep from singing the songs of Zion!

The exile afforded a new opportunity for the chosen people of God to discover all over again what it meant to live faithfully and obediently. The stranglehold of false spirituality, self-indulgent materialism and sexual promiscuity, that had squeezed the life out of Jerusalem, had been broken in Babylon of all places. They were given a fresh opportunity to live for God in a foreign land. God's plan for them, as it is for us, was to live in the world but not of the world

We Call on the Lord to Remember

*Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them to the rocks.*

Psalm 137:7-9

We vow to remember the Lord on pain of self-mortification but we have no trouble remembering our enemy's atrocities. The psalmist asks the Lord to remember what he cannot possibly forget. The pain of injustice and the anguish of man's inhumanity to man drives his passion in this closing section. The darkness of Edom's revenge and their unmitigated hate impact the psalmist's joy. Echoes of their betrayal and their glee over Jerusalem's destruction haunt the exiled Israelite. But the psalmist reserves his deepest animosity for Babylon who is "doomed to destruction" (Ps 137:8). He attributes blessing and happiness to "the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Ps 137:8-9).

Most of us have never lived through the atrocities experienced by these oppressed exiles, but we know the powerful emotions of revenge and vengeance. The image of babies being smashed against the rocks is horrific, appalling, unimaginable, yet the hate that inspires such unthinkable

²⁶⁴ Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 242.

acts of evil is within us all. We struggle with these imprecations, not only here but throughout the Psalms, trying to reconcile them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How shall we understand this *prayer*? How did Jesus pray this psalm? “To cut this witness out of the Old Testament,” writes Derek Kidner, “would be to impair its value as revelation, both of what is in man and of what the cross was required to achieve for our salvation.”²⁶⁵ John Calvin saw Psalm 137 as prophecy: “This is not the language of imprecation, but of prophecy, and predicts the horrors which would accompany the taking and sacking of the city of Babylon; and amongst these atrocious the cruelty of ‘dashing the children against the stones.’”²⁶⁶

First, through prayer the people of God have a safe and significant way of expressing their dark emotions and moral pain. The moral outrage triggered by brutalities and atrocities must be brought to the Lord in prayer and left to his righteous judgment. We are challenged to look evil in the eye and call down judgment. In prayer we hate what God hates. We refuse to call the good evil and evil good. “Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God – and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with “the world rulers of the present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).²⁶⁷

Second, where we stand on the salvation time-line makes a difference. In an effort to preserve the identity of the people of God, the Israelites were instructed to form their own culture. Through diet, clothing, language, ritual, and the law, God separated out a people for himself. God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people (Gen 12:2-3). God chose one nation among the nations to deliver the message that Yahweh was the God of all creation and the Lord of history. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations that occupied the promised land (Deut 7:2-6). Israel and the church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites (1 Pet 2:9). The church is commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).²⁶⁸ The militancy of Jesus is radically different from the militancy of Israel. The nationalistic strategy of the promised land is no longer viable in the light of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Jerusalem and Babylon are symbols of God's eternal plan for judgment and salvation. Jerusalem, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, represents the rule and reign of God. Babylon embodies human success turned against the Lord God. But over time the meaning of Jerusalem becomes more complicated, because in her rebellion against God and in her refusal to accept the Lord's Anointed One she becomes like Babylon. Jesus pronounced judgment against Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. . . . Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37). Jesus equated Jerusalem and Babylon. They were both under the judgment of God. As the apostle Paul said, “There is no difference between Jew

²⁶⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 461.

²⁶⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, vol. 5:125.

²⁶⁷ Peterson, *Answering God*, 95.

²⁶⁸ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol. 2:7

and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:22-24). The apostle John used Babylon to symbolize not only the Roman Empire, but every secular and spiritual power that set itself up against the Kingdom of God, even Jerusalem. Down through the ages God has pronounced judgment against the spirit of Babylon. “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! (Rev.18:10).

Third, we pray Psalm 137 in the light of God’s final judgment. The redemptive trajectory of the gospel of Jesus Christ holds out hope for forgiveness and salvation (2 Pet 2:9). “God will judge,” writes Miroslav Volf, “not because God gives people what they deserve, but because some people refuse to receive what no one deserves; if evildoers experience God’s terror, it will not be because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah.”²⁶⁹ To put this another way, to resist the love of God is the greatest evil we will ever do. If God’s wrath and the consequences of evil are imaginary; if there is no final judgment day, if there is no hell, then Christians have no reason to shout “Fire!” But if the house is burning and danger is imminent, then Christ’s love motivates believers to “rescue the perishing and care for the dying.” The psalmist’s raw imprecations shout disaster at the top of his lungs. And against all reason many refuse to get out of the burning building.²⁷⁰

Finally and *thankfully*, the Lord remembered the Edomites and the Babylonians and *all the rest of us* in a way that the psalmist never imagined and in a way that our sins do not deserve (Ps 103:10). God Incarnate took on our humanity and became a baby, a vulnerable, weak, baby. God’s one and only Son, who knew no sin became sin for us “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Like those Edomites, “we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:3-5).

²⁶⁹ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 298.

²⁷⁰ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 164.

The next eight psalms are attributed to David (Ps 138-145). They deepen our insight into God's promises to the house of David (2 Samuel 7:1-29) and help us understand the meaning of the incarnation of God. We pray these psalms today in the light of David and Jesus, the Son of David. They point forward not only to Jesus' self-understanding but to our own in Christ. They offer valuable insight into what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. They reflect on the pressures, vulnerabilities, and challenges facing all those who have entrusted themselves to the ever-living Son of David. These eight psalms are followed by five praise psalms. Each of the final five psalms begins and ends with Hallelujah, "Praise the Lord." The Psalms conclude with lament-free joyous psalms – total praise from beginning to end.

Psalm 138 takes in the large view of salvation history. The "gods" and the "kings of the earth" are called by David to join him in praising the Lord. David is one of the earliest proponents of the global gospel. He instructs the nations on how to respond to the Lord's unfailing love and faithfulness. He bows down low before the Lord and rises up to proclaim the gospel to the kings of the earth. He does so boldly and without condemnation. He is welcoming to the nations. He invites them to praise the Lord. When they hear what the Lord has decreed they will all want to praise the Lord, because "the glory of the Lord is great" (Ps 138:5). David even gives a glimpse of how the gospel works. The Lord transcends his transcendence and "looks kindly on the lowly" (Ps 138:6). The first hint of resistance to this global gospel comes in David's need for protection. He walks in the midst of trouble and is subject to the anger of his foes. But the Lord preserves his life and stretches out his hand to save him.

The messianic significance of Psalm 138 is striking. We see David in the psalmist's description, but not only David, we see Jesus, the Son of David, who proved his faithfulness beyond what could be imagined and lowered himself unbelievably so that we might believe. We see Jesus, but not only Jesus, we see ourselves and all those who follow him. This messianic self-understanding, prefigured in David, informs the life of today's disciples. The way to know Christ is to become like Jesus precisely in the way the psalm describes, bowing adoration, emboldened proclamation, and humble identification. What Jesus did in person, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection was foreshadowed in principle and promise long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. David reveled in the anticipation of these truths. Their meaning goes beyond David's expectation and finds fulfillment in the Son who is the radiance of God's glory, the one who learned obedience by the things that suffered (Heb 1:3; 5:8). Like the prophets, David spoke of things that would be best understood in the light of the gospel. Truths that even the angels long to look into (1 Pet 1:12).

Beyond All Expectation

*I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;
before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name*

*for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.
When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.*

Psalm 138:1-3

David's praise and thanksgiving knows no bounds. He's all in, "I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart." Or, as one translation says it, "Thank you! Everything in me says, 'Thank you!'" (Ps 138:1, The Message). He acknowledges Yahweh exuberantly and joyfully before every ungod who claims to be god, every angel or authority, every king or prince, every idol or ideology. David stands before the world to sing the praises of the Lord God. He is not intimidated by worldly powers. His open confession before the gods is undaunted. His confession is public for all to hear. His thankfulness unites his public and private self. He cannot be one way in the world and another way in worship. "Before the 'gods' I will sing your praise." David stands before the world unbowed, bowing before the Lord. It is this combination of courage and humility that is the sign of spiritual maturity and wisdom.

The reference to "your holy temple" may refer specifically to the Jerusalem temple or it may generally refer to the presence of God. "Temple" conveys a range of meanings from the Tabernacle to the Temple. David's worship is filled with gratitude. He praises the Name of the Lord for his unfailing love and faithfulness. He then adds an intriguing third attribute: "for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame." Ross suggests that "the Lord's fulfillment of his promise to the psalmist surpasses all other manifestations of God's works."²⁷¹ What David may be saying is that the Lord fulfills his revealed promises in ways that even exceed our expectations. He's not implying that God's promises are at odds with his name, but that the fulfilled promises are beyond our imagination. The apostle Paul said something similar when he writes, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. . ." (Eph 3:20).

This line takes on deep significance when we compare God's promises to David (2 Sam 7:1-29) with the reality of the incarnate Son of David. Who would have thought that the promise to raise up offspring to succeed David, to build the temple, and to establish his kingdom would be fulfilled through a virgin conceiving and bearing a son? And that this child would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God (Luke 1:32-35). Surely David did not envision the fulfillment of God's promises in this way (that's the point!), but he did anticipate fulfillment in ways that he could never have imagined. The Lord's exalted greatness was such that he expected to be surprised! What he experienced of God's unfailing love and faithfulness only served "to greatly emboldened" him. We imagine Jesus praying Psalm 138 and identifying with David's confidence. His whole public ministry of teaching and healing expressed this bold confidence. Jesus said, "I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20).

²⁷¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:805.

David and the Son of David

*May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord,
when they hear what you have decreed.
May they sing of the ways of the Lord,
for the glory of the Lord is great.
Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them afar.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.
The Lord will vindicate me;
your love, Lord, endures forever –
do not abandon the works of your hands.*

Psalm 138:4-8

The early church undoubtedly prayed this psalm with the testimony of Jesus in mind. Jesus was the fuller realization of everything David said; everything he prefigured. If we put the apostle Paul's Christ hymn (Phil 2:6-13) alongside Psalm 138 we see key parallels. The call for the kings of the earth to praise the Lord finds its resolution in the exaltation of Christ when "every knee" will bow and "every tongue" confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father." The description of the exalted Lord looking kindly on the lowly parallels the humility of the Incarnate One, "Who, being in nature God. . . .made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."

David's description of walking in the midst of trouble and depending on the Lord to save him and vindicate him finds a far deeper, rich meaning in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. David's testimony sets us up for the testimony of the Son of David, who we imagine praying this psalm in preparation for the life-threatening troubles and the anger of his foes. Surely, David's passion for thanksgiving and praise and his experience of being "greatly emboldened," ministered to Jesus' self-understanding and spiritual fortitude. David's total disavowal of self-reliance and his absolute dependence on the Lord to save him bore testimony to the messianic strategy.

What was true of David and most true of the Son of David becomes true for all who follow Jesus today. The parallels run deep throughout salvation history and encompass all those who are in Christ. David bore elegant testimony to the truth when he said, "The Lord will vindicate me; your love, Lord, endures forever," but as we know his vindication depended upon the sacrificial love of the triune God. Jesus, the Son of David, fights for us in the Name of the Father, to rescue us from sin and death and to give us new life, everlasting life, in the Spirit. So when David prays, "do not abandon the works of your hands," we hear the apostle Paul's confident reassurance, "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

Self-worth is not a human achievement but a divine gift. We are made in the image of God, which means we are made for communion and community, for rational reflection and righteous obedience, for worship and work. We are called into a personal, face-to-face relationship with God and with one another. We have a soul because God created us with a soul. This means that I am not my own, that which is most dearly “Me” is not mine. The genesis of soul-making lies not in our ourselves but in our Creator and Lord. The me-centered world of our own making is nothing but myth. Reality is the God-centered world of creation and eternity.

Jesus made this clear: the value of the soul is beyond our means. Many people have told us that we don't have a soul, but only one person has said that we can't afford one. Only Jesus has said that my soul is so expensive that even if I gained the whole world I couldn't afford my very own soul. “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matt 16:26). Who we are and to whom we belong is a critical issue, especially when it comes to relationships. How we see ourselves has a great impact on our friendships and commitments. Our self-understanding shapes our expectations of self-fulfillment.²⁷²

Unselfing Self-Understanding

*You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand on me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.*

Psalm 139:1-6

Psalm 139 describes how God's parental love cares for us. The ground for all knowledge begins with this personal relationship: “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.” Thomas Cranmer's memorable words echo this truth: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. . .” “The Psalmist could have written, very simply, ‘Lord, Your knowledge of me is total.’ This brief statement would have said, in essence, what the first strophe of this psalm does say. . . Obviously he wants to dwell on the thought; he is not anxious to leave it. He wants the conviction to sink deeply into his soul that God knows him through and through, so he comes at the idea from a variety of angles and aspects — search and

²⁷² Webster, *Soulcraft*, 43.

know, sitting down and rising up and lying down, paths and ways, thoughts and words.”²⁷³ Derek Kidner writes, “Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended by this psalm; yet for all of its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last.”²⁷⁴

Psalms 139 is filled with references to the first-person personal pronouns: *I*, *me* and *my*. The emphasis, however, is not on the self but on the Lord. The best way to avoid self-centeredness, as David knew so well, is to be God-centered. Instead of living according to the constant refrain “Me! Me! Me!” we enter into a hymn of praise and adoration: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Rev 4:8). Everything about me becomes centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, my abilities and disabilities, my hopes and fears, my friends and enemies, my past and future, my daily tasks and long-range goals.

The psalmist takes comfort in the fact that God is all knowing (“You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.”), God is ever-present (“You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand on me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.”), God is totally sovereign (“All the days ordained for me were in your book before one of them came to be”), and God is completely holy. The psalmist embraces this truth as a comfort but if we wish to hide from God we might perceive it as a threat (Gen 3:8).

Children focus on a *sensory world* that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted. Most adults focus on a *sensible world* that calls for investigation, interpretation, reflection and action. Children are meant to grow up in an adult world where they are known, loved and cared for by adults. They need to be nursed, fed, protected and most of all, loved. *Their growth and maturity depends on being known better than they know. What is true for children is also true for adults.* Thankfully, we are known better than we know.

The apostle Paul said, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. *Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). We are not alone and unknown, as many fear, but we are fully known and truly loved. The myth of the autonomous individual self spreads the lie that we are neither known nor loved. The myth contends that we are cosmic orphans adrift in a meaningless universe without identity and security. Knowledge is not an autonomous exercise. Life’s learning curve ought to lead to humility, not frustration. Wisdom is the ability to see ourselves from God’s perspective.

Freud explains away the deep-seated emotion poured out in Psalm 139 and dismisses the reality of the all-knowing, all-loving, holy God. He claims in *The Future of an Illusion* (1928) that a parent-child relationship is responsible for the illusion of God.

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of this father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he

²⁷³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 277.

²⁷⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 463.

nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. Thus, his longing for a father is identical with his need for protection against the consequences of human weakness.²⁷⁵

Christians believe just the opposite – that a parent-child relationship is at best but a faint, albeit tender, reflection of God’s abiding parental love. The choice is ours between a world of our making and the world of God’s creating. Either the Creator creates creation or creation invents a creator. In a multitude of practical ways we choose between being me-centered or God-centered.

Regardless of how brilliant the scientist or philosopher may be, to insist on a knowledge independent of God is like the stubborn two year old insisting on doing it himself. Or, as my granddaughter said this week, “Help me Mommy! I want to do it all by myself!” Self-understanding begins with an acknowledgment in the depth of our being that we are fully known by our Maker and Redeemer. We are invited into his fellowship which sustains and supports us. We are not cosmic orphans or the masters of the universe but we are the children of God.

The Physics of True Spirituality

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

Psalm 139:7-12

I cannot escape this relationship, nor do I want to. It is this relationship that defines me, secures me and understands me. Within it I am free to “rise on the wings of the dawn” or “settle on the far side of the sea” (139:9), but I am never independent from God’s guidance or protection. God is the answer to my inherent fears of anonymity and loneliness. We may no longer be scared of the dark, but we fear the dark night of the soul. Darkness is a metaphor for death and disaster. But even if “darkness crushes me” says the psalmist and the light all around me becomes night, the darkness isn’t dark and the night isn’t night to Yahweh; night will shine like daylight.²⁷⁶ The psalmist’s hope points forward to the true light that gives light to everyone. This is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5,9). Like his Lord, Rembrandt used a dark canvas to accentuate the light of Christ. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

²⁷⁵ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 24.

²⁷⁶ Waltke, *The Psalms*, 556. Waltke writes: “The psalmist personifies the darkness: ‘will crush me’ is well known from Gen 3:15: ‘The Seed of the woman will crush/bruise your head, and the Serpent will crush/bruise his heel.’”

The Physicality of True Spirituality

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I were to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand –
when I awake, I am still with you.*

Psalm 139:13-18

This all-knowing, all-present God is the one responsible for my security – my redemption. The apostle's bold declaration that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39) echoes this psalm. The Lord God knows me from the inside out, from top to bottom, and from beginning to end. There is nothing like the birth of a child to make a mockery of the belief in nature alone. I stood in the delivery room and held our seven-pound newborn, and I was overwhelmed by the sheer glory of her. In Psalm 8 David asks, "What is a man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" He then answers his own question, "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him/her with glory and honor" (Ps 8:4-5). The birth of a child causes us to re-examine the meaning of life, to contemplate God's sovereignty and to feel our dependence upon God. A child's dependence on human parents is so obvious; our dependence upon God so real. God's knowledge of me is complete. It is intimate, immediate, comprehensive, persistent and sovereign.

David revels in the thoughts and blessings of God. "Your thoughts – how rare, how beautiful! God, I'll never comprehend them!" The psalmist cannot begin to tally up all the deeds and thoughts of God. The apostle Paul's doxology echoes David's praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36).

The Pressing Need for Divine Intervention

*If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*

*They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.
Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.*

Psalm 139:19-22

There is an abrupt change from intimacy with God to indignation against the wicked. Some find it hard to reconcile the psalmist's euphoria over the precious thoughts of God with such a vehement attitude towards God's enemies. David pleads for divine intervention. Ethicist R. E. O White observed, "Doubtless the psalm would be more comfortable without verses 19-22. So would the world without evil men."²⁷⁷ The psalmist counts God's enemies as his own. Derek Kidner writes, "For all its vehemence, the hatred in this passage is not spite, but zeal for God. In 'the day of salvation' the New Testament will re-direct this fighting spirit, but it will endorse its single-mindedness ('What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?' (2 Cor 6:14-15))."²⁷⁸

Biblical realism runs through the Psalms beginning with the description of the wicked in Psalm 1. God's enemies are David's enemies. The psalmist asks a rhetorical question, "Do not I hate those who hate you?" He is devoted to God and opposed to all those who openly despise God. The overt enemy of God becomes his enemy. Eugene Peterson writes, ". . . Our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. . . . Hate is often the first sign that we care."²⁷⁹ Prayer identifies the enemy, confronts wickedness, and names the evil. "Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God – and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with 'the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 6:12)."²⁸⁰

Self-Examination

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

David ends the psalm by inviting the Lord to examine his heart and expose his sin. He finds his joy by being fully known by God. Nothing escapes God's notice. His past, present, and future, his thoughts and feelings are an open book before God. He invites God's scrutiny and testing. When we worship God for who he is and what he has done, we discover who we are and what God intends for us to do. Worship not only tells the truth about God, worship also reveals the

²⁷⁷ White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms*, 203.

²⁷⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 467.

²⁷⁹ Peterson, *Answering God*, 98-100.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

truth about ourselves. Convinced of God's love and wisdom, David is transparent before God and invites scrutiny, "See if there is any offensive way in me."

Throwing off the sin that so easily entangles is easier said than done (Heb 12:1). C. S. Lewis argued that it was "indispensable to a real understanding of the Christian faith" for all believers to detect the "real inexcusable corruption under more and more of its complex disguises." When a person is getting better, Lewis reasoned, "he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him," but when a person is getting worse, "he understands his own badness less and less."²⁸¹ Detecting sin's complex disguises is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Diagnostics requires prayerful diligence and the wisdom of insightful spiritual directors.

The soulful self finds its rest in God. Every truly self-aware person can identify with C. S. Lewis' discovery. At the age of thirty-one, while a student at Oxford, Lewis painfully realized that the secret to self-fulfillment was not to be found in himself. "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," he recalls. "I had tried everything in my own mind and body; as it were, asking myself, 'Is it this you want? Is it this?'" Even Lewis's noble pursuit of joy left his soul empty and unfulfilled.

"I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective."²⁸²

John Calvin wrote,

"Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom...consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...no person can survey himself without immediately turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves... It is evident that a person never attains to a true self-knowledge until he or she has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself or herself...the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie."²⁸³

Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a deep insight when he writes, "Christian childlikeness and Christian maturity are not in tension with one another. Even at an advanced age, the saints enjoy a marvelous youthfulness."²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 58-59.

²⁸² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 176-177.

²⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1:37.

²⁸⁴ Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 41.

The final collection of David psalms recalls a dynamic state of struggle and hope (Ps 138-144) that is reminiscent of the Psalter's opening survival prayers (Psalms 3-7). It is fair to say that David majored in spiritual realism. He never shied away from wrestling with evil nor celebrating God's goodness in the midst of it. He refused to edit the psalms of disturbing and disheartening elements that might discourage the naive or the superficial. His storm-tested faith took on the full range of evil. This is why if we embrace the psalms and make them our prayer guide so we will never be caught blind-sided by evil. We may be surprised, but we will not be unprepared. The Psalms guide believers in an in-depth theology of evil that is comprehensive and pastoral. One of the special features of the psalms that is often missing in our worship today is how the psalms deal with the reality of evil – the persistent, insidious form of “insider evil” that robs the Christian community of its joy.

Psalm 140 ends on a hopeful note, but not before describing the violent attack of evildoers. David is not preoccupied with Israel's archenemies the Philistines; he's under siege by fellow Israelites. He is dodging “friendly fire.” The very people who should be honoring the Lord's Anointed and supporting his leadership are devising “evil plans in their hearts” and plotting his downfall. They are “slanderers in the land,” who “stir up war every day.” Either Psalm 140 is an exercise in royal paranoia or it is an archetypal description of the ongoing reality that confronts and prepares God's people for spiritual warfare. We may be lesser targets than David, but his example of turning to the Lord for deliverance inspires our dependence on the Lord. His analysis of evil alerts us to the threat of deception and causes us to be aware of the vulnerability of faithfulness. His willingness to let evil run its course, “whereby evil wrecks its own nemesis,” strengthens our patience and resolve.²⁸⁵ And finally, David's unshakeable confidence in the Lord's justice and in the vindication of the upright inspires our perseverance and hope.

We do not live the Christian life for very long before we discover the hidden violence of those who feel it is their moral duty to oppose us. Binary logic likes a clean division between the wicked and the righteous, but anyone who has worked among the people of God discovers the hidden violence that goes on right under our noses. Honesty requires us to admit that we have not been guiltless in this regard. The apostle Paul warned believers in Galatia to stop biting and devouring one another (Gal 5:15). James said that “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness” (James 3:8-9).

Rescue Me

*Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers;
protect me from the violent,
who devise evil plans in their hearts
and stir up war every day.
They make their tongue as sharp as a serpent's;*

²⁸⁵ Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 268.

*the poison of vipers is on their lips.
Keep me safe, Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent,
who devise ways to trip my feet.
The arrogant have hidden a snare for me;
they have spread out the cords of their net
and have set traps for me along my path.*
Psalm 140:1-5

David the king instructs us in our desperate, daily need for deliverance. If the king with all of his wealth and power should utter imperatives, not of command but of help, such as “rescue me” and “keep me safe,” we should learn to follow his example. If our problem is to turn everywhere but to the Lord for help, Psalm 140 recalibrates our spirituality and reorients our prayers. The temptation to self-sufficiency is best resolved early in life and early in each episode that threatens us. If we cannot pray, “rescue me,” because we are either too proud or too distracted, we are unwittingly conspiring in our own downfall.

The distinctive form of violence the psalmist finds threatening takes into account the subtle forces of envy and jealousy that constantly threaten human relationships. The violence the psalmist has in mind is not the mugging by a street thug, but a carefully calculated deception devised by a “trusted” colleague and designed to bring about the victim’s diminishment. The planning is hidden in the heart and the weapon of choice is the tongue which strikes with the deadly force of a cobra’s poisonous bite. The enemy is not a wicked foreign entity but an arrogant “brother in Christ” who knows you well enough to trip you up and manipulate what people think of you. Kathryn Stockett describes this kind of violence in her novel *The Help*. Her character Aibileen, a black nanny, explains that if you cross a white woman she won’t come after with a stick or pull a pistol on you. “No, white womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set of tools they use, sharp as witches’ fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em.”²⁸⁶

When Jesus prayed Psalm 140, he must have had the religious leaders in mind. How could he not? David’s description of his enemies parallels the daily experience of Jesus, who contended with the teachers of the law who condemned him as a blasphemer, criticized his socializing with the needy, plotted his death, credited him with demonic powers, and tried to trip him up and use his words against him (Mk 2:7,16; 3:6, 22; 11:28). Jesus was under relentless attack by the most respected people in the community. Their antagonism was driven by self-righteous anger, religious pride, and professional envy. They resented Jesus’ growing influence and impact of his ministry. The enemies of Jesus are the ultimate objective correlative to David’s description of his antagonists. Whoever David had in mind, whether Saul or Absalom, the psalm makes the most sense in the light of Jesus Christ.

My Strong Deliverer

I say to the Lord, ‘You are my God.’

²⁸⁶ Stockett, *The Help*, 188.

*Hear, Lord, my cry for mercy.
Sovereign Lord, my strong deliverer,
you shield my head in the day of battle.
Do not grant the wicked their desires, Lord;
do not let their plans succeed.
Those who surround me proudly rear their heads;
may the mischief of their lips engulf them.
May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.
May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent.*

Psalm 140:6-11

The intensity of David's appeal evidences his passion for God and his need for deliverance. In the midst of opposition it is often hard to keep our focus on the Lord. David leads by example and if we are following his lead, we too will say to the Lord, out loud and emphatically, "You are my God!" We will keep turning to the Lord in daily prayer, shared worship, and genuine fellowship. The only way to run the race with perseverance is by "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:1-2). We would be foolish to deny that we need a deliverer and we would be foolish not to earnestly and intensely turn to the Sovereign Lord for his deliverance. David's reference to armor, "you shield my head in the day of battle," is not an allusion to actual combat, but a metaphor for the Lord's strategic protection. The Lord has him covered. He has his back. The Lord protects his head. His feet will not slip. The wicked can't get to him, because of the Lord, and not his strength or ingenuity.

If we follow David's example we will be bold to pray against the desires and plans of the wicked. David was not shy about identifying his enemies and earnestly asking the Lord to thwart their plots and plans. He describes them as surrounding him, "proudly raising their heads." As the religious opposition grew against Jesus, so did his overt condemnation of their hypocrisy. In the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus explicitly critiqued the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and pronounced seven woes against them (Matthew 23). But coupled with the psalmist's courage to identify and pray against the enemy is the resolve to let evil run its course. The psalmist depends upon the moral law built into the universe by Yahweh. He knows that soon or later, the wicked will receive their just reward. David prays down judgment:

*"May the mischief of their lips engulf them.
May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.
May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent."*

There is hardly anyone who is active in ministry who does not regularly encounter some well-intentioned believer who is intent on bringing down the spiritual leadership. George was one such nemesis of mine. His Christendom model of the church longed for the glory days when the church was the religious home to city officials, prestigious weddings, and state-sponsored

funerals; when the pastor was a member of Rotary and the country club and campaign chairman for the United Way. George wanted me “out there” hob knobbing with the urban elite, greeting the Navy ships when they came to port, creating events that would draw crowds and the attention of the media. Our church was steadily growing. The average age of our members was becoming younger. The lost were coming to Christ. But George was not satisfied with our “slow growth.” He wanted exponential growth. So he mounted a campaign to undermine my leadership. He called and visited pastors throughout the state culling together facts and figures, quotes and anecdotes, to be used against me. Everything good that was happening elsewhere was an indictment against me because it wasn’t happening in our church. George turned several previously supportive elders against me. Eventually these manipulated elders left the church, but not before souring others on my preaching and spiritual leadership. Congregational meetings became George’s platform for strengthening his campaign and using surrogates to represent his position. George came to church every Sunday but stopped coming into worship, or if he did, he left before the sermon.

Through it all I had an unusual sense of peace. The prayerful support of many elders and members of the congregation was a great help. Even George’s adult daughter explained through tears how sorry she was for what her father was doing to the church and to me. She will never know how much that meant to me. Some of the elders spent literally hours trying to dissuade George from his negative campaign. When pastors, some of them hundreds of miles away, called to inform me of an encounter with George and to what George was saying about me, I simply didn’t feel the need to react. Maybe the criticism was so blatant and the encouragement from others so helpful that it was easy to leave the whole matter in the Lord’s hands. Then one day, I received a call from Joanie, George’s wife. Would I come quickly to the hospital ICU, George had collapsed at his computer of a massive stroke. I rushed there, held his hand, and prayed for him, and prayed for the family. George never regained consciousness and the church held his memorial service. Joanie, who was always faithful in worship, became a deacon the next year and was a real blessing to the church and to me.

Eschatological Confidence

*I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor
and upholds the cause of the needy.*

*Surely the righteous will praise your name,
and the upright will live in your presence.*

Psalm 140:12-13

David declares his confidence in the Sovereign Lord at the center and at the end of this psalm. For the present, David is confident that the Lord hears his cry for mercy and that he is his “strong deliverer” (Ps 140:6-7). It is easy to go from the meaning of “you shield my head in the day of battle” to putting on “the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). And for the future, David rests in the truth that the Lord’s administration will secure justice for the poor and uphold the cause of the needy. He looks forward to that day when the Lord dwells among his people. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4).

The struggle to remain faithful is intense. Evildoers are intent on seducing and entrapping the righteous. They make the beautiful side of evil look inviting – even compelling. For his part David is feeling especially vulnerable. He fears that he will say or do what will jeopardize his relationship with Yahweh. Compromise is easy. It would only take a little word from him to be welcomed into the fellowship of evildoers. He is enticed by their delicacies, intrigued by their delights. However, the emphasis in Psalm 141 is more on David's earnest plea for help than a description of the seduction of the soul.

David's early psalms (Psalms 3-7) and his concluding psalms (138-144) alert the earnest believer to the struggle for faithfulness. This struggle stretches from the beginning of the Christian life to the end. We may be pummeled by the ugly side of evil or enthralled by the beautiful side of evil, but either way the threat remains from start to finish. The Psalter's symmetry of spiritual struggle and survival testifies to the spiritual realism of the psalms.

The Spiritual Defenses

*I call to you, Lord, come quickly to me;
hear me when I call to you.
May my prayer be set before you like incense;
may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.
Set a guard over my mouth, Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.
Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil
so that I take part in wicked deeds
along with those who are evildoers;
do not let me eat their delicacies.
Let a righteous man strike me – that is kindness [hesed];
let him rebuke me – that is oil on my head.
My head will not refuse it,
for my prayer will still be against the deeds of evildoers.*

Psalm 141:1-5

The Christian life calls for serious effort. But when our evangelism implies that all it takes to become a follower of Christ is a quick decision for Jesus, we end up not only undermining the biblical message but deceiving ourselves. To minimize the challenges is to put believers at serious risk for succumbing to the compelling attractiveness of evil. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not produce an automatic predisposition and enthusiasm for obedience and faithfulness. Moral transformation and spiritual resilience does not happen automatically. Costly obedience in the face of evil does not become “second nature” without humble dependence upon the Lord and tremendous spiritual, intellectual, and emotional effort. The psalmist dispels any illusion to any form of spirituality and maturity that is not hard-fought and costly.

David's example of what it takes to be "strong in the Lord" and to "stand against the devil's schemes" deserves our careful attention (Eph 6:10-11). From college freshman to corporate officers and from school teachers to plumbers, all Christ's followers are called to practice the spiritual disciplines. If David prayed this way, so should we.

David leads by example. He makes an impassioned, humble plea for the Lord's help. This is how we begin to defend ourselves against the allure of evil's seduction. We pray. There is nothing complicated about calling on the Lord and asking for his immediate aid, "come quickly to me" (Ps 141:1). David describes the earnestness of his prayers by comparing them to the scent of sweet incense filling the room and by describing his physical body language before the Lord. He lifts up his hands in a demonstration of praise and adoration (1 Tim 2:8). This earnest, demonstrative prayer is not for show but for spiritual effect, proving to himself and to others that he needed the Lord's help to remain faithful.

What David prayed for is as important as how he prayed. He asked the Lord to set a guard over his mouth. He was especially concerned that his speech might betray him. Often times it is our words that give us away and lead us down an avenue of compromise and conceit that causes damage to ourselves and others. The apostle Peter's stunning denials offered to an un-intimidating servant girl ought to be a warning to us all. In the pressure of the moment it is easy for us say the unthinkable and then follow through on our verbal response. How important it is for those of us who are parents to ask the Lord to "keep watch over the door of [our] lips." Even our well-intentioned good advice to our children can come off sounding arrogant and self-serving. Like the father, who is never wrong and always has the last word on everything. Please don't misunderstand me. Parents and grandparents need to offer compelling spiritual direction but before we do, let's pray, "Post a guard at my mouth, God" (Ps 141:3, The Message).

The second thing David prayed for was his heart. If a man after God's own heart expressed his acute vulnerability to say and do the wrong thing, we can hardly deny the subtlety of our hearts' deception. We may not be tempted by the ugly dark side of evil, with this cruelty and vulgarity, but the seductive, beautiful side of evil, with its emphasis on worldly success, material luxuries, and personal ego is tempting. We are tempted to spiritualize these enticements and ask the Lord to bless us with these very tempting delicacies. David explicitly prays, "Lord, do not let me eat their delicacies."

David's third prayer request was for righteous friends to hold him accountable and to stand in his way in order to prevent him from doing what was wrong. The prophet Nathan was one such person in David's life. The Lord used Nathan to confront David over his horrendous sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah (2 Sam 12). The Lord also used Nathan to convey his word to David that prevented him from building the temple (2 Sam 7). We need the righteous, some of whom may be close friends, some not, who will prevent us from doing evil. David likens their blows to acts of kindness and their rebukes to a healing balm. David really meant it: "My head will not refuse it, for my prayer will be against the deeds of evildoers" (Ps 141:5).

Ironically, the way David expressed his heart for righteousness may have given the Pharisees

with their twisted logic a psalm to use in their case against Jesus. They condemned Jesus for blasphemy, because he did not set a guard over his mouth. They found proof that he was drawn to evil by his association with sinners and tax collectors. And when Jesus came before the Sanhedrin, he was struck by religious men who may have claimed their right to do so on the basis of Psalm 141.

C. S. Lewis saw the danger of twisting Psalm 141 to defend “Pharisaism” and self-righteous snobs. He saw the problem of rendering Psalm 141 legalistically. Lewis thought it was wise for Christians to avoid meeting with people who are “bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest, spiteful and so forth.” Not because we are “too good for” them but because “we are not good enough.” Lewis wrote, “We are not good enough to cope with all the temptations, nor clever enough to cope with all the problems, which an evening spent in such society produces. The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to ‘consent.’ The temptation was never greater than now when we are all (and very rightly) so afraid of priggery or ‘smugness’.”²⁸⁷

But the righteousness David prays for in Psalm 141 is not legalistic. It is not smugness. It is not hypocritical. On the contrary it is on the order of the heart righteousness described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Psalm 141 corresponds with the moral imperative of the Christian life described by the apostle Peter in his letter. Peter wrote, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pet 3:15-16).

Vindication & Protection

*Their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs,
and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken.
They will say, “As one plows and breaks up the earth,
so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave.”
But my eyes are fixed on you, Sovereign Lord;
in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death.
Keep me safe from the traps set by evildoers,
from the snares they had laid for me.
Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I pass by in safety.*

Psalm 141:6-10

The Sovereign Lord provides refuge and protection to those who call on him and seek his ways. David knows how important it is to keep his eyes fixed on the Lord. The author of Hebrews captured not only David’s phrasing but the moral and ethical challenge of the psalm when he wrote, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us

²⁸⁷ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 71-72.

run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2). The psalmist believes that evil will run its course and, speaking metaphorically, wicked rulers will be thrown over the cliff. Those who despise the word of the Lord and reject his commands will eventually come to see that they were wrong and the Lord was right. The obscure reference to bones being scattered at the mouth of the grave may describe the grim fate of those who reject the word of the Lord and fall victim to their own scheming. The danger of evil doers setting traps persists but ultimate vindication is the hope and expectation for those whose trust is in the Lord.

Psalm 141 is a faithful and timely prayer guide for the followers of Christ. We share David’s passion for holy living and a clear conscience. John Calvin warned, “Peace with God is contrasted with every form of intoxicated security in the flesh.”²⁸⁸ Jesus was under no illusion that the world would find his way acceptable. He taught his followers to expect trials and tribulation in the world, but he also taught them that the way of Christ will prevail. “I have told you these things,” Jesus said, “so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John16:33).

²⁸⁸ Quoted in Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 151.

The David psalms help us navigate the inevitable difficulties of life. The final set of psalms attributed to David include seven perilous journey psalms followed by a final praise psalm (Ps 138-145). These psalms correspond with the opening survival psalms (Ps 3-7) and other David psalms that honestly reflect the hardships of life. If Christ's followers were aware of how many psalms deal with the struggle of life they may not be as surprised when they fall victim to betrayal or depression or attack or disease. The challenges facing the people of God have not changed much over the years. We are still struggling saints who by the grace of God turn to God daily for his sustaining grace.

Everything we have experienced in Christ, including our new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3-5), should convince us of our need to pray the psalms. If anything, the gift of the Holy Spirit ought to draw us into the psalms. The Spirit inspired David to write these psalms and the Spirit can inspire us to pray these psalms today. Living the Christian life apart from Jesus' Prayer Book is dangerously akin to living without prayer. God intends for us to embrace this resource as a daily, practical guide to following Jesus. Through the psalms we learn to depend upon Jesus.

My Cry

*I cry aloud to the Lord;
I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
I pour out before him my complaint;
before him I tell my trouble.
When my spirit grows faint within me,
it is you who watch over my way.
In the path where I walk
people have hidden a snare for me.
Look and see, there is no one at my right hand;
no one is concerned for me.
I have no refuge;
no one cares for my life.
I cry to you, Lord;
I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."
Psalm 142:1-5*

The reference to a cave in the superscription along with the psalmist's acute sense of loneliness narrows the narrative search to David's escape to the cave of Adullam (1 Sam 22:1). He had just orchestrated his escape by pretending to be insane in order to escape the Philistine king of Gath. He must have felt thrown back on his own resources and that he was running out of options. He was physically and mentally exhausted with nowhere to turn. Both the Israelites and the Philistines were hunting for him and wanted him dead. David's personal prayer of lament is an act of desperation.

Such a psalm dispels any notion that we have to have our act together and our words piously arranged before we can approach God. We can begin with the straightforward cry of anguish. We can lament and give reign to our complaint. The Lord is not offended. He invites it. A corollary to this truth is that in the presence of discouraged and troubled fellow believers I have long since given up feeling the pressure to get my wording right or even my emotions right. The psalmist frees us up to begin with the “cry” and the “complaint.”

Psalm 142 critiques the counselor who is ready to judge the crier as harboring some unconfessed sin. We must be over-cautious in dismissing a believer’s lament as playing the victim. There is a form of weakness that fosters a false dependency on others and some people cling to their weakness as their own personal claim to significance, a merit badge that invites attention and sympathy. But we must be careful to hear our brother or sister’s lament without snap-judgments and emotional pet peeves. The psalms give voice to all those who are deeply afflicted and emotionally distraught. We are challenged to respond to a troubled soul with sensitivity and compassion.

Deep in the cave, David can afford to be loud – real loud. There is no one to hear him but the Lord. The listening subject of our lament is profoundly important. If it is to the wind, that’s despair; if it’s to the stranger in the crowd, that’s foolish; if it’s to the Lord (and to his people), that’s wisdom. The repeated emphasis of the psalm drives this truth home. The psalmist cries out to the Lord. He lifts his voice to the Lord for mercy and pours out his complaint before him, “before him I tell my trouble.”

In his memorable voice, Louis Armstrong intones the old spiritual, “*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows my sorrows . . . Nobody knows, but Jesus.*” Trouble is an inescapable fact of life. As one of Job’s unfriendly friends famously said, “Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Trouble is universal and pervasive. It touches all of our lives deeply and personally. Each of us seems to have our own original experience of trouble that no one else can share. We agree: “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” And sometimes we cherish the lament that is uniquely our own. Trouble is trouble, but nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows *my* sorrows.²⁸⁹ His loneliness leads him close to despair. He is bereft of friends and family, comrades and companions, but he still knows deep down that “it is You who watch over my way.” The people he is aware of are out to get him. “In the path where I walk people have hidden a snare for me” (Ps 142:3). The hidden snare is a repeated theme in these perilous journey psalms (Ps 140:5; 141:8).

The psalmist knows the Lord watches over his way, but he still feels alone. We sense his despair. This is how he feels in his heart, “I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.” But he knows that the Lord is there for him, “I cry to you, Lord; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’” On the surface the juxtaposition of statements may seem confusing and contradictory. If you are overhearing the psalmist you may be inclined to ask, “Are you looking to the Lord as your refuge or not?!” It is important for us to hear others express their devotion and their discouragement, maybe even their despair, and hold their convictions in tension. The fear of

²⁸⁹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 1.

loneliness does not cancel out the deep devotion and the deep devotion does not dispel the discouragement. We can lament the loneliness, and boldly say *before the Lord*, “no one cares for my life.”

This psalm deserves to be better understood and prayed more often because it honors the soul of the troubled believer. It gives real validity to our discouragement without easy, pious retorts that spiritualize our pain and leave us even more isolated. This is a great single’s prayer. The devoted disciple of Jesus Christ who cries out to the Lord and yet has found no husband or wife to share their life together. This is a great prayer for the home bound older person who loves the Lord but has never felt as lonely as they do now. In so many ways we can truly identify with David in the cave and pray Psalm 142.

Free Me From My Prison

*Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.
Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.
Then the righteous will gather about me
because of your goodness to me.*

Psalm 142:6-7

Prayer does not always bring immediate relief, but it often sharpens the request and clarifies the hope. In this last section David’s tone is desperate. His plea is a cry. He needs to be rescued. His enemies are breathing down his neck and he has nowhere to run to. Whether it is his circumstances or the cave itself, he likens his predicament to a prison, a metaphor for his hopeless, frustrating and dangerous situation. “Prison” may represent any number of circumstances that conspire to lock us up and close us down. David shows us how to pray against the evil. His motivation is evangelistic, “that I may praise your name,” and his expectation is hopeful, “then the righteous will gather around me.” David trusts in the goodness of the Lord.

The cave of Adullam proved to be a turning point in David’s life. The relational blessing that he envisioned came to fruition. The Samuel narrative reports: “When his brothers and his father’s household heard about it [David’s escape to the cave], they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered about him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him” (1 Sam 22:1-2). In the psalm, David says, “the righteous will gather about me,” but the narrative account describes the group as distressed, in debt, and discontent. Hardly, a promising group from which to build an army, but Eugene Peterson urges us to see “David’s morally and socially ragtag band as the embryonic holy people of God.”²⁹⁰ As with David in the wilderness, the people God forms into community need saving. It can be said of them: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but how you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:10). God took a group of

²⁹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, San Francisco, Harper, 1997, 95.

misfits and forged an army. They were not righteous; they were made righteous by the grace of God. And they were drawn to David because of God's goodness to him. The whole scene corresponds to the words of the Son of David when he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

David's Psalm 143 exemplifies dependence on the faithfulness and righteousness of Christ. It anticipates the apostle's trust in the sufficiency of God's grace in the midst of "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties." Even the way David prays for his enemies is consistent with Jesus' instruction in how we should pray for our enemies. The whole psalm from beginning to end is Spirit-inspired spiritual direction for Christ's followers today.

Mercy, Misery, and Meditation

*Lord, hear my prayer,
listen to my cry for mercy;
in your faithfulness and righteousness
come to my relief.
Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no one living is righteous before you.
The enemy pursues me,
he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in the darkness
like those long dead.
So my spirit grows faint within me;
my heart within me is dismayed.
I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works
and I consider what your hands have done.
I spread out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land.*

Psalm 143:1-6

David's insistence on being heard is a theme running through the psalm. He is bold to ask for God's gracious intervention. His vocal cry and outstretched hands on bended knees "signifies the intensity of the prayer."²⁹¹ His prayer foreshadows the confidence believers have "to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19). He prays in faith believing that by the mercy of God he will be heard, not because of any merit on his part, but because of the faithfulness and righteousness of God. In this respect David models for the New Testament believer the canonical truth that the just will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4; Rom 1:17). Whatever confidence David has in his own faithfulness is based solely on God's faithfulness. Only in God and by God's righteousness can he be found faithful. David's admission is a confession, "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you" (Ps 143:2; see Rom 3:10-11). He is not asking God to give him a pass and look the other way (Prov 17:15); he's crying out for the mercy of God. He is dependent on God's covenant love and the redemptive trajectory that begins with God's promise to defeat Satan through Adam's descendant, "he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15) and Abel's sacrifice (Gen 4; Heb 11:4).

²⁹¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:883.

David prays this way because of the Passover Lamb and the sacrificial system even as we pray this way because of “the blood of Jesus” (Heb 10:19).

David describes his need for God in a way that invites our participation. We may not face the same issues he did, but we face serious opposition nonetheless. Like David, “we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and our plea for God’s relief is based entirely on God’s mercy, not our merit. Like David, we can identify with being pursued by an enemy and confronting external circumstances that make life difficult. Whether we feel crushed physically or emotionally we have encountered opposition that threatens our well-being. It would be a mistake for us to distance ourselves from David’s graphic description of the enemy as if the problem of opposition only pertains to those who suffer state-sponsored persecution. Suffering is a major concern for most Christians. The “enemy” may be a colleague or a parent or a professor who belittles your faith and seeks ways to humiliate you because of your Christian witness. Or the “enemy” that pursues the believer may be cancer or a chronic disease or a disability that renders her weak and discouraged.

The apostle Peter refers to believers experiencing “grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Pet 1:6) including false accusations (1 Pet 2:12) and malicious slander for their good behavior (1 Pet 3:16). The picture Peter develops of believers living as resident aliens in their home culture is consistent with the psalmist’s description of enemy opposition. Peter expresses it this way: “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Pet 4:3-4). It is inevitable that living for Christ will draw fire because our enemy is free to attack us regardless of the political system or cultural setting. Peter warned, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers, throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Pet 5:8-9).

The third feature of David’s misery involves his internal, emotional state. “So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed” (Ps 143:4; see 142:3). David encourages us to identify this mental and emotional state *in prayer*. By his example we are encouraged to go beyond the empathy of shared need and honestly express our spiritual, relational, and emotional needs to the Lord in prayer. We are not alone in these needs, but it is one thing to identify them and quite another to say to the Lord, “listen to my cry for mercy.” When Jesus’s heart was dismayed, he immediately turned to the Father in prayer: “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ‘Father, glorify your name!’” (John 12:27-28). This was true in Gethsemane as well, when his sorrowful and troubled soul drove him to prayer (Matthew 26:35-39). We want to do more than identify our misery, we want to pray. We want to remember what the Lord has done over time. We want to meditate on his works and consider how the Lord has helped us in the past. Instead of using our weaknesses and afflictions as an excuse to “throw up the conflict in despair,” we want to “rise to him with our hearts amidst all our anxieties.”²⁹² Psalm 143 guides us in the

²⁹² Calvin, *Psalms*, 252.

spiritual discipline of bringing every anxious thought and every situation to the Lord in prayer (Phil 4:6). This is how we are to pray, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

The Work of the Spirit

*Answer me quickly, Lord;
my spirit fails.
Do not hide your face from me
or I will be like those who go down to the pit.
Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love,
for I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go,
for to you I entrust my life.
Rescue me from my enemies, Lord,
for I hide myself in you.
Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God;
may your good Spirit
lead me on level ground.
For your name’s sake, Lord, preserve my life;
in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.
In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes,
for I am your servant.*

Psalm 143:7-12

David delivers ten petitions, ten rapid-fire staccato imperatives, that demand immediate attention. The intensity of his concerns and the ultimacy of his requests imply that his very life depends on the Lord’s answer. His spirit is failing and his life hangs over the pit. Everything is at stake.

His urgent plea for *communion* with the Lord is reflected in the first three petitions. He has no desire for impersonal knowledge. His passionate concern is to know and to be known. He longs to say with the apostle, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Cor 13:12). Although he frames it negatively, “Do not hide your face from me,” every fiber of his being wants a real face to face encounter. His petition echoes Psalm 27, “My heart says, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek” (Ps 27:8). He wants to rise on the wings of the dawn and know the Lord’s unfailing love (Ps 139:9). His desire will be expressed by the prophet who said, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-23).

His urgent plea for *commitment* to the Lord combines his need for direction and his need for deliverance. The two petitions are inseparable and juxtaposed for impact. He needs it all: the way, the truth, and the life. He is desperate for the Lord to save him and to show him the way he should go. His imperatives “show me,” “rescue me,” and “teach me,” are clear and unambiguous. His reasoning has the character of a vowed commitment, “for to you I entrust my life,” “for I hide

myself in you,” and “for you are my God.” Each is all encompassing and grandly inclusive of all he is and will be.

The most remarkable petition of all underscores the *commissioning* work of the Holy Spirit, “may your good Spirit lead me on the level ground” (Ps 143:10; Nehemiah 9:20). This seemingly passing reference foreshadows the high impact gift of the Spirit. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he described the outpouring of the most self-effacing member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. He said, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me” (John 15:26). The focus of the Spirit’s advocacy is Jesus Christ. Against the world’s unbelief and hate the Spirit takes the lead in growing Christ’s church, establishing the biblical canon, and proclaiming Christ to every people, tribe, language, and nation. Jesus’ literal, physical departure through death, resurrection, and ascension signals a dramatic new turning point in salvation history (John 16:7-11). The comforting reason given by Jesus for the coming of the Paraclete is the Spirit’s impact on the mission of God.²⁹³

The promise of the Spirit is not to make us feel better about ourselves or to endow us with deeper spiritual intensity. The Spirit will reveal the shocking truth “that the root wrong in the world is the refusal to believe Jesus.”²⁹⁴ The Holy Spirit will also prove that Jesus is the best thing going for the world. Of all the things that we might aspire for and hope for, becoming like Jesus is the most right goal we can imagine. He is humanity’s highest hope and greatest good. He alone is our righteousness. The world’s conceptions of righteousness from The Golden Rule to The Will to Power fail to recognize that Christ alone is true righteousness and by his grace he offers us his righteousness. The Holy Spirit will also prove that the world is under judgment and that the crucified and risen Christ has won the victory over the prince of this world. David’s seventh petition foreshadowed far more than he imagined. The apostle expressed it this way, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).

Finally, David’s urgent plea for *salvation* is expressed in a variety of ways: “preserve my life,” “bring me out of trouble,” “silence my enemies,” and “destroy all my foes.” And the ground for this comprehensive salvation rests in one person only, the Lord, who is described by his name, his righteousness, and his unfailing love. David humbly ventures one final mercy-filled reason for invoking the Lord’s saving action on his behalf: “for I am your servant.”

²⁹³ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 128.

²⁹⁴ Bruner, *John*, 925.

The Davidic character of this royal psalm is evident even though the psalm may have been written in the post-exilic period for worship in the Second Temple. The psalmist composed the psalm by drawing on a number of David psalms especially Psalms 18.²⁹⁵ He sought to inspire a new generation of worshipers with the hope and confidence of David. These forlorn refugees returned to Jerusalem from Babylon under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. They faced tremendous challenges. They were under constant threat by surrounding hostile powers and they faced the daunting physical task of rebuilding Jerusalem. The psalmist sought to inspire the people of God by the timely application of David's bedrock trust in the Lord. The same bold humility and grateful thanksgiving that had shaped God's people during David's reign promised to bring spiritual renewal and hope to a struggling people once again.

The psalmist's effort to bring the psalms forward into his own experience is a model for praying the psalms today. Within the Psalter there are examples like Psalm 144 of development and editing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. By re-framing the content of a psalm for a new context in order to strengthen and inspire believers we are encouraged to interpret the Psalms for the Church today. Psalm 144 invites Christ's disciples to inhabit David's passion for the Lord and practice David's trust in the Lord's steadfast love.

The psalmist develops the leaders' participatory dependency on the Lord. David's role and timing in salvation history meant that he was called to fight to preserve the integrity of the people of God against the surrounding nations. Thus, his militancy is understood in specific ways that are compatible with his calling. But today, David's actions against his enemies would be antithetical to the Christian's calling. The metaphors for war carry over into the Church today because we are still at war, but we reinterpret these images in the light of the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Cross of Christ. The psalmist concludes with a beautiful picture of the Lord's abundant material blessings, but such a vision of success should not be misconstrued in support of a prosperity gospel. Believers are children of the King, but that doesn't legitimize egotistical materialism.

My Defender

*Praise be to the Lord my Rock,
who trains my hands for war,
my fingers for battle.
He is my loving God and my fortress,
my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield, in whom I take refuge,
who subdues peoples under me.*

Psalm 144:1-2

²⁹⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:683. Goldingay links Psalm 144:1-2 to Ps 18:2, 34, 46-47; Psalm 144:3 to Ps 18:4 (on the brevity of life); Psalm 144:5-11 take up Ps 18:9, 14, 16, 17, 44-45, 50 and Ps 33:2-3. He also finds phrases in Psalm 144 that parallel Pss 39, 102 and 104. Goldingay identifies several "Aramaisms" which suggests a post-exilic composition ('snatch away' = 'deliver' in v.10; 'kind' = 'kind of provision' v.13; 'relative' = 'people' v.15b).

The psalmist's unself-centering on the Lord is accentuated by his ten personal references (eleven in the ESV). Apart from the Lord who is his Rock and who trains him for war the leader has nothing. He declares his exclusive and absolute dependence upon the Lord. He captures this confident trust in word pictures: an impregnable fortress, an unscalable high tower, an unconquerable protector, an impenetrable shield, and an unassailable refuge. The psalmist revels in the security the Lord provides, and confesses, "He is my loving God." In the midst of these militant images of security and deliverance, the Lord's steadfast love is not to be confused with romantic or sentimental love. This is the love of a King for his subjects, of a commander for his troops, and of parents for their children. This is the redemptive love of the Savior of the world. The strong, saving love of Yahweh overcomes the enemy. The psalmist's intent is to build on King David's royal legacy of faithfulness and fidelity.

The controlling metaphor and motivation for praise is "my Rock."²⁹⁶ The Rock stands "for the stability on which the messianic kingship rests." In Psalm 18 it signals a transition from David's longsuffering struggle to the establishment of his messianic kingship.²⁹⁷ In Psalm 144 it reaffirms the saving power of Yahweh and expresses "the belief that the Lord is strong, solid, and immovable."²⁹⁸ Jesus applied the typology of the "rock" to himself and to his ministry and the apostles developed the metaphor in keeping with Jesus' own interpretation (Matthew 7:24-27; 16:18; 1 Peter 2:4-7). Jesus used the image of the rock to explain his rejection (Matthew 21:42; see Ps 118:22-23) and to illustrate acceptance. When Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:16-18). The believer's rejoicing depends on Jesus the Rock of our salvation.

It is not difficult to see how Psalm 144 may have emboldened Nehemiah and the builders of the Jerusalem wall. They were under constant threat of attack from their enemies. Nehemiah challenged the people to put their trust in the Lord and to be prepared to fight for their families. They built the wall with their weapons by their side (Neh 4:16-18). David's praise and gratitude to the Lord because he had trained his hands for war and his fingers for battle undoubtedly inspired the people to be vigilant. Post-exilic Israel was not commanded by God to conquer the surrounding nations as Joshua had been charged to do nor as David had sought to do, but they were called to pray for the Lord's protection and challenged to defend themselves. This implicit just defense strategy may be instructive to Christians today who find themselves in dangerous situations where they need to take up arms to defend their families and innocent victims of

²⁹⁶ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 76-77. "The ancient imagery of the Lord's unshakable stability goes back to the prophetic pronouncement of the patriarch Jacob over his favored son Joseph. The 'Rock' of Israel steadied Joseph's bow in the face of all his opponents (Gen 49:24). Moses' final song also hails the unwavering faithfulness of God as 'the Rock' whose ways are always just, a God who does no wrong (Deut 32:4). Israel erred greatly when the nation rejected 'the Rock' their Savior (Deut 32:15). They deserted the 'Rock' who had fathered them (Deut 32:18). In no way could they lose a battle, unless their 'Rock' abandoned them (Deut 32:30). For the 'rock' of other nations cannot compare to Israel's 'Rock' (Deut 32:31). Again, Samuel's mother Hannah anticipates her son's role when the time comes for God to give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed (1 Sam 2:10c). With that future prospect before her, she delights to declare, 'There is no Rock like our God' (1 Sam 2:2).

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 78.

²⁹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:895.

terrorist attacks and mob violence. For Christians this “just defense” strategy is a last resort in a dire situation. It is only when authorities have abandoned their responsibility to pursue justice and protect the innocent that such extreme measures may be taken. A defensive strategy does not seek to go after the perpetrators of injustice, but only to defend and protect the innocent. It is limited “police” action in response to government abdication. It must not be allowed to become vigilante justice. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” must be the believer’s chief concern (Rom 12:21).

With that in mind it is important to understand that the psalmist’s militant metaphors are transposed in the Church today from physical violence to spiritual combat. The militancy of the gospel is radically different from the militancy of the world. Jesus commanded believers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:43). We are called to be peacemakers and to leave room for God’s wrath (Matthew 5:9; Rom 12:19). As Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11). The believer’s commitment to combat readiness is intentional, but instead of being armed with the “weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4), she follows the example of Jesus who was willing to suffer for the good.

The psalmist concludes his opening praise by thanking the Lord for subduing “peoples” under him. This implies that the Lord had subdued Israel’s enemies. But the Hebrew text reads, “my people,” which implies Israel had been subdued. The corresponding verse in Psalm 18:39 states “adversaries” but the psalmist may want to emphasize something different here – the people of Israel’s cooperation under the post-exilic leadership. In either case the Lord is gratefully acknowledged as the one who makes the leader’s administration possible. As Calvin wrote, “The settled state of the kingdom was owing not to any counsel, valor, or authority of his own, but to God’s secret favor.”²⁹⁹

The Arc of Deliverance

*Lord, what are human beings that you care for them?
mere mortals that you think of them?
They are like a breath;
their days are like a fleeting shadow.
Part your heavens, Lord, and come down;
touch the mountains, so that they smoke.
Send forth lightning and scatter the enemy;
shoot your arrows and rout them.
Reach down your hand from on high;
deliver me and rescue me
from the mighty waters,
from the hands of foreigners
whose mouths are full of lies,
whose right hands are deceitful.
I will sing a new song to you, my God;*

²⁹⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 261.

*on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you,
to the One who gives victory to kings,
who delivers his servant David.
From the deadly sword deliver me;
rescue me from the hands of foreigners
whose mouths are full of lies,
whose right hands are deceitful.*
Psalm 144:3-11

The psalmist begins the arc of deliverance with astonishment. Instead of focusing on the littleness of human beings in comparison to the cosmos (Ps 8:5), the psalmist focuses on the insignificance of human beings in comparison to time. “Mere mortals, Lord, why do you care? We’re nothing more than a puff of air, a breath, a passing shadow.” Job will ask a similar question and agonize over the significance he wished he didn’t have: “What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18). But the psalmist knows that contrary to anything we might think, human beings are significant in the Lord’s eyes.

The psalmist’s astonishment that the Lord really cares is met with a bold request. He appeals to the Lord for his supernatural deliverance. “Part your heavens, Lord, and come down.” He is not asking for the Lord to prove himself, nor is he questioning the Lord’s desire to rescue and save his people. He believes in the Lord’s love and power with all his heart. The request is prompted by his desperate straits and the threat of the enemy. The enemy is about to overwhelm him like a tidal wave and the psalmist pleads for the Lord to “reach down your hand on high” and pull him out of the mighty waters. He writes as the representative of the people and he wants the Lord to snatch him out of the hands of deceptive, deceitful enemies. The image of a raging torrent was used by the apostle John in the Book of Revelation to capture the nature of the devil’s oppression (Rev 12:5). The world is drowning in the devil’s deception. The serpent is spewing out lies and accusations. The sheer volume of deceptive words is overwhelming. The metaphor of a flood captures what faithful Christians are up against.

The language of descent and rescue triggers in the believer’s praying imagination the self-emptying of 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). As Ross says, “So here is another case of a messianic interpretation that uses a type to point to the time when the poetic language will be historically literal.”³⁰⁰

The arc of deliverance goes from astonishment that the Lord cares, to a humble boldness that requests the Lord to act, to the grateful and exuberant joy of a new song to “my God.” The song is dedicated to the One who gives salvation. He delivers his chosen ones from “the deadly sword,” and from “the hands of foreigners, whose mouths are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful” (Ps 144:11). The psalmist is captivated by the beauty of the Lord’s deliverance and he concludes the psalm by painting a picture of the abundant life (John 10:10). The apostle John

³⁰⁰Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:898.

will do something similar in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21-22).

True Human Flourishing

*Then our sons in their youth
will be like well-nurtured plants,
and our daughters will be like pillars
carved to adorn a palace.
Our barns will be filled
with every kind of provision.
Our sheep will increase by thousands,
by tens of thousands in our fields;
our oxen will draw heavy loads.
There will be no breaching of walls,
no going into captivity,
no cry of distress in our streets.
Blessed is the people of whom this is true;
blessed is the people whose God is the Lord.*

Psalm 144:12-15

The Lord is at the center of this integrated vision of life under the reign of God. Family, work, fertility, security, and peace, come together to form a picture of blessing. The psalmist begins with sons who thrive like healthy plants and daughters who are as graceful and elegant as hand-crafted columns. These images of relational blessing drawn from agriculture and architecture may be especially well-suited to the returning exiles as they sought to reestablish themselves in their homeland. The psalmist reminds planters and builders that their real legacy is not in plants and buildings, but in their sons and daughters. It is they who stand for a future filled with promise. Besides strong families, the psalmist envisions great harvests and fertile flocks. The land will be so productive and fertile that strong oxen will be needed to draw heavy loads to market.

Finally, the psalmist promises security and safety to refugees who had lived through many years of hardship and suffering. It must have been immensely reassuring to be told, “There will be no breaching of the walls, no going down into captivity, no cry of distress in our streets.” They were at long last safely home – recipients of the Lord’s steadfast love and blessing. They had trusted in the Lord and the Lord had brought them home to grow their families, harvest their crops, increase their herds, and give them his shalom. Those who trust in the Lord receive tangible spiritual blessings. Jesus promised the same to his disciples who left family and work to follow him. He promised “a hundred times as much in the present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). Martin Luther wrote, “Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on the cross. Your victory, therefore, does not consist in conquering and reigning, or in the use of force, but in defeat and in weakness.”³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Luther, “Admonition to Peace,” *LW*, 46:32.

Psalm 145 is the last Davidic psalm and the final acrostic psalm.³⁰² Its placement in the psalter serves to bring Psalms 138-145 to a conclusion and to introduce the last five praise psalms which form a concluding crescendo of praise. Doxology is the theme of Psalm 145 and the resounding concern of all the concluding psalms. The psalm reaches back to the Exodus and Yahweh's self-revelation to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod 34:6-7; see Ps 145:8). The exhortation to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" echoes the themes of Psalm 145: the Lord's abundant goodness, his everlasting kingdom, and his compassionate and merciful response to all who call on him. Exuberant, uninhibited praise is the overarching theme of this lively, passionate psalm. If you are looking for a psalm to sing in the shower this is it!³⁰³

We can safely assume that Jesus prayed Psalm 145 often, maybe daily. He knew it inside and out, not just the words, but the whole psalm permeated his understanding and outlook on life. When the rich, young ruler ran up to him and fell on his knees saying, "Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good? No one is good – except God alone" (Mark 10:17-18). His response is consistent with Psalm 145 with its emphasis on the greatness and goodness of God. It is not difficult to see how this jubilant Kingdom-oriented psalm shaped Jesus' self-understanding and how it inspired his overarching joy and confidence.

Praise Never Quits!

*I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.
Every day I will praise you
and extol your name for ever and ever.
Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.
One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts.
They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty –
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.
They tell of the power of your awesome works –
and I will proclaim your great deeds.
They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.*

Psalm 145:1-7

³⁰² There are eight acrostic psalms (Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). Each verse or group of verses (Ps 119) begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This alphabetical structure gave the poet-psalmist a tight artistic structure to work with, although the poet was not entirely beholden to it. The acrostic style is thought to aid in memorizing the psalm in Hebrew, but it is difficult to carry over the style into another language.

³⁰³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 289.

The forceful and declarative “I will” statements from the psalmist overshadow whatever lingering malaise we might bring to the psalm. His enthusiasm shakes us out of our lethargy and apathy. Doubt is drowned out in his confident commitment to “exalt,” “praise,” and “extol” the Lord. Skepticism is sidelined in his passionate desire to “meditate” and proclaim the “wonderful works,” the “awesome works,” and the “great deeds” of “my God and King.” Whoever heard and observed the psalmist knew immediately that his praise was not dependent on his feelings in the moment nor in the mood of the congregation. His passion to praise the Lord was independent of his aesthetic sensibilities or his acoustical preferences. His unstoppable praise was not rooted in personality, profession, or performance. The reason nothing got in the way of his worship was because it was grounded in the Lord’s mighty acts and abundant goodness. The psalmist found no reason in himself – in his existential self, to praise the Lord. He did not look within. He looked up, to the Lord. Those on the outside may attribute the psalmist’s passion for praise to expressive individualism. But not the psalmist, he is overwhelmed by the greatness and the goodness of God.

He joyfully gives himself to the wonderful work of praising the Lord “every day” and “forever.” His motivation is clear: the Lord is “great” and “most worthy of praise.” He leads others into the joy and privilege of worship by his example. He speaks of the Lord, to the Lord. “I will exalt *you*. . . I will praise *your* name.” He refers to “*your* majesty,” “*your* wonderful works,” “*your* awesome works,” “*your* mighty deeds,” “*your* righteousness,” and in so doing he inspires the generations to extol “the glorious splendor” of the Lord’s majesty. He is in the company of like-minded worshipers who celebrate the Lord’s “abundant goodness” and “joyfully sing” of his righteousness.

The psalmist revels in the revealed character and redemptive acts of the Lord. Calvin inferred from the psalmist’s description “that the greatness of God is not that which lies concealed in his mysterious essence, and in subtle disputationfor true religion demands practical not speculative knowledge.”³⁰⁴ Calvin goes on to say that the more a person feels drawn to God, the more he or she has advanced in the knowledge of him.³⁰⁵ Knowing God is not a theoretical exercise in speculative thought, but a personal and practical experience of God’s goodness and grace. It is the knowledge *of* God, and not the knowledge *about* God, that celebrates the Lord’s abundant goodness and sings joyfully of his righteousness.

“The prayer encouraged by this psalm,” writes Goldingay, “is the kind embodied in the Lord’s prayer.”³⁰⁶ It is as if Jesus took Psalm 145 and compressed it into four or five sentences. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10), covers the psalm’s opening section which extols the name of God and celebrates the greatness of God’s coming kingdom. The implications of each line in the Lord’s prayer can be found in Psalm 145. “Give us today our daily bread,” is reflected in the Lord’s gift of food and open handed generosity (Ps 145:15-16). Forgiveness for sins is expressed in the Lord’s nearness “to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Ps 145:18) and

³⁰⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 273.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁰⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:705.

“deliverance from the evil one” is found in the Lord’s watch care over “those who fear him” and “over all who love him” (Ps 145:19-20). The caption under Psalm 145 could read, “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

Reasons for Praise

*The Lord is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
The Lord is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.
All your works praise you, Lord;
your faithful people extol you.
They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,
so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.
and your dominion endures through all generations.*

*The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does.³⁰⁷
The Lord upholds all who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.
The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.
You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*

Psalm 145:8-16

The psalmist expands on his opening declaration of praise by beginning with Yahweh’s self-revelation. The covenant people of God have never known the Lord apart from his compassion and grace, apart his love and forgiveness. This is the one and only living God who redeemed them out of bondage and called them to be his “treasured possession,” and “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5-6; see Ps 103:8). However, the Lord’s goodness is not confined to Israel, “The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.” Israel’s role in the world is to communicate to “all people” the glory, power, and splendor of the Lord’s everlasting kingdom. This is so that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3).

Once again the psalms confirm that worship is the cutting edge of evangelism. The good news of what the Lord has done in his mercy and grace is communicated to the world through the praise of God’s people. There is an organic, natural reality to genuine praise. Praise is not a duty performed nor an obligation imposed. It is a privilege embraced out of joy. Grace, not guilt,

³⁰⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 480. Kidner writes, “One letter of the alphabet (*nûn*) is lacking from the standard Hebrew text; but most of the ancient translations and now a text from Qumran supply the missing verse, which RSV [and NIV] and subsequent translations include at the end of verse 13 (“The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.”).

provides the motivation to praise the Lord and to tell of the glory of his kingdom. Even in the secular age, where the truth about God and the gospel has been driven underground, there is an exuberance, a joy, that cannot be denied. Ironically, the truth of Psalm 145:13 is quoted by King Nebuchadnezzar in a preamble to a dream in which he is judged by a “holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven.” In his dream the reason for the verdict is given, that he would know “that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth. . .” (Dan 4:3,13,17). It is telling that the meaning of the Lord’s “everlasting kingdom” should be impressed upon an egotistical, power-driven narcissist like Nebuchadnezzar. Clearly, the Lord is more than capable of making himself and his kingdom known in any secular - pagan age.

The psalmist leads by example. He gives us the language and reasons for praise. Contrary to the power schemes of the world, the Lord’s greatness and majesty is evident not in human domination but in human liberation. “God reigns only for the promotion of the general welfare of mankind,” wrote Calvin.³⁰⁸ The psalmist doesn’t say it. He doesn’t need to, but human leaders are not trustworthy in their promises and faithful in their actions. They do not uphold the fallen, lift up the weak, provide “food at the proper time.” They don’t practice open-handed generosity and “satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Ps 145:13-16). But the Lord does! Hebrew scholar John Perowne writes, “Where is the cosmic excellence of the kingdom seen? Not in symbols of earthly pride and power, but in gracious condescension to the fallen and the crushed, in a gracious care which provides for the wants of every living thing.”³⁰⁹

Christians praying Psalm 145 today know there is much more to be said of the Lord’s mighty acts than the psalmist had lived to experience. “My God the King” (Ps 145:1) became Immanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). The Divine disclosure deepened and that which was anticipated became actualized. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and 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). At Pentecost, following the bodily resurrection of Jesus, Peter assured Israel of this: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). Later, Peter would write, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Pet 1:3-4).

“All” Praise

*The Lord is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.
The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.
The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.*

³⁰⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 277.

³⁰⁹ Quoted in Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:916.

Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.
Psalm 145:17-21

The simple word “all” is repeated some fourteen times to describe the totality and universality of the Lord’s goodness (Ps 145:9-20). The Lord is good to *all*, compassionate to *all*, and near to *all* who call on him. *All* his works declare his glory to *all* people and to *all* generations. The Lord is trustworthy in *all* his promises, righteous in *all* his ways, faithful in *all* he does, upholding *all* who fall, lifting *all* who are bowed down, near to *all* who call on him, and responsive to *all* who call on him in truth. The Lord watches over *all* who love him. This is a beautiful description of the inclusiveness and universality of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its total impact on every aspect of life. The Lord is worthy of praise every day and forever and ever, and “of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end” (Isa 9:7).

The person who commits to this *all* enters into the psalmist’s exuberant praise. This is the *all* that believes that Jesus accomplished *all* on the Cross. This is the *all* of covenant love that is grandly inclusive of all we are and will be. This is the *all* that says with David, “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord *all the days of my life*, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Ps 27:4).

The very last “all,” the fifteenth “all” describes the judgment of the wicked. The Lord promises to destroy “*all the wicked.*” The fourteen to one ratio is significant. The psalmist emphasizes the Lord’s goodness fourteen times and in the whole psalm refers to the Lord’s righteous judgment of all the wicked just once. To reject the Lord’s goodness and to persist in one’s evil ways takes unbelievable effort. It means going against the grain of the universe and violating the witness of one’s conscience. You have to really want to turn your back on God, because everything in creation and in your soul is bearing witness to the goodness of the Lord.

The psalmist concludes where he began. He pledges his everlasting praise to the Lord, knowing that he is not alone, but that he is joined by all creation. “Let every creature praise his holy name.” C. S. Lewis wrote, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”³¹⁰

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*
Isaac Watts³¹¹

³¹⁰ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 95.

³¹¹ Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” 324.

The concluding set of five psalms (Ps 146-150) begins and ends with “Praise the Lord” or “Hallelujah.” This is the third set of Hallel Psalms which includes the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113-118) and the Great Hallel (Ps 120-136). Psalm 146 serves as bridge between Psalm 145, the final David psalm, and the final set of praise psalms. Psalm 146 covers similar themes as in Psalm 145, including a personal commitment to unceasing praise, complete confidence in the sufficiency of the Lord – our only help and hope for time and eternity, and the Lord’s compassion toward the oppressed and hungry. This concluding set of psalms challenges the life we live between the Hallelujahs. Do we share the psalmist’s life-long passion for *public* praise? Is our *holistic* trust in God *alone* or are we trying to manage divided loyalties? Does the Lord’s commitment to the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner, the blind, the bowed down, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow reflect the mission of the gospel in our lives? Life in the middle, between the Hallelujahs, focuses our attention on the God of Jacob, who continues to transform self-centered strivers into “salt and light” disciples.

Call to Exclusive Praise

Praise the Lord. [Hallelujah!]

Praise the Lord, my soul.

I will praise the Lord all my life;

I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in human beings, who cannot save.

When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;

on the very day their plans come to nothing.

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is the Lord their God.

Psalm 146:1-5

The psalmist’s self-exhortation to praise models for the believer the determination of the heart and will that transcends mood and feelings. The fragility inherent in a modern life of divided loyalties with multiple masters and competing agendas makes the singularity of the psalmist’s devotion exemplary. There is a clarity inherent in his conviction that leads to peace and tranquility. He faces the day and holds depression at bay with the power of devotion. This power does not come from his will or from any form of sentiment, but from the grace and wisdom of the Lord who invites and participates in this praise. In the morning, when he arises, he meets with the Lord. The psalmist begins the day not alone, but in the company of his Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Having exhorted himself to life long praise, he bluntly warns all believers, in his day and our own, “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save” (Ps 146:3). The connection between these two exhortations is the fierce competition for our devotion. The Great Deceiver endeavors to dissuade the people of God from trusting in the Lord and to shift their

loyalties to “princes.” As the next line indicates, the designation “princes” covers the whole range of competing objects of devotion from powerful influential people to mere mortals. Given our sinful predisposition to idolatry and foolishness any human being can become a messiah figure. Celebrities, in all fields and disciplines, are an obvious attraction, but parents, friends, coaches, and teachers qualify as well. We are sinfully inclined to put our hope in politicians, lovers, and experts. The pantheon of counterfeit gods is too numerous to count.

The stated reason for not trusting in princes is that no matter how powerful and influential they may be, they are mere mortals and when they die, “their projects die with them” (Ps 146:4 The Message). All success is short-lived and soon forgotten, but the Lord reigns forever and the people of God go on for all generations (Ps 146:10).

A sure sign of placing one’s trust in “princes” is when American Christians talk as if they had no other identity or loyalty than to their nation and party. If we are living between the Hallelujahs we will keep in mind that the Christian before the world is like Jesus before Pilate (John 18:36). Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was the leading Churchman in England and chaplain to King Henry VIII (1473-1530). An ambitious and calculated man, Wolsey compromised his integrity and his office to gain political power. When he failed to obtain an annulment of Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon, he fell from the King’s favor. He was stripped of his titles and later indicted for treason. In Shakespeare’s play Wolsey laments his demise and his vain trust in princes. The Bard of Avon offers a warning that hold true today:

Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness! . . .
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye:
I feel my heart now open’d. O, how wretched
Is that poor man that hangs on princes’ favors!³¹²

Jesus warned, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and the love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). Jesus exposed a conflict of interest that remains pervasive among believers. We are steeped in expressive individualism and personal autonomy. We fancy ourselves as masters of the universe priding ourselves on self-rule. We are little chiefs with multiple tribal loyalties: family, school, work, sports, hobbies, church, friends, and entertainment. Our multiple tribal identities, each with its own set of cultural customs, rituals, offerings, and obligations, compete for our time, energy, and loyalty. Colleagues at work, next-door neighbors, work-out friends, and even family members may not even know we belong to Christ. Jesus calls for total allegiance, single-minded devotion.

The first section ends with a blessing, the last beatitude of the Psalter.³¹³ The psalmist sets up a contrast between those who trust in human beings, including themselves, and those whose help comes from the God of Jacob. The surprising truth about Yahweh is the divine humility that refuses to give up on his covenant promise, even though all he has to work with are fast-talking,

³¹² Shakespeare, “King Henry The Eighth,” 1182.

³¹³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-73*, 47. “Blessing” is used twenty-six times in the Psalter: Psalm 1:1; 2:12; 32:1,2; 33:12; 34:8; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4,5,12; 89:15; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1,2; 127:5; 128:1,2; 137:8,9; 144:15,16; 146:5.

shifty-eyed, self-serving people like Jacob. All the beatitudes in the Psalms, including this one, point forward to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes reveal the heart and soul of what it means to follow Jesus.

The Messianic Mission

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them –
he remains faithful forever.
He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The Lord reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 146:6-10

Unlike all other worldly categories of greatness, the “Maker of heaven and earth” is known for his faithfulness to the oppressed and fatherless. The list of recipients of the Lord’s love and mercy is once again expressed in a nine to one ratio (see Psalm 145). The psalmist makes a point of repeating the Lord’s name, Yahweh, seven times in this section. The Lord’s presence, power, and mercy dominates this description. When it comes to the oppressed, the hungry, the imprisoned, the blind, the fallen, the righteous, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, the Lord says in effect, “I’ve got this.” The Lord fights for justice, feeds the hungry, sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, lifts up the bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the foreigner, and sustains the orphan and the widow. This is what it means to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). This is the “one new humanity” forged by the social reality of the gospel (Eph 2:15). This is what James meant when he said, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Charles Spurgeon’s commentary on verse nine is especially timely as we wrestle with “the refugee crisis.”

“Many monarchs hunted aliens down, or transported them from place to place, or left them as outlaws unworthy of the rights of man; but Jehovah made special laws for their shelter within his domain. In this country the stranger was, a little while ago, looked upon as a vagabond,—a kind of wild beast to be avoided if not to be assaulted; and even to this day there are prejudices against foreigners which

are contrary to our holy religion. Our God and King is never strange to any of his creatures, and if any are left in a solitary and forlorn condition he has a special eye to their preservation. He relieveth the fatherless and widow. These excite his compassion, and he shows it in a practical way by upraising them from their forlorn condition. The Mosaic law made provision for these destitute persons. When the secondary fatherhood is gone the child falls back upon the primary fatherhood of the Creator; when the husband of earth is removed the godly widow casts herself upon the care of her Maker. But the way of the wicked he turneth upside down. He fills it with crooked places; he reverses it, sets it down, or upsets it. That which the man aimed at he misses, and he secures that for himself which he would gladly have avoided. The wicked man's way is in itself a turning of things upside down morally, and the Lord makes it so to him providentially: everything goes wrong with him who goes wrong.”³¹⁴

The seven-fold repetition of Yahweh’s action is the psalmist’s way of emphasizing that all of the Lord’s social justice is rooted in his covenant love, his steadfast love, which is to say today, the good news of Jesus Christ. We cannot have social justice apart from the gospel of grace. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection is the true and only ground for overturning the evils of oppression and the greed that causes scarcity and the selfishness that breaks up families. Those who believe that justice can be achieved apart from justification by faith do not understand the Lord’s covenant love and necessity of the Cross.

Christ’s followers cannot pray Psalm 146 without thinking of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth when he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read from Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:14-21). Jesus began his public ministry by proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoner, and recovery of sight for the blind. Reardon calls these “the great messianic signs.”³¹⁵ “All of the Lord’s various restorations and acts of therapy were both the foreshadowing and the firstfruits of that definitive curing of the human race accomplished on the Cross.”³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Spurgeon, “Psalm 146,” *Treasury of David*.

³¹⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 291.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

The psalmist is eager to call the people of God to sing praises to the God who not only heals the brokenhearted but sets the stars in place. This carefully crafted psalm is a mosaic of Old Testament texts, composed in the era of the Second Temple, when Nehemiah and Ezra led the people.³¹⁷ Psalm 147 was particularly well-suited to worship at the Feast of Tabernacles as it celebrates God's creation care and covenant blessings. The recently returned refugees from Babylon were humbled by the ordeal and grateful for the Lord's redemption. They were eager to worship Yahweh and mindful of the monumental challenge before them.

The psalm moves effortlessly from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. The Lord who sustains the universe with his word is the same Lord who is rebuilding Jerusalem and gathering the exiles. As a creation psalm it celebrates Yahweh's sovereign control over the cosmos and all of nature. As a covenant psalm it celebrates Yahweh's gracious redemption of his people. Both realities are woven together to form a single truth and a powerful incentive to praise the Lord. Each of the three sections begins with a call to praise and then develops the weave of God's cosmic sovereignty and his covenant faithfulness. The Lord governs the stars and the seasons by his word, but even more importantly, he reveals himself personally to the descendants of Jacob. Living between the Hallelujahs means celebrating God's sovereign control over creation and covenant which are woven together under the rule of God.

Starting Over

*Praise the Lord.
How good it is to sing praises to our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!
The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the exiles of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars
and calls them each by name.
Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
his understanding has no limit.
The Lord sustains the humble
but casts the wicked to the ground.*

Psalm 147:1-6

Nehemiah's account begins with a description of the returning refugees: "Those who survived

³¹⁷ Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 308-309. Allen writes, "The psalm seems to be the product of an interweaving of passage with passage in almost midrashic fashion" (309). Psalm 147:2 - "outcasts" or "exiles" (Isa 56:8); Ps 147:3 - "brokenhearted" (Isa 61:1); Ps 147:4 - "stars" (Isa 40:26; Ps 147:5 - "his understanding has no limit" (Isa 40:28); Ps 147:8 - "makes grass grow on the hills" (Ps 104:14); Ps 147:9 - "young ravens" (Job 38:41); Ps 147:10 - "horse" and "warrior" (Ps 33:16-17); Ps 147:11 - "who put their hope in his unfailing love" (Isa 40:31; Ps 33:18); Ps 147:15,18 - "the word" (Ps 33:16-17); Ps 147:16-18 - "snow, frost, hail, ice" (Job 37:6-10; Isa 55:10-11).

the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” When Nehemiah heard this report in the Persian capital of Susa a thousand miles away, he wept and prayed: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel” (Neh 1:3, 5-6). It is out of this struggle and the faithfulness of people like Nehemiah that Psalm 147 was sung and prayed.

The post-exilic rebuilding of Jerusalem by refugees who were weak and humbled was God’s way of preparing for the Messiah – the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The prophet Zechariah warned the people not to despise the day of small things (Zech 4:10). The Lord was healing the brokenhearted and binding up old wounds. He was restoring the Jewish people and reestablishing the temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem. He did all of this to cradle the Incarnate One in a lowly manger. There was little room for pride of country and race, among a humbled people who were dependent upon God for mercy and justice. The believers who first prayed Psalm 147 found the Promised Land much less promising than they imagined it to be in the days of King David, but the Promised One was coming and God was building his cradle.

The Redeemer who saved this beleaguered group of refugees was none other than the Lord of the universe who numbered and named the stars. The people of Israel had undergone a Job-like experience brought on by years of disobedience. It would have been natural for them to think that their disgrace impinged on the Lord’s greatness. The psalmist was there to remind them that it didn’t and that they must not project their weakness and failure on the Lord. He who remained in control of the universe remained their faithful Redeemer – their only Savior.

The reference to the stars is of special note on two counts. First, it recalls God’s covenant promise to Abraham, when the Lord said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5). Secondly, it recalls the pagan religious practices of the Assyrians and Babylonians who prayed to the star-gods.³¹⁸ The psalmist reiterates the greatness of the Lord’s mighty power over all of creation. He proclaims, “His understanding has no limit.” The result of the psalmist’s weave of creation and covenant is doxology:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?

Romans 11:33-36

Unfailing Love

*Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp.*

³¹⁸Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 278.

*He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain and makes the grass grow on the hills.
He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.
His pleasure is not in the strength of horses,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;
the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.*
Psalm 147:7-11

The exiles can sing to the Lord in grateful praise, because the Lord cares for his creation. Just as the Lord supplied the needs of the Israelites in the wilderness, he will supply the needs of the exiles. The people can put their trust in Yahweh because he provides food for their cattle and even for the young abandoned ravens who are on their own. The Lord is not impressed by horsepower or military muscle. His delight is “in those who fear him and put their hope in his unfailing love” (Ps 147:11). The psalmist understands power differently from the world. The Lord’s redemption was not based in the kind of power they experienced in exile.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter was ready to fight for Jesus, but Jesus refused. “‘Put your sword back in its place,’ Jesus said to him, ‘for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?’” (Matthew 26:50b-54). Jesus in Gethsemane teaches believers how to use power. He doesn’t need his disciples fighting for him with the weapons of the world. Jesus was surprised that Peter didn’t know that he has thousands of battle ready angels at his immediate disposal. All he had to do was say the word and his Father would have sent them. The problem with angel warriors was simple: “How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” That is to say, “Peter, don’t you know that everything is being orchestrated by divine necessity.” “It must happen just like this,” Martin Luther wrote. “Here then is the ground of Christ’s suffering: not because he had to, or because God could not find another way to effect his praise and glory, but in order that God might be vindicated as true to his Word which he had spoken through his prophets.”³¹⁹

The Lord of the universe, the hope of the world, chose the power of redeeming love over the power of natural forces and worldly strategies. The exiles were experienced in worldly oppressive power, but Jesus was setting up a strategy of redemption that involved cruciform powerlessness. Israel’s descent into powerlessness paved the way for a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son who would be called Immanuel – God with us.

The Language of God

*Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;
praise your God, Zion.
He strengthens the bars of your gates*

³¹⁹ Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 5:380.

*and blesses your people within you.
 He grants peace to your borders
 and satisfies you with the finest wheat.
 He sends his command to the earth;
 his word runs swiftly.
 He spreads the snow like wool
 and scatters the frost like ashes.
 He hurls down his hail like pebbles.
 Who can withstand his icy blast?
 He sends his word and melts them;
 he stirs up his breezes and the waters flow.
 He has revealed his word to Jacob,
 his laws and decrees to Israel.
 He has done this for no other nation;
 they do not know his laws.
 Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 147:12-20

The only reason we are able to extol the Lord is because he has chosen to speak to us *and* because he has given human beings the ability to understand his languages. God is not silent. We have his word in creation and in covenant. God is the ultimate polyglot, speaking all the languages, all seven thousand of them, plus the more than five hundred extinct languages. God is not limited to phonology, but deploys every conceivable language to communicate. The “voices” of molecular biology, mathematics, and music, to name only three, *declare*, in their own special way, “the glory of God” (Ps 19:1).³²⁰

Creation and redemption depend on the word of the Lord. The psalmist sees the powerful word of the Lord securing Jerusalem, protecting Israel’s borders, and satisfying the people with the finest wheat. He “sends his command to earth; his word runs swiftly” (Ps 147:15). The God who speaks creation into existence orders the planets and the seasons. “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb 11:3). He sustains “all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). The word of creation can be an intimidating word. The psalmist asks, “Who can withstand the icy blast?” He might have framed this question with any number of nature-inducing fearful scenarios from earthquakes to hurricanes. But instead, he quickly balances it out with the encouragement of fresh spring breezes and thawing streams. The word of creation lifts the human spirit.

Of all the languages of God, the one that centers them all is his revelation to Jacob. The Lord chose to reveal himself and his commands to Israel for the sake of the world. He gave his word to a small, beleaguered nation, who in their post-exilic state were humbled and keenly aware of their weakness, in order to share his redemptive love with the nations. The Jews have been advantaged wrote the apostle Paul, because “they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Rom 3:1). However, this advantage was not for the sake of their pride and privilege but

³²⁰ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 24-25.

for their sacrifice and responsibility. The author of Hebrews describes the unfolding progression of God's word this way: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (Heb 1:1-2). The ultimate climax to God's revelation in creation and covenant came in his embodied word – the Living Word. "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The scandal of particularity, that God chose Jacob (Israel) among all the nations, narrows down to the scandal of the cross. God himself is crucified for the sins of the world. The incarnation of God in Jesus defines God's good news in the most specific and personal way possible: "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).

The ultimate convergence of God's word in creation and covenant comes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first-fruits of the new heaven and the new earth. From Genesis to Revelation, the meaning of the cross and the mystery of the atonement unfold under the sovereign direction of God. We are prepared for the cross through images, events, allusions, symbols, parables, prophecies, and poetry. Every form, phase, type, and strata of the Bible points to the cross. From the Garden of Eden to the return of the exiles, from Babylon and from the birth of Christ to the Garden of Gethsemane, we are moving toward the inevitability cross. The word of the cross is woven into the very fabric of history. And as history moved toward the cross, *creation* moves toward the Resurrection. The word of resurrection is woven into the very fabric of nature. The history of God's revelation points to the cross and the nature of God's creation points to the resurrection. We are prepared for the resurrection through the "big bang," the language of DNA, the human quest for knowledge, the Periodic Table, mathematical patterns and formulas, the human capacity for beauty, the anthropic principle of the universe, the incredible complexity of the living cell, and the meaning of the human drama. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and covenant.³²¹

³²¹ Webster, *Second Thoughts*, 125-126.

The psalmist's invitation to praise the Lord encompasses the heights and depths of all creation, every square inch, every microbe and galaxy. Everything and everyone is summoned to participate in a great concert of endless praise. We may not think of inanimate objects like planets and stars praising the Lord, but the psalmist understands all of creation from angels to insects existing in a state of praise. Every element in creation reflects their Creator. Their essence is to praise the Lord God Almighty. Second Temple worship resounds with the conviction that the God of Israel is the God of all wisdom and power. After seventy long years of captivity and exile, the people of God call the heavens above and earth below to praise Yahweh. Living between the Hallelujahs means living in the convergence of all things praising the Lord.

We inhabit a world where the entire cosmos is a testimony without words and a natural witness without effort. Everything, by virtue of being part of God's created order, reverberates with praise even though they may lack "voice and heart."³²² There is an inherent revelatory quality in all aspects of life. Creation is always beckoning for greater exploration, always inviting a deeper experience, always pointing beyond itself, and always bearing testimony not only to its many truths, but to the one and only singular truth.³²³ The world is called into existence by the will and word of God. "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (Hebrews 11:3).

The resounding praise of nature inspires believers to praise with their whole being. "Let not your tongue and voice alone praise God," admonishes Augustine, "but your conscience also, your life, your deeds. For now, when we are gathered together in the Church, we praise: when we go forth each to his own business, we seem to cease to praise God." Augustine acknowledged the intent of the psalmist when he encouraged constant praise – perpetual praise, like the stars and the mountains, "Let a person not cease to live well, and then be ever praising God."³²⁴

The psalm's two panel diptych divides equally between heaven and earth. The symphony of praise is arranged symmetrically so as to affirm that all of creation serves as an agent of praise. This is creation in its fullness, not as an object to be worshiped, nor as a problem to be solved, nor as a threat to be endured, but as the grandest arena for God's glory. The artist and the scientist, the explorer and the farmer, are intuitively aware of this cosmic glory even if they do not know to *whom* to praise. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). The psalmist's call to praise counters the materialist who believes that a great void of nothingness lucked out somehow and became a universe populated by human beings. "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1), but the psalmist commands everything in heaven above and earth below to praise the name of the Lord.

³²² Augustine, *Psalms*, 674.

³²³ Webster, *Second Thoughts*, 128.

³²⁴ Augustine, *Psalms*, 673.

From Heaven Above

*Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,
and he established them for ever and ever –
he issued a decree that will never pass away.*

Psalm 148:1-6

Augustine was right when he said no one praises apart from being pleased.³²⁵ Praise is always a response to God's action. The initiative belongs to God who is always creating-out-of-nothing and redeeming-out-of-mercy. The *imperative*, "Praise the Lord," points to its necessity not its compulsion. It becomes our duty only because it is our devotion. The psalmist encourages us to do what we want to do anyways. Praise is to the people of God what playing is to the athlete and the musician. Not to be able to do what our heart is set on contradicts the human spirit. True worship leads us out of the closed universe of our own making and into the large world of God's creation and redemption.

The psalmist insists that no one anytime, anywhere, praises the Lord *alone*. We are always in the realm of praise because everything made by the Lord reveals his glory. "The nature of each element reveals the glory of God."³²⁶ The psalmist had no idea of the vastness of the cosmos, nor of the energy of the sun, nor the power of the moon, but he knew that their business is to praise God! Science is incredibly important and the more we know the better, but the essence of the meaning and purpose of creation has been known from the beginning. Many people prefer scientism's "nature alone" reductionism, but it requires living in denial.

The praise range is extraordinary. It begins with angels and ends with old men and youngsters. A reference to angels sounds incredulous to the secular ear, but for all those who take the Bible seriously, angels are real. Angels are not flighty cherub-like creatures, but God's messengers on a mission, "sent to serve those who inherit salvation" (Heb 1:14). They worship God, reveal his will, and do his bidding. They play a strategic role in the drama of salvation history. When they announced the birth of the Messiah, they praised God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Modern versions of spirituality believe in a "blinding abyss of undifferentiated spirituality," but reject angels.

³²⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 674.

³²⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:946.

From Earth Below

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,
kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women,
old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 148:7-14

From the far reaches of the universe to the unfathomable depths of the ocean, let everything praise the Lord. The psalmist takes in the whole panorama of nature, from stars to sea creatures, from lightning storms to fruit trees, and from whales to insects, before introducing the one species that can praise the Lord with heart and voice. He begins with kings and rulers and ends with old men and children. “In these few lines,” Kidner writes, “there emerges, quite incidentally and with unforced simplicity, the only potential bond between the extremes of mankind: a joyful preoccupation with God.”³²⁷ Humanity is the “crowning point of all creation” and the one thing that all human beings were designed to do is to praise the Lord whether they be kings or toddlers.³²⁸ The psalm begins with angels and ends with children “as if to say that at these two extremes you will find the most direct and articulate praises of God.”³²⁹ Jesus’ birth was celebrated with a great company of angels, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). And Jesus entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross with children shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9).³³⁰

The psalmist counters our celebrity culture and checks our propensity to idolize the rich and famous. He concludes with a resounding affirmation of praise to the Lord, “for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and heavens” (Ps 148:13). Praise to the Lord is our sure defense against bowing the knee to Caesar or any other person or object that encourages our

³²⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 488.

³²⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:948.

³²⁹ Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 282.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

veneration or adulation. His final thought brings the reason for praise into the realm of the Lord's redemptive love: "He has raised up for his people a horn" (Ps 148:14). The psalmist may not have envisioned the Incarnate Son of God or the Suffering Servant, but he knew for sure that Yahweh would provide a strong deliverer for Israel.³³¹ It remained to be seen how the Lord would fulfill this promise of deliverance. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, broke his silence with the Holy Spirit's prophecy: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69).

³³¹ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:948. Ross is reluctant to read this Psalm with a redemptive trajectory. "The word 'horn' refers to power. . . . But here there is no internal support for the meaning of raising up a king, or ultimately the Messiah. Rather, it likely refers to the Lord's giving renewed strength and courage to Israel. . ." Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 488. Kidner sees the promise of a strong deliverer the climax of the psalm and of the gospel: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people" (Rev 21:3)."

Psalm 149 picks up where Psalm 148 left off in praise to the Lord who “has raised up for his people a horn” (Ps 148:14). The psalmist develops the arc of salvation history from creation to judgment. The invitation to praise goes out to all the world and ends in judgment against the nations, peoples, kings, and nobles that refuse to praise the name of the Lord. Psalm 149 celebrates the triumph of all those who have put their trust in God’s redemptive love. These are the Lord’s faithful people, the saints, God’s holy ones (Ps 149:1, 5, 9), who “have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

For Christ’s followers living between the Hallelujahs means living between the advents. The first advent was the coming of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, who was “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7). The second advent will be the return of the Messiah in victory. He is the one who is called “Faithful and True,” the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:11,16). Psalm 149 looks forward to the day of final judgment when the Lord will judge the nations with justice and righteousness. This eschatological psalm calls the saints to sing a new song *today* in anticipation of the Lord’s ultimate victory *tomorrow*. Psalm 149 celebrates the final judgment that will put all things right and put an end to evil once and for all.

If these closing Hallel Psalms were composed and prayed by refugees returning from exile then the exhortation for the people of Zion to be glad in their King carries a transcendent meaning. The kingdom envisioned by the psalmist goes beyond Jerusalem’s walls and Israel’s borders and extends to all nations and all peoples under the rule and reign of God. Israel’s humiliation becomes key to her exaltation. The faithful people of Zion are gathered from all the nations and they rejoice in their divine King.

The theme of Psalm 149 corresponds to Jesus’ inaugural sermon from Isaiah 61. Several key words in the psalm correspond to Isaiah’s prophecy. These include “the humble” or “the lowly” (Ps 149:4; Isa 61:1), “vengeance” (Ps 149:7; Isa 61:2). “crowns” or “honors” (from the stem of the word for “glory” (Ps 149:4; Isa 61:3); “Zion” (Ps 149:2; Isa 61:3); “judgment” or “sentence” (Ps 149:9; Isa 61:8).³³² The reason for praise is that the Lord delights in his people and the greatest measure of that delight is in the coming of Jesus Christ. He is the reason we dance and make music.

The Humble Sing a New Song

Praise the Lord.

Sing to the Lord a new song,

his praise in the assembly of his faithful people [saints].

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

Let them praise his name with dancing

and make music to him with timbrel and harp.

³³² Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 319.

*For the Lord takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with victory.
Let his faithful people [saints] rejoice in this honor
and sing for joy on their beds.*

Psalm 149:1-5

The exhortation to sing a new song inspires creative exuberance and meaningful praise. Worship suffers when we substitute mind-numbing routine and formulaic language for thoughtful praise. New covenant prophecy demanded a new song, sung by the people of Zion with genuine joy and delight. We share in this praise today. True Word-centered doxology expresses and evokes meanings which are at once intellectual, emotional, volitional, and spiritual.³³³ We commit to memory hymns and songs of praise. The melody and lyrics fill our soul with joy. We tune up the instruments for these songs of praise and join in the lively dance. “Every mode of expressing delight was bound to be employed,” wrote Spurgeon. “Dancing, singing, and playing on instruments were all called into requisition, and most fitly so. . . . When the Lord saves a soul its holy joy overflows, and it cannot find channels enough for its exceeding gratitude.”³³⁴

The psalmist does not limit this meaningful worship to church services in the household of faith, but describes the saints singing for joy on their beds. “Whether this means that we cannot sleep for joy, or that we can sleep (that is, sleep in safety)” raises two interesting possibilities.³³⁵ Augustine drew out the significance of believers rejoicing in private as opposed to rejoicing in theaters or at stadiums or parties.³³⁶ Away from all the hype and cultural stimuli the measure of a person’s genuine praise to God becomes evident. The greater joy belongs in the believer’s inner devotion to God found in those private and personal moments when the testimony of our true self is revealed. God-honoring public worship has its source in meaningful personal worship. “When you pray,” Jesus said, “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). Saints who sing for joy on their beds find it difficult to complain about other believers. True devotion helps to internalize the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

The Humble Wield The Sword

*May the praise of God be in their mouths
and a double-edged sword in their hands,
to inflict vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
to bind their kings with fetters,
their nobles with shackles of iron,
to carry out the sentence written against them –
this is the glory of all his faithful people [saints].*

³³³ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 17.

³³⁴ Spurgeon, “Psalm 149,” *Treasury of David*.

³³⁵ Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, 283.

³³⁶ Augustine, *Psalms*, 679.

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 149:6-9

In the second section the psalmist develops what it means for the Lord to “crown the humble with victory” (Ps 149:4). The picture of the saints singing praises to the Lord while wielding a powerful sword that inflicts vengeance on the nations seems at first glance contradictory. Given that the psalm was probably first prayed by returning exiles who were faced with the daunting challenge of rebuilding the city out of the ruins of a once proud nation, the notion of world conquest seems arrogant and not in keeping with the *humble* being crowned with victory.³³⁷ But if the psalm offers an eschatological perspective of the Lord’s future judgment and victory arising from a people who were destined to bless the nations (Gen 12:3), and that this was to be done, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zech 4:6), then we see a transcendent purpose behind the militant metaphors. With the praise of God in their mouths and the “double-mouthed” sword in their hands, the saints are empowered by the truth of God to devour the opposition.

One wonders if the author of the Book of Hebrews did not have the “double-edged sword” of Psalm 149 in mind when he wrote that “the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The glory of the saints is not secured by taking up arms and fighting the world on its terms. “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:3-5; see Eph 6).

Inflicting vengeance on the nations, binding kings with fetters, and nobles with shackles is metaphoric language for the binding of evil and the victory of the Lord. The psalmist takes us back to the beginning of the Psalter and the promise: “You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9). The Holy Spirit takes us forward to the binding of Satan, which began with Jesus’ vision, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:17-18). From that time on the church has born witness to the redemptive power of the Lamb. The apostle John wrote, “the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan,” has been bound and kept from “deceiving the nations” (Rev 20:2-3). The power of evil has been curtailed in anticipation of the final judgment. “Now is the time for judgment on this world,” Jesus said; “now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:31-32). The crucified and risen Lord has “disarmed the powers and authorities. . . .triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15).

Living between the Hallelujahs means living in anticipation of the end of evil and the glory of the

³³⁷ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 3:411. If we take the militaristic metaphors literally we have “a most impressive picture of a warlike theocracy” (Herman Gunkel, JSTOR, 365). Delitzsch writes, “It was by means of this Psalm that Casper Scloppius in his *Classicum Belli Sacri*, which, as Bakius says, is written not with ink, but with blood, inflamed the Roman Catholic princes to the Thirty Years’ religious War. And in the Protestant Church Thomas Munzer stirred up the War of the Peasants by means of this Psalm.”

new heaven and the new earth. We believe, along with the psalmist, that the Lord has already put the principalities and powers of this dark world on notice. The victory of the risen Lord is secure and only remains to be consummated. Until then we wait with praise on our lips and in our hearts and we wield the double-edged sword of the gospel in our hands.

We are not surprised that Jesus' Prayer Book should end with resounding praise. There is a time and place for lament. There are special occasions for thanksgiving. Critical situations invoke anguished prayers of pain. Covenant worship recalls the history of God's redemption and pilgrimage anticipates communal worship. Evil incites dark psalms of pent up hatred poured out to God. But it is always the time and the place to praise the Lord.

Psalm 150 is the final doxology in the set of five Hallel Psalms (Ps 146-150) that bring the entire Psalter with its five books to a conclusion. The psalm is all praise; it is only praise. Nothing more needs to be said, except to praise the Lord. The psalmist chose "not to argue, to teach, to explain; but cries with burning words, 'Praise him, Praise him, Praise the LORD.'"³³⁸ "To attempt to say something final about Yhwh," writes Goldingay, "would inevitably be anticlimactic. Everything in the previous 149 psalms have affirmed about Yhwh offers the reasons and content for this praise."³³⁹ All the challenges have been given and all the dark questions have been asked. All that is left to do is to praise the Lord. Psalm 150 is the ever ready call to praise in the moment and for eternity. There is never a time when Psalm 150 is untimely and never place where it is unwelcome.

Augustine humbly acknowledged that the arrangement of the Psalms was a "mighty mystery," but that did not stop him from speculating as to the reason for one hundred and fifty psalms. The number fifteen suggested to him "the agreement of the two Testaments," because seven signified the Old Testament week ending in Sabbath rest and eight signified the New Testament week ending in Resurrection hope. Augustine's numerology is not the point, but his sensibility as to the agreement of the Old and New Testaments is.³⁴⁰ We have prayed the Psalms that Jesus prayed in concert with Old Testament understanding and New Testament fulfillment. Jesus has made the psalms come alive for us. Between David and Israel we have seen the Son of David and the True Israel. We have seen how the psalms interface with the gospel narratives and the apostolic witness. The Holy Spirit has extended the redemptive trajectory of the psalms and liberated the text so that we can think Christianly about the psalms. Jesus Christ is the redemptive key that unlocks the psalms making them essential for spiritual formation and worship. In the Spirit the psalms teach us what it means to follow Jesus.

Psalm 150 corresponds to Psalm 1 the way Psalm 149 corresponds to Psalm 2. Together these four psalms form an *inclusio* for the entire Psalter. They represent the *personal* and *political* scope of true obedience and worship. Beatitude-based living (Ps 1) frames the community life of the people of God who are destined to live between the Hallelujahs (Ps 150). The Psalms begin with a personal call for daily obedience and reverence for the Law of God and end with a communal call to praise the Lord for making such a blessed life possible.

³³⁸ Spurgeon, "Psalm 150," *Treasury of David*.

³³⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3:747.

³⁴⁰ Augustine, *Psalm*, 681.

After we have pled our lament, vented our hate, and railed against evil, it is time to praise the Lord; after we have entered into the unfolding drama of salvation and meditated on the greatness of God's creation, it is time to praise. And by the time we reach the end of the Psalter Psalm 150 stands ready to grapple with "the problem of how to render to God adequate praise."³⁴¹ The *who*, *where*, *why*, and *how* of praise is contained in an all-inclusive summons to praise.

Praise the Lord.

*Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.*

*Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.*

*Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipes,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.*

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 150:1-6

Who we praise is clearly understood in the light of the entire Psalter. We are summoned thirteen times in the imperative voice to praise the Lord. The whole psalm is an exclamatory call to exuberant praise and the person to be praised has been set forth from Psalm 1. The praise book of the Bible provides a worship theology that deepens our understanding of God. We answer God in these Spirit-inspired psalms out of the highs and lows of human experience. By God's grace we relate to God in his holiness, righteousness, justice, and mercy. Our naive notions of God are shattered even as our love for God grows. The Psalms celebrate the Lord's steadfast love and his sacrificial grace. The God-centeredness of the Psalms exposes our fixation upon ourselves and teaches us one psalm after another to shift our attention away from the world (1 John 2:15-17) and to focus on the Lord who redeems and empowers us in the world.

Where we praise the Lord is expressed in two parallel lines that encompass earth and heaven. To praise God in his sanctuary has a range of meanings. In the Hebrew text it may mean "in his holiness" or "sanctity." In the Greek version, which is plural, it may mean "in his holy places" or "among his saints."³⁴² The psalmist's description of where we ought to praise the Lord recalls Abraham Kuyper's famous line, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human

³⁴¹ Allen, *Psalms 106-150*, 324.

³⁴² Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:961.

existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” Worship is not limited to a specific space that has been set aside for congregational worship but is everywhere, because God is present everywhere in earth below and in heaven above. To praise God “in his mighty heavens” is to summons the entire cosmos to praise. The psalmist’s thought anticipates Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus said, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). In the spiraling intensity of the Book of Revelation worship on earth is in synch with worship in heaven and both are in tandem with the sovereign will of God (Rev 11:15-19). George Herbert said it well,

Let all the world in every corner sing,
my God and King!
The heavens are not too high,
his praise may thither fly;
The earth is not too low,
his praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
my God and King!³⁴³

Why we praise the Lord needs only the briefest statement. The psalmist gives two reasons, “for his acts of power” and “for his surpassing greatness.” Everything that the Psalter has declared about the Lord can be encompassed by his “mighty acts” and “immense greatness.” Who God is and what he has done in creation and redemption is included in these two reasons for praise. Ross writes, “The praise will declare God’s power and greatness as displayed through his marvelous works – creation, redemption, judgment, deliverance, healing, forgiveness, to name but a few that the Psalter has proclaimed.”³⁴⁴ Implicit in these reasons for worship is the human response in prayer and praise. The human voice is raised in testimony and witness, declaring the power and goodness of the Lord.

How we praise the Lord receives the most attention in the psalm. The psalmist’s focus is on the full range of musical expression from loud, attention-getting, exclamatory instruments like the trumpet and cymbals, and tambourine dancing, to soft, reflective and meditative instruments like harp, lyre, strings, and pipe. Seven instruments are named in the psalmist’s symphony of praise. They represent the three major musical groups, wind, strings, and percussion. The trumpet or ram’s horn announced the worship gathering. The dancers in the processional danced to the rhythm of the tambourines. The stringed instruments and the shepherd’s pipe accompanied the human voice in song. The variety of instruments with their different sounds impressed Augustine as representative of the diversity of saints. The “sweetest harmony arises from sounds differing indeed, but not opposed to one another.”³⁴⁵ The loud clash of cymbals brought the worship experience to a crescendo. Augustine reasoned, “Cymbals touch one another in order to sound,”

³⁴³ Herbert, “Let All the World,” 24.

³⁴⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3:966.

³⁴⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 683.

therefore we need each other to give praise to God.³⁴⁶

Who then, is summoned to praise the Lord? The answer to that question has been delayed until now for emphasis. But it is no surprise. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps 150:6). Universal praise is the goal not only of Psalm 150, but of the entire Psalter. Ultimately, “every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). The arc of history will climax in total praise and the apostle John’s vision will be realized: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (Rev 5:13). Until then we live between the Hallelujahs our lives framed from beginning to end in praise to the Lord.

Having come to the end of Psalms, what shall we do but begin again. We agree with T. S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” No matter how many years we pray and study the psalms they never cease to inspire, instruct, challenge, and comfort. They give us the words we need to express our praise and our pain. Luther summed it up well when he said, “Who would even dare to assert that anyone had completely understood a single psalm?”³⁴⁷ The finite text of one hundred and fifty psalms yields infinite truth and praise.

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³⁴⁶ Augustine, Psalm 150, 683.

³⁴⁷ Goldingay, Psalms, 750. Luther, Selected Psalms, 3:284.

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